

December 15, 2013
Advent 3

"Streams of Joy at Christmas"

ISAIAH 35:1-10

The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, ² it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon; they will see the glory of the LORD, the splendor of our God. ³ Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; ⁴ say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you." ⁵ Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. ⁶ Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. ⁷ The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow. ⁸ And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness. The unclean will not journey on it; it will be for those who walk in that Way; wicked fools will not go about on it. ⁹ No lion will be there, nor will any ferocious beast get up on it; they will not be found there. But only the redeemed will walk there, ¹⁰ and the ransomed of the LORD will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

It was late May of 1998. Two of my sons and I were biking on Paradise Road in the Upper Santa Ynez River. The road was closed to cars and even big trucks because of the large flow of water still coming down the river even in late May. We carried our bikes across several river crossings often knee deep in fast moving water. The huge amount of rain from El Nino storms had scoured out the river. There were deep pools blue and green in color. Everything was lush and green almost like Hawaii. Now everything is so dry. There is hardly any water running in the river.

The prophet Isaiah sees a vision of the desert wastelands of the land of Israel flowing with streams of water. He says, "In the haunts where the jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow."

Some have said that these words of Isaiah predicted the current situation in the land of Israel where the desert regions now produce fruit and vegetables because of modern drip irrigation. Others have said that these words predict the rain falling on the land of Israel when the Messiah comes to set up his kingdom here on this earth and reign for a thousand years. How much better it is to look at these streams in the desert and think of the peace and forgiveness and joy Jesus brings when he comes into the lives of people. Isaiah says, "Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away." Streams of joy pour into our hearts and lives as we celebrate the Savior's birth.

The Savior streams to people like water in the desert

Oh, how the desert changes when God sends his rain on this earth. "The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom." The land of Israel, the land of milk and honey, had stopped receiving the abundant rains from the west because God's people had turned their hearts against him. The Lord withdrew his rain because these people were as Isaiah said, "A sinful nation, a people loaded with guilt, a brood of vipers, children given to corruption."

The other day I was driving up Union Valley Parkway. I noticed a place where there were prickly pears. The paddles on the prickly pear cactus were so thin and gaunt because of a lack of rain. I recalled how thin and gaunt the cactus plants were in Tucson in the early summer. How they longed for the late summer monsoon rains to bring them back to life again. How our dry and barren hills long for the winter rains to come.

I look at these gaunt prickly pears. I see the dry grass on the hills that should be green by this time of the year. Then I look at the people who live in my neighborhood. How many actually know who Jesus is and what he has done to save them. Without Jesus their lives are without hope. "The grass withers and flowers fall because the breath of the Lord blows on them." Oh, to be sure, they string up their lights and they have a large blow up Santa Claus on their front lawn. Do they know about Jesus the Christ of Christmas?

Let's not make the mistake of looking at other people and judging them without looking first at ourselves. We look inside and see evidence of sin that causes us to shrivel up and lose our joy in the Lord. And so we say with the Psalmist: "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God." Oh, how this desert wasteland within my own soul cries and yearns to kneel in a manger in Bethlehem. It longs for the joy of the shepherds who return home as the rejoicing and praising God for all the things they had seen and heard.

The rains come and the desert blooms. "The wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon. They will see the glory of the Lord, the splendor of our God." So abundant is the rain year after year huge trees begin to grow in the desert similar in size to the great cedars of Lebanon. The wastelands of the desert will look like the valleys of Carmel and Sharon that suck in the moisture from the Mediterranean and give glory to God. We marvel even more at the glory of God we see in Jesus his Son.

Oh, how the lives of people change when Jesus comes to them. I have seen it happen. I have seen it happen and so have you. They once had nothing because they trusted in themselves for salvation. They once looked for their peace and joy in the things of this life that wither and dry up like grass. Jesus comes to them. They hear the message, "Unto you a child is born. Unto you a son is given." They wonder in amazement at the birth of a child who is God in human flesh. And they joyfully confess, "The Word became flesh and dwelled among us and we beheld his glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father full of grace and truth." They see his glory. They become alive. Streams of joy come to them

If the full throated joy of this Christmas season is not yet yours, then listen, my dear people to what Isaiah tells us. "Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give; say to those with fearful hearts, 'Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance.'" There are times in life when your hands tremble and knees shake and your heart pounds with fear. Remember when you had to be taken to the emergency room in the hospital. Your heart pounded with fear. All these little fears in life are nothing compared to the fear of standing before God in the final judgment with no one to protect us from the sin that has found its way into our lives.

"Be strong, do not fear; for your God will come, he will come with vengeance." Jesus comes into this world with vengeance to crush our enemies. Look at those tiny little hands of Jesus and think of the power there is in those hands to crush our enemies of sin, death, hell and Satan. "Nail, spear, will pierce him through, The cross he'll bear for my and you." Don't be afraid of whatever life throws at you, because your greatest problems have been taken care of for you by Jesus. The rest of the problems are small by comparison.

Please, please don't ever doubt the power of the Savior who comes flowing to you like streams in the desert. Here is rock solid proof of his power and greatness. "Then the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the dead unstopped. Then the lame will leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy." See that man lying there on his mat. He has never walked in his life. His legs are shriveled. Jesus heals him and he can jump like a deer. See that fellow over there. He is deaf. He never heard a sound in his life. When he speaks strange sounds come from his mouth. Jesus heals him and the ears hear and the mute tongue shouts for joy. You can understand every word he says. There are no more strange sounds that come from his mouth because he cannot hear. He even knows how to sing, never having sung a note in his life.

Everything changes when Jesus comes into the lives of people. He is like the rain that falls on the desert and causes it to bloom. "Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow." You and I share something very special as we worship together here in this church in the month of December. You are worshipping with people who have been miraculously transformed by God's grace just as rain transforms the desert. Look at the person sitting next to you. They worship a little baby born in Bethlehem as the Lord and God just as you do because Jesus has come to them like streams in the desert.

The people stream with joy to their Savior

The prophet Isaiah now sees something streaming across the desert. It is not a stream of water but a stream of people, a large stream of people joining together to worship the Lord. "And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness. The unclean will not journey on it; it will be for those who walk in that Way; wicked fools will not go on it." Imagine a highway where there will be no more bad drivers. No one will be on the road of life to hit you from behind or side swipe you or back into your new car even though you parked it at the very end of the parking lot. Off course we are not talking about driving are we? We are talking living our lives with people who have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus. The last thing these people want to do is to bang into the lives of other people and hurt them. They want to love people the way Jesus loved them. They enjoy walking

in the Way and walking in the light as they live each day one step closer to the perfect place Jesus has prepared for them.

On that wonderful highway of joy back to God the tigers do not come out at night. "No lion will be there, nor will any ferocious beast get up on it; they will not be there." You won't have to lock your doors in heaven. Someday God will wipe away all tears from your eyes. We don't have to wait till heaven to be protected by Jesus. Romans 8 says that nothing in all creation will ever separate us from the love of God that exists in Christ Jesus our Lord." In the midst of our most trying moments of life we can say, "God is our refuge and strength...."

Now we watch as the people come into Zion. "They will enter Zion with singing. Everlasting joy will crown their heads." All over the world people stream in large numbers to worship a tiny baby as their Lord and God. They do so with singing. Think of all the great words and great music that we are privileged to hear and sing. One of my fond memories of Christmas come from the Christmas Eve services where we light the candles and then join in singing "Silent Night." From my vantage point in front of the church I get to see your faces illumined by candlelight and joyfully singing about your Savior's birth. We get to see God's kindness and goodness flowing to each other like streams in the desert. "Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away." Amen.