

**Sermon: December 11, 2016 (Advent III) – Isaiah 35: 1-10**  
**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley**

Flowers shall bloom in the desert.

I think that all of us can identify times in our lives that we would call “desert times”: everything from times of sorrow, to times of loneliness or worry, to times when our creative energies were low. They could be times linked to a chemical imbalance in our brains or our bodies, they could be times linked to an upsetting event within our family or friends, they could just be times when something is missing from our day-to-day circumstances that could feed our spirits. Whatever the shape, whatever the cause, the experience of feeling dry, dull, desolate, is an experience that is widely known.

In contrast to the desolation of the desert, Isaiah offers this exquisite image of flowers blooming in the desert. At first glance, this appears to be much like the image we explored last week, of a tiny shoot emerging from the stump of Jesse, tender, tentative new growth in unlikely surroundings. And when I think back 16 years, to the year I basically lost to depression, that’s how it felt when crawling out from that abyss: like a single, fragile shoot growing out of a chopped-down stump, or one little wildflower pushing its way through the crack in parched soil. And if that’s all that Isaiah has for us today, that would be enough: an assurance that God wants us to blossom once more, that God is present in our dry times with the intention of accompanying us to times when life will be more robust, colourful and fragrant.

But then I started seeing pictures and hearing stories about desert wildflowers, and realized that my picture of a single flower pushing its way to life is *sometimes* the way it happens, but not *always*. There are places around the world where wildflower seeds lie dormant for years, awaiting either the completion of a cycle or, more often, periodic floodwaters – and when those seeds germinate, the results are so incredible that they look like someone has been playing with photoshop. Here are some photos from the Atacama Desert in Chile, considered the driest place on earth: here’s what it normally looks like – and here’s what it looked like a year ago, after a period of intense flooding. The land, usually as forlorn as you can get, is carpeted in pink mallow. At Bible study this week, Dirk told us of a similar phenomenon in the deserts of Namibia – and I found some photos of that – and when we look at the Negev desert SW of the Dead Sea, we see the same thing.

Pretty pictures... and so what? For me, this phenomenon of flowers not just tentatively blooming in the desert, but absolutely taking over the place, is a giant step forward in understanding this passage from Isaiah. When we picture, not just one wee flower but a desert transformed by wildflowers it tells us that not only can we emerge from our doldrums; it is God’s intention that we make a startling and complete exit from those things that subdue us. This is, after all, the God of resurrection – the God who, in Christ, assures us that those things that cause us pain do not have the final word. This is the very force of love, calling us and shaping us and giving purpose to our days, a love that will not be held down.

In case these reassurances of God’s deepest desires for your life sound like soft-focus imaginings from the Hallmark collection, or something you should be running through Snopes.com to make sure it isn’t a hoax, I’m going to switch gears and share with you three stories of flowers blooming where once there was only arid land, and am going to offer them without a lot of analysis, in the hope that something here connects with your life’s story, or that a word of encouragement presents itself for you to pass along to someone living in a desert time.

**First, a story by Garrison Keillor** about a Professor at a small college in the US Midwest. In Keillor’s style, this story is officially “fictional” but based on a lot of human observation. I think this story needs hearing in our province, where so many people are disheartened not only because of the downturn in the oil patch, but because they cannot envision themselves doing anything else.

It’s the story of a professor who was the head of the Classics department at a small College in the mid-western states, with a particular expertise and passion in the study of Latin. In recent years, however, the classics department was shrinking. High School matriculation no longer required Latin, and fewer and fewer college programs required it, either. Each term, enrolments declined and each time a faculty member retired, they were not replaced. Eventually, the classics department consisted of just him, and eventually even his position could not be justified.

Unfortunately, there really wasn't anything else he could teach at the College level – and so he sat, and lamented his loss of work, and worried about his finances, and his relationships suffered, and his mood slid, and there appeared to be no way out. As a last resort, he was offered a job as an academic advisor, helping students choose a major area of study and decide which courses to take. As Keillor describes it, the job was twice the work of being a professor for two-thirds the pay, and the professor jumped at it.

Colleagues didn't know what to say to him about this new position, a demotion both in status and in pay, but what they did not see was the new life bubbling up within this man. As much as he loved teaching, he now was able to focus on these young people's lives, and not just imparting wisdom to them. He enjoyed the interaction, he liked being busy, his life felt more relevant. He felt younger. He realized that he was more than the sum of his training, more than the caliber of his expertise; he was a full human being, with abilities and passions and a level of caring he had not seen in himself before. This less prestigious, less lucrative job was for him an exit from the dryness of desert, a time of flourishing, a new life of full humanity. If we perceive new opportunities in life to be part of the way God connects to us, God had opened a significant window for this man, when the door of his old career was shut and bolted.

**The second story is from Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor**, a neuroanatomist who suffered a stroke in 1996. As a scientist, this was both devastating and intriguing: she was in a unique position to observe the altered functioning of her brain and its ability to recover. Here is an excerpt from her book, *My Stroke of Insight*. (pp.117-121)

“One of the secrets to my success was that I made the cognitive choice to stay out of my own way during the process of recovery. An attitude of gratitude goes a long way when it comes to physical and emotional healing. I enjoyed a lot of my recovery experience as one process flowed naturally into another. I found that as my abilities increased, so did my perception of the world. Eventually I was like a toddler wanting to go out and explore...I tried a lot of new things, had a lot of successes, and tried some things that I wasn't ready for yet.

“Part of getting out of my own way meant that I needed to welcome support, love, and help from others. Prior to the stroke, I had been extremely independent. I was not comfortable accepting help, but [now] I needed to let people do things for me, [and for] people to come close and not be afraid of me. I desperately needed their kindness. I know it can be very uncomfortable for a healthy person to try to communicate with someone who has had a stroke, but I needed my visitors to bring me their positive energy. Since conversation is obviously out of the question, I appreciated when people came in for just a few minutes, took my hands in theirs, and shared softly and slowly how they were doing, what they were thinking, and how they believed in my ability to recovery.

“For a successful recovery, it was important that we focus on my ability, not my disability. It was way too easy to focus on my disabilities because they were vast. By celebrating my achievements every day, I stayed focused on how well I was doing. If all I was doing was breathing, then we celebrated that I was alive – and we breathed deeper together.. I needed people to celebrate the triumphs I made everyday because my successes, no matter how small, inspired me....Emotional healing was a tediously slow [8-year] process, but was well worth the effort.”

**The third story, is from Dr. Robert Meyer**, who speaks of recovery from the traumatic death of a spouse. He writes, (pp.94-96)

“In the midst of my adversity, I noticed a tendency to retreat, not to bother anyone else with my misfortune. What a mistake! The love and support of family and friends, in letters, phone calls, visits, and invitations, were so gratifying and so enriching as to defy description. This caring continues to stand out in my mind as a bright spot in an otherwise bleak scenario.

“I have made a valuable new friend as well – time. The sadness can seem interminable, the pain relentless, but it does pass. The tears still come, unexpectedly, but with less intensity and less frequency. At first, the sudden waves of sadness knocked me down, but I have learned to stand up to them - all because of time.

“Prior to this time, I had been spared any great tragedies in my life. And I had regarded religion in the time of crisis as just another [crutch]. I surprised myself at just how comfortably I used this [supposed] crutch [once I was the one in need]. Surrounded by other worshipers at a service, reciting traditional

prayers, or singings in unison, it was comforting to find that when my [small f] faith was running low, I could turn to another [capital F] Faith which had stood the test of thousands of years. If that Faith and the people who trusted in it had survived, then so would I.

“The only script, is that there is no script. Everyone copes in his or her own way. Certainly, I look daily for more answers, and can sometimes lose sight of my comforting insights when the grief becomes particularly acute. But more important than any intellectual or emotional coping mechanism is the knowledge that I have survived a terrible loss...[and] life goes on, and I will survive. “

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Three very different stories, underlining the possibility of new life sprouting forth from the dry desolation of desert. While they are not full of God-language, the healing, encouraging power of God’s love, in the healing power of time and the healing power of friends, is evident in all three. As we hear others’ stories we recognize the ways that new life can reach into our lives, and as we return to today’s scripture from Isaiah we are reminded that he was speaking not just of better days ahead, but amazing days ahead.

Listen to the effusive language in this scripture: those who were hobbled do not just walk, they leap. Those who were previously mute are not given the gift of speech, they sing for joy. The parched ground does not just become moist, it erupts in growth. There is not just a road for people who wish to undertake God’s journey towards joy and completeness, it is a road completely safe from predators of all kinds. And as I learned this week, when flowers bloom in the desert they tend to take over the place. Whether you experience God mostly as a personal and personified God you talk to and listen to and seek wisdom from – or as that deepest good that resides within you, and which connects you to the goodness of all creation – the intent is the same. God’s deepest desire for the world is for us to experience, not just peace and harmony, but life in abundance. One wee flower is an important starting point but there is within that the potential of a garden exploding with colour, like the front of our sanctuary today with these stunning poinsettias.

My prayer, in all this, is for us to gratefully accept this gift of hope: as a direct gift, if our spirits are flagging, or as a gift to be shared, if you are struggling to support another. If you or a friend can take one small step forward, if one bud opens to flower, then that prayer is answered. If you are in one of those flat spaces, where everything is OK but you’re not really sensing abundance or joy or energy or any of those bigger aspects of life, then I hope you hear in these words God’s desire for life in abundance, for your life and for all lives to be big and full and rich. If you are in a medical situation where huge reversals are not likely, then I hope you hear that even now, God’s love reaches to you the sacredness of each moment and an intention toward wholeness and life. And for all of us, there is a reminder here of Christ’s journey, which goes before us and points us to that highway of holiness that sets our steps moving toward our loving God. Wherever you’re at in your journey, whatever you need to take even one more step forward, may the love of God, the encouragement of Christ, and the companionship of the Spirit be yours. Amen.

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