

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Rev. Claire George-Drumheller
“Advent Through Isaiah’s Eyes”
Isaiah 40:1-11
First Sunday in Advent
December 3, 2017

Our scripture reading today comes from the Book of Isaiah. To be more specific, these verses open what scholars call “Second Isaiah.” The Book of Isaiah as we have it today is thought to be composed of three, some scholars say four, separate pieces of writing that have been combined into one book attributed to the prophet Isaiah.

The ministry of the prophet Isaiah ben Amoz took place in the southern kingdom of Judah in the 8th century BCE. He prophesied in a time of political turmoil; he speaks to the city of Jerusalem following Assyria’s attack on Israel.

The beauty and power of Isaiah’s words attracted disciples, who preserved his words and passed them on to future generations. Isaiah’s success led to the growth of the prophetic book over time; other prophets, inspired by Isaiah’s words, confronted different situations in different times and yet in a language and vision that stayed within the school of Isaiah.¹

Second Isaiah opens with the words we will hear in just a minute. Scholars date Second Isaiah in the last half of the 6th century BCE. In the years that followed the prophet Isaiah, the Assyrian empire weakened and was conquered by the Babylonian empire. Under Babylonian rule, Jerusalem was demolished, the Temple was destroyed, and Jerusalem’s inhabitants deported, an event known as the Babylonian exile. Second Isaiah is generally traced back to a single anonymous prophet who carried out his work in the final years of exile; Second Isaiah likely originated just as the Persian ruler Cyrus began his conquest, just after Cyrus promised the Israelites they could return to Jerusalem and build a new Temple.²

In First Isaiah, God’s judgment on Israel’s sin is announced by means of Assyria’s attacks. The news in First Isaiah is not good. The prophet writes, “Cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is utterly desolate” (6:11).³

The news in Second Isaiah is altogether different. Through the prophet, God in Second Isaiah says to Israel, “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, and you are mine” (43:1). The news isn’t bad in Second Isaiah, but good. The good news is about God’s comfort and God’s promise of redemption for a people who have lived in exile for some 150 years.⁴

So let’s hear this good news that opens Second Isaiah.

Isaiah 40:1-11

40:1 Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,

that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.

3 A voice cries out:

"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

4 Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

5 Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

6 A voice says, "Cry out!"
And I said, "What shall I cry?"

All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.

7 The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.

8 The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand forever.

9 Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
"Here is your God!"

10 See, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.

11 He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.

I subscribe to *The Christian Century*, a bi-weekly magazine that reports on religious news, current cultural issues, and reviews books and movies. Right now, *The Christian Century* is hosting The Buechner Narrative Writing Project. Readers are invited to submit narratives based on certain topics, and selected essays are published online or in print. The essay topic featured in a recent edition was "wilderness." One writer talked about how lonely she felt being one of the few single people in her church. Another writer spoke of traveling through the wilderness between Denali National Park and Fairbanks, Alaska, wondering if the cabin of her childhood would still be standing; she named the trip through this wilderness a spiritual pilgrimage back to the place where she grew up - back to a place of grief and disappointment. Another writer spoke of serving a church in rural East Texas, where she was the only female pastor in the community and the only one who watched MSNBC. She recalls, "just as the

wilderness shaped the Israelites, this place began to shape me.”⁵ She viewed the challenge of preaching with new appreciation and learned to rely on the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The audience of Second Isaiah knew the wilderness. They once lived in the land of promise, in the land that flowed with milk and honey. But now they know political turmoil and defeat in battle; now they know exile. Now they know life in the wilderness - life in Babylon. The psalmist’s words grew out of this exiled community:

“By the rivers of Babylon -
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.” (Ps. 137:1)

Even before they were exiled, the Israelites knew the wilderness. They knew it to be a desolate area, deserted, devoid of civilization. Isaiah and his people knew the wilderness story: they knew about their ancestors who escaped Egypt through the desolate wastelands of Sinai. Isaiah’s people knew the stories of how hard the wilderness was. It remained for them always this way it’s described in Deuteronomy: “the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions” (Deut. 8:15).

New Testament writers understood the significance of the wilderness. When Jesus was tempted for those forty days and nights, the setting was the wilderness (Mt. 4:1-11; Lk. 4:1-13). In the feeding of the 4,000 in Mark, the disciples are concerned about how they will provide; they ask Jesus, “How can anyone get enough food in this wilderness to satisfy these people?” (Mk. 8:4 CEB). John the Baptist appears preaching his message of repentance, and where is he? In the wilderness (Mk. 1:4).⁶

The wilderness is a place of danger, a wasteland, a desert. But more than that, the wilderness is *not* home. The psalmist in exile asks, “How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” (Psalm 137:4) The people once lived in Jerusalem, their home was in the Promised Land, but now, just like that, the people of Second Isaiah are exiled from the land and back to making some kind of home in the wilderness.

The writing project in *The Christian Century* reminds me of modern day wilderness. The writers in *The Christian Century* spoke of loneliness, cancer and disease, grief from a hard childhood, divorce, abuse. Yes, we know the wilderness today. Though our reality may not be deserts and waterless lands, we know barrenness; we know danger; we know wandering.

In today’s wilderness, child protection training is a necessity. Because statistics and personal stories have proven that we cannot assume everyone places children’s safety as a priority; we would be naive and obstinately sinful to assume that the abuse of a child couldn’t happen here.

In today’s wilderness, police departments offer church safety seminars, even in our own county. Churches are known for welcoming everyone, being a literal sanctuary to all who enter the doors. But church shootings in Charleston, South Carolina, and in Sutherland Springs, Texas, have us asking hard questions about how our safety, security, and hospitality are all intertwined.

In today’s wilderness, #metoo is trending. Women have long withstood harassment and abuse in the workplace, and their stories are only now coming to light. I’m afraid we’ve only seen the tip of the iceberg of the personal testimonies of men in power taking advantage of women and their bodies.

In the wilderness, we know a different reality - we know about a better land, a better life, but our reality is something else. Yes, we know wilderness even today.

Advent itself is a kind of wilderness. We know the truth of a different promise, but our reality is something else. For Moses and the Israelites, they knew slavery, and they knew the promise of a new land, but their reality was somewhere in between - the wilderness. For the people of Second Isaiah, they knew of their homes in the Promised Land, and they had hopes of returning and worshiping in a new Temple, but their reality was Babylon, exile, wilderness.

And in Advent, we know of the Christ event. We can't live our lives as usual because God has come to this earth and has taken on human flesh. We know of the healing, the grace, the love that comes with God's gift of Immanuel - God-with-us.

And we know the promise of God's kingdom, a time when God's plan for the world is fully realized. We pray for the time when there is no more crying, no more sorrow, no more death. We pray for Christ's return and for God's future.

We're in some kind of in-between. We're in some kind of wilderness - between the advent of Christ who comes to us as a baby in a manger and the arrival of Christ's return, when God's rule is established over all things. We're in a wilderness, the wilderness of Advent.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. And over the next four Sundays, we will observe this wilderness season together. Advent is more than decorating our homes and wrapping our presents. Advent is more than those chocolate-filled countdown calendars. Advent is even more than preparing to celebrate the first coming of Christ. Advent is a wilderness. It's a time when we know and hope for something that is to come. Advent is a time when we anticipate the future coming of Christ. In light of Christ's first coming, we have hope for the fulfillment of God's realm in the future. Because of Christ's first coming, we joyfully prepare for God's return to earth. But right now, we're in that period of hoping, praying, waiting. We're in the wilderness of Advent.⁷

In the wilderness of Advent, we live somewhere in between our prayer for the future coming of the Lord and our belief that the Lord *has* come as that baby in a manger. In the wilderness of Advent, we give thanks that our Lord calls the little children to come to him -- that our Lord commands us to have faith like a child, and yet we pray for a time when God's children are safe and can rest in the innocence of childhood. In the wilderness of Advent, we long for the beating of swords into plowshares, yet we rejoice that the Prince of Peace *has come*. In the wilderness of Advent, we give thanks for first responders and for public servants and for brave citizens who take on dangerous situations, and yet we pray for a time when everyone lives by God's command to love God and to love neighbor. In the wilderness of Advent, we anticipate the promised justice of God's new world, yet we praise God who has raised up the "righteous branch" to rule with justice (Jer. 23:5). In the wilderness of Advent, we rejoice that in Christ so that there is no longer slave nor free, Jew nor Greek, male nor female. And yet we long for the time when women are safe from harassment and abuse. In the wilderness of Advent, we hope for the restoration of the afflicted, yet we delight that healing *has come* in Christ.

Friends, we are in the wilderness of Advent.

Second Isaiah tells us, "A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain'" (Isa 40:3-4). The image of the highway has a Babylonian parallel: great highways would be prepared for gods and kings to enter the city of Babylon. It was a parade - a triumphal procession - of powerful kings and their powerful gods. But in *this* wilderness, it's not the Babylonian kings who parade in triumph. It's not the idols of false gods that are carried into the city. This parade features the God of Israel. This engineering project will level the land for a smooth road, and the purpose of the road is that God shall move in triumphal procession. The road stretches from Babylon to Jerusalem, and as the God of Israel marches through, so do God's people; along with God will come the long-exiled Jews in a victorious homecoming. Those watching will be astonished: the god who seemed defeated will march in a show of unrestricted power.⁸ This God is not weak, not powerless. This God - *our* God - comes in strength with arms stretched out in triumph. And yet, our God's power is radically different; our God comes in power of gentleness, such as a shepherd carrying his lambs (Isa. 40:10-11).⁹

The way to the future is through the wilderness. The wilderness is a way already known by God's people¹⁰: the wilderness is known by Moses and the Israelites wandering in the wilderness for 40 years; it's known by the exiled Israelites living in Babylon; by Jesus, who was tempted in the wilderness; the

wilderness is known by his followers, who witnessed a miraculous feeding there; and we know the wilderness - we, who have faith in the promises of God, but also know that God's future is on the horizon. The way to the future is through the wilderness; the way to the celebration of Christmas is through the wilderness of Advent.

In the Season of Advent, we move along that highway in the wilderness. There is some wandering. This is not home, not all that we have been promised. And yet we know God is preparing the way. God is leveling the mountains and raising the low places. We travel this highway in Advent. We aren't stuck, we aren't stranded, we aren't idle. Because through God's covenants, we know God's future is a good one; because of Christ's love, we anticipate Christ's return.

Friends, this is the wilderness of Advent.

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- ¹ Towner, W. Sibley, "The Book of Isaiah" in *The Discipleship Study Bible*, eds. Bruce C. Birch, Brian K. Blount, Thomas G. Long, Gail R. O'Day, W. Sibley Towner (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 929-932.
- ² Towner, W. Sibley, "The Book of Isaiah" in *The Discipleship Study Bible*, eds. Bruce C. Birch, Brian K. Blount, Thomas G. Long, Gail R. O'Day, W. Sibley Towner (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 929-932.
- ³ Stroup, George W., "Theological Perspective" in *Feasting on the Word, Year B., Vol., 1*, eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 26-31.
- ⁴ Stroup, George W., "Theological Perspective" in *Feasting on the Word, Year B., Vol., 1*, eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 26-31.
- ⁵ "Wilderness," *The Christian Century*, November 8, 2017, 22-27.
- ⁶ "Wilderness" in *Harpercollins Bible Dictionary*, ed. Paul J. Achtemeier (Harper One, 1996), 1212-1213.
- ⁷ *The Companion to the Book of Common Worship*, ed. Peter C. Bower (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2003), 91-105
- ⁸ *Texts for Preaching: a lectionary commentary based on the NRSV, Year B*, eds. Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 23-31.
- ⁹ O'Connor, Kathleen M., "Exegetical Perspective" in *Feasting on the Word, Year B., Vol., 1*, eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 26-31.
- ¹⁰ Jarvis, Cynthia A., "Pastoral Perspective" in *Feasting on the Word, Year B., Vol., 1*, eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 26-31.