

“Waiting Patiently”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Advent III – December 15, 2013

Isaiah 35: 1-10
James 5: 7-10

At the bible study this past Tuesday, I asked the group if they have ever been to a desert. Several folks have been to deserts, either in this country or in other parts of the world. Carolyn Lyons described how she and her husband, Stan, lived in Iran for a couple of years, and the desert there was one of small gravel and undulating landscapes. Janet Pitcock spoke of visiting the Painted Desert in Arizona, and of the incredible colors and contrasts within the desert landscape. Others of you may have had such experiences. Maybe you have been struck by the barrenness of the desert, or maybe you have been touched by its other-worldly beauty.

To the best of my knowledge, I have not been in such a desert, but a place that evokes similar feelings for me is the Highland Region of Scotland. It was a true joy to visit that special place again this past summer, and to introduce our girls to that part of the world. It is a vast and sparsely populated region in the northern half of the British Isles. Despite all the lochs and coastlines and little villages, what stood out to me were the hills and mountains. They are so unlike the mountains of my home in West Virginia, which are covered with hardwood and evergreen trees. The Scottish dells rise with no such natural covering, except for the hundreds of sheep which graze on their slopes. As you drive through the great glens of Scotland, you feel as if nothing could ever grow on those hills, as if you are traversing the lunar landscape and wondering whether there is any life at all. And yet, there is a beauty which is hard to describe, almost as if you know you are looking at something which is special because it is so unusual.

A wilderness can be beautiful, because it is so different than our normal environs. A wilderness can also be incredibly isolating, for it feels like there is no way out of it. At the time of our Old Testament lesson, Isaiah was speaking to a people in the wilderness, not unlike what Moses led Israel through in Sinai. This wilderness was called Babylon, the period when Israel and Judah had been conquered by Assyria, and taken away into exile. They had neglected their covenant with God, they had failed to live faithfully according to the law, and they had not sought the ways of truth. The prophets Jeremiah, Amos, Hosea, and others had spoken sternly to God’s people, warning them of their fate which was soon to come. Now, they have been carried away to a foreign and barren land: they thirst for their homeland; they yearn for the temple and their religious rights; they hunger for a sign of hope which might point them back to Jerusalem and their God.

In the midst of such desolation and despair, it must be hard to hear words of hope. It is difficult for us to hear words of hope when events around us bring little comfort or peace. In the midst of domestic violence and child abuse, it is hard to believe violence will ever end. In the midst of extreme poverty, it is difficult to imagine a world where no one goes hungry or naked or homeless. In the midst of anger and hatred towards another group of people, it is hard to imagine a world of unity and cooperation. In the midst of terror and war, it is difficult to envision a peace-filled world.

The people of Israel had likely run out of hope. They felt there would be no second chance for them, and they had no idea what the future held. They were in a desert of uncertainty, and saw no oasis in sight.

It is to this situation that Isaiah speaks the Word of God: "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; for waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water." The prophet speaks of the most arid of places on God's earth – the desert – and how it will be transformed by God's might and love into a place full of life. In the same way, so will God's people be transformed from hopelessness into joy.

Joy and optimism reverberate throughout this passage. Despite the hopelessness which the Israelites now feel, they are encouraged to believe in their God. There is imagery which speaks to Jesus' earthly ministry: "the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless shall sing for joy" (35:5-6). And it's not just an image of literal blindness and deafness and so on being reversed. There is also the metaphorical blindness and deafness of the people which will be reversed. It was due to Israel's inability to see or hear God's Word that led them in to exile. Now, God will restore their ability to comprehend God's Word, and "He will come to save them."

Isaiah depicts a highway which the Israelites will traverse back to their homeland. "A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; and the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing." The image of a highway is significant throughout the book of Isaiah. In this instance, the prophet reveals that none of the threats travelers would usually have will be present: "no lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come upon it" (35:9).

And on this highway, no one can get lost. "No traveler, not even fools, shall go astray" (35:8). You might be the most directionally-challenged soul in the world, but because you are on this highway – this Holy Way, a road for the redeemed – your Tom-Tom or Garmin will not be necessary, for God will get you to the promised destination. One modern translation puts it even more bluntly: "God will walk there with you; even the most stupid cannot miss the way" (The Way – Living Bible, 35:8).

In Isaiah, there is a joyful exuberance. But when you hear this passage from James, it has a much different feel. Patrick Howell writes: *Isaiah paints a*

picture of the parched land exulting, the desert land blooming, and the whole earth rejoicing. In counterpoint, James encourages the early Christians, probably Jewish Christians, to stand firm, not to judge one another, but to bear each other's faults and failings with patience. Isaiah has a theology of exuberance, James a theology of patient endurance.

As Christians, we are invited to live fully into both these realities. We are invited into the paradoxical place of joy and sorrow, of a grace-filled vocation and the daily grind of duty; of the earth bursting with abundance and the dry-as-dust times when the farmer can barely eke out a living (*Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2010: 62*).

Four times in these four verses, the word “patient” is used by the writer of James. To be patient includes waiting, but there are different means of waiting. You can wait patiently for a task to be complete – say a woodworker patiently working with a piece of wood until it is just the way it needs to be. But there also is patience in circumstances where you have no control – sitting on a jammed freeway with nowhere to go; standing in the security line at the airport.

It is this second type of waiting which James speaks of. “The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains” (5:7). The farmer cannot make it rain, cannot force the skies to open up at exactly the right moment, either at the beginning of the growing season or at the end during harvest. The farmer must wait – patiently, expectantly, faithfully – and trust that God will provide.

We are called to wait patiently for the joy which the Lord will bring. And despite our modern technological advances, and our belief we are self-determining creatures, we nevertheless must patiently depend on God. We cannot always fix things quickly and completely – diagnoses of illness, broken relationships, loved ones making poor choices, careers going down misguided paths. There will be hardship and pain and suffering, as James speaks of. But, through the promise of God in Jesus Christ, there will be hope, joy, comfort, and peace, for the coming of the Lord is near. Advent is more than a season of counting down to Christmas. Advent is a time to recognize the joy God is bringing, as we patiently await that joy’s arrival.

Up here on the pulpit I have placed a Christmas cactus. This was given to me by Margaret Wilson a couple of years ago. I am proud to say I have not killed it in those couple of years! And as any of you know who have such a plant in your home, these are green 11 months of the year. But, for one month, usually in December, they bloom with these red blossoms. This cactus is my physical reminder of the joy which blossoms in the desert, the patient waiting we must have for God in our lives, and for the hope which springs eternal in our faith each Advent.

Thanks be to God. Amen.