

Isaiah 35:1-10  
Luke 1:46b-55

James 5:7-10  
Matthew 11:2-11

I'll never forget the first time I saw the desert in Arizona. I was in Phoenix for a conference. I had some free time, so I drove north out of the city into the desert countryside. What I really enjoyed was seeing the Saguaro cactus in their natural habitat, the tree-like, columnar cacti that develop branches that look like arms. The views of the desert and cacti were breathtaking. But I cannot quite say it was beautiful. It was certainly unlike any place I had ever encountered. The ground was dry, sandy, and very sparse of vegetation. I grew up in north-central Iowa. When the weather finally warms up, after about 14 months of winter, everything turns green. Miles of green corn, soybeans, and alfalfa. The green lawns, compared to the gravel lawns of the desert southwest. There is a stark contrast between the green landscape of fertile black dirt Iowa and the brown landscape of the arid Arizona desert.

However. There can be a radical transformation of the desert after a light rain. Sometimes after a small rainfall, the desert can blossom creating a blanket of color covering the arid landscape. Here is a picture of the Chilean Atacama Desert after a rain. Quite a transformation.

Isaiah uses the transformation of the desert as a metaphor of God's hope breaking into the gloom and despair of the Judeans, as a reversal of Judah's gloom and despair. This season of Advent we have been hearing God's message of hope. Isaiah is declaring hope to a people sitting in gloom and despair. They too were declaring that if they did not have any bad luck, they'd have no luck at all! They were a conquered people, wondering if God had abandoned them, or if their God simply was not powerful

enough to protect them. God is declaring in the midst of this gloom and despair that there is hope. God is going to reverse Judah's despair, Judah's desolation!

Isaiah's reading is packed with all images, metaphors, of God's reversals. There is a reversal of desert, wilderness, drylands: they will be glad, deserts rejoicing and blossoming, waters will break forth in the wilderness, streams in the desert, burning sand will become a pool, thirsty ground will become springs of water. And then another kind of reversal, the reversal of persons with disabilities: the blind will see, the deaf will hear, the lame will leap like a deer, the mute able to speak. The reversal of their situation makes it possible for those with disabilities to participate fully in God's kingdom. All of God's creation, all of God's people will participate in God's reversals. As I said last Sunday, it is as the prophet Isaiah cannot stop himself from proclaiming God's plan for an end to Judah's gloom and despair. God will reverse the misfortune of Judah, God will reverse the gloom and despair.

We see a reversal in our gospel reading, our reading from Matthew, also refers to the disabled. John the Baptist is in prison and he has heard what the Messiah, what Jesus was doing, so John sent some of his disciples to Jesus to ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" In other words, John is asking him, "Are you really the Messiah that we have been waiting for? Are you the one who is going to reverse our misfortune. Jesus answers with a quote from our Isaiah passage: the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the deaf are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. The reversals are a messianic sign. Jesus performs the work of the predicted Messiah. Jesus invites John to answer his own question. I'm doing what was predicted for the Messiah in Isaiah. What do you

think, John? Although the people of Judah are in a place of desolation, God will reverse their misfortune.

The psalm reading for this Sunday also speaks of God's reversal. Well, it really is not a psalm. The psalm for today is a canticle, songs found in the Bible that are not psalms. Today, the optional psalm or canticle is the song of Mary, often referred to as the Magnificat.

Mary has just been informed by the angel Gabriel that she is pregnant with the Christ Child. Mary rushes to see Elizabeth, a distant relative of Mary. Elizabeth is also pregnant, pregnant with John the Baptist. When Elizabeth acknowledges Mary's pregnancy, Mary breaks out into a song, the Magnificat. In this canticle of Mary speaks of another reversal: God has scattered the proud, brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly, filled the hungry with good things, and has sent the rich away empty.

Mary sings that her Savior has "looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant." Lowliness. The Greek word used here is not talking simply about humility, but about poverty. Mary is poor—dirt poor. After a woman gave birth, she was to undergo a purification ritual, which required a sacrifice. Mary and Joseph bring as their sacrifice, "a pair of turtledoves or two pigeons." The law stipulated they were to sacrifice a sheep. But if the mother could not afford a sheep, then she could sacrifice turtle doves or pigeons. This passage speaks to the materiality of poverty. God has looked down on Mary's poverty. God is working to bring down the powerful and lift up the lowly.

The Magnificat, as well as many other passages in the Bible, challenges the present economic arrangements and anticipates alternative arrangements. The gospel,

the good news, is concerned about economic viability for all of God's people. God declares that God wants all of God's people to enjoy well-being, a well-being that includes economic well-being. As the Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann writes, "We live in a society that would like to bracket out money and possessions (politics and economics from ultimate questions. The Bible insists otherwise.... The gift-giving God intends an abundant life for all creatures."

We all know that we can never build such a world. Our hope is on a God who will bring that about. In the meantime, God still intends that all of God's people enjoy well-being. We are God's workers. As a church we are the body of Christ in the world. Dorothy Sayers, a British writer of a generation or so ago, rebuked the church with some really stinging words. She said, "you have the greatest good news on earth -- the incarnation of God in human life -- and you treat it as an insignificant news item fit for page 14 of the chronicle of daily events!" Her rebuke is still accurate. Do we not want the opportunity to do our part so that all may experience God's intention of material well-being? In response to the great gift of Christmas, the incarnation of God, God coming to us in the Christ Child, can we not share God's concern for the well-being of all God's people.

Blessed be the name of the Lord forever;  
may the glory of God fill the earth. Amen.