

## CHRISTMAS: AN OASIS IN THE DESERT – ISAIAH 35:1-10

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The desert and the parched land will be glad; 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. Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; 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." Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. 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. 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. And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness; it will be for those who walk on that Way. The unclean will not journey on it; wicked fools will not go about on it. No lion will be there, nor any ravenous beast; they will not be found there. But only the redeemed will walk there, and those the Lord has rescued 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.



This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it,

There he was, rotting away in prison, because he had offended the ruler with God's Word. And there Jesus was, walking around with everyone flocking to him. You can begin to see why John the Baptist may have wondered if Jesus was indeed the Messiah. Earlier in his ministry he proclaimed that Jesus was "**the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.**" But now, he began to have some doubts. He was growing impatient with Jesus – the man who would come with an ax to the root of the tree, who would burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. Instead Jesus preached a message of forgiveness. Perhaps John had just seen a mirage of who the Messiah was supposed to be, a mirage and nothing more.

So he sent some of his disciples to Jesus to check, "**Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?**" Instead of responding with a simple "yes" or "no," Jesus paraphrased the prophet Isaiah. The very words which we have before us this morning in our sermon. "**Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.**" With his answer, Jesus was responding a resounding "Yes, I am the one who was promised, I am the Messiah, I am no mirage, I am the real deal, come and find rest in me."

How those words would have comforted John's ears, just as they should comfort our ears as well. Sometimes we just take for granted the comfort which we have because we know Jesus is the messiah, the promised one of God. But think about what those words mean. Think about the vast desert and parched land that is out there – physically, spiritually – and the oasis which God planted at Christmas. For CHRISTMAS IS AN OASIS IN THE DESERT not a mirage.

1. It gives us rest now
2. It gives us a highway to follow

(1)

Yet again, in Isaiah's book of prophecy, he gives us a picture of Christmas, 700 years before it even took place. And you can picture this vision of Christmas like a journey. A journey that begins in a barren wasteland. A journey where there is no water, there is no beauty, there is no shade, there is no rest or comfort. Isaiah was describing for the Israelites the time they would be taken from their homeland into captivity. The northern nation of Israel was taken by the Assyrian empire never to be seen again, the southern nation of Judah was taken by the Babylonian empire, and they would indeed return. But for the time they were in Babylon, it would be a barren wasteland. Maybe not physically, but at least spiritually.

That was the picture Isaiah described in chapter 34, the chapter before our verses for this morning. But in chapter 35, he talks about an oasis in the desert. He was not only giving hope for the nation of Judah to return, but he was also talking about a future time, he was talking about Christmas. **"the wilderness will rejoice and bloom, it will burst into 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."** Here in Arizona we know what it's like to live in a desert. And especially here in the Sonoran desert, we can appreciate the beauty of the desert. But what Isaiah is talking about is a beauty which is unnatural for the desert. This oasis will be unnatural. Isaiah is basically saying imagine the Sonoran desert like a south American rainforest. God acted – a virgin became pregnant, God himself was born into the world. This brought us rest.

Why would it be a real oasis? Because the glory and the splendor of God would be seen. The splendor and glory of God was seen at Christmas, as God remembered his promise to send a Savior, he revealed his love to the world. A little baby born in a manger, it is something so simple, so humble, that the devil will do all that he can to convince you it is not important, to convince you it is just a mirage (and a poor one at that). Look at what a good job he has done in our world, in ourselves.

We live in a culture which is driven by commercialism – same as cash financing, have-to-have items, can't live without novelties. All of these "things" supposedly are the oasis which make your life better. "Sex sells" is one of the unwritten rules of marketing. Independence is put on a pedestal – independence from rules, independence from parents, independence from religion. The devil will even make religion look like the parched wasteland and everything else an oasis. All of these are portrayed as an oasis in the desert. But they all are cleverly disguised mirages and offer nothing lasting or permanent. But it is not just the world which is drawn in by the devil's mirages, so are we.

What mirage attracts your attention? Is it the mirage of self-absorption? The idea that the world revolves around you, and anyone who disagrees with you is wrong, even if that someone is God? Is it the mirage of indifference to God? It doesn't matter what I do, I'm just a sinner and God will just have to deal with it. Is it the mirage of despair? My life is so terrible that not even God can fix it so I'll turn to something else. All of these mirages have one thing in common – they leave us thirsting for more. In fact, seeing a mirage and realizing it's not real is more of a disappointment than not seeing anything at all.

Only the gospel can bring nourishment and hope. Only the gospel is the true oasis in the desert. Because that little child, born in a Bethlehem manger 2,000 years ago brings the glory of God. Just listen to some of the Christmas songs out there – from “What child is this” to “Oh, Come, All Ye Faithful,” many of them have put the truths of the gospel into song describing the baby born in a manger. This babe grew to be a man, and he opened the eyes of the blind, the ears of the deaf, the tongues of the mute, but even those were not his greatest miracles. His greatest miracle was bringing us from death to life, restoring our relationship to God.

This is the oasis in the desert. Because we have Christmas, we have rest, we have food, we have drink. We have peace that passes understanding. Outwardly to the world, Christians seem to be stumbling around in a desert, they are accused of not knowing what’s going on, not believing what the “experts” are saying. And yet, we can take all of that, because of the oasis we know is there. It is an oasis that gives us rest now. It is an oasis that keeps us refreshed and nourished by the forgiveness and salvation found in Christ.

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But Christmas is not just something we celebrate in December, (I know it’s becoming more cliché), but it’s something we can celebrate and look to every day, because CHRISTMAS, THE OASIS IN THE DESERT gives us a highway to follow. Once again, Isaiah describes it as something unnatural which will come. **“In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow. And a highway will be there.”** It’s not like the road construction going on over here on Houghton Road where they are just expanding a current road, this is like a completely new road which is being constructed, in a place where roads normally aren’t, so for example in the washes.

This would be different than many of the roads in Isaiah’s day. The roads in his day were crooked and full of potholes. Many of the roads were dangerous for single travelers. But the road Isaiah is describing is nothing like that. It is a highway, it will be straight, it will be raised, there won’t be any bushes for ferocious animals to hide behind, or corners to watch out for. And it will have one destination – heaven.

What will be so great about it? **“It will be called the Way of Holiness...wicked fools will not go about on it...only the redeemed will walk there, and those the Lord has rescued will return.”** So picture this highway as I-10, except without all the crazy, numbskull drivers on the road, only good drivers. Now picture that spiritually speaking. That’s what this highway will be like. Why is that? Because this highway is our very Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Remember when he said, **“I am the way, the truth and the life.”** Jesus is the highway we follow. That is why the only people who will walk on it will be believers, that is why there will be no crazy people on it, because spiritually crazy people don’t follow Jesus.

CHRISTMAS, THE OASIS IN THE DESERT gives us a highway to follow. The highway we follow, the highway we walk on is Jesus. We follow Jesus, we get to heaven based on what he has done, and when we continue on that path, we are holy. Only the rescued and the redeemed will walk on this highway leading to Zion. Those are two passive verbs, the action is being done to us. While we walk this highway we will still see the barren desert around us, but when we reach Zion, the kingdom of God, everything will change.

Hear the last verse of Isaiah chapter 35, **“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.”** Heaven is the journey’s end, it is why we even get on this path to begin with. The journey starts at CHRISTMAS, THE OASIS IN THE DESERT God sent to a Bethlehem manger. The earthly journey concludes when we reach the city of Zion, that is heaven.

Maybe you have felt like John the Baptist at times, knowing that Jesus is the messiah, but not knowing it at the same time. Maybe you have gotten impatient with God fulfilling his promise to take us to heaven and judge the unbelievers. Maybe you have forgotten the joy that Christmas brings. Whatever the case, go to God’s Word and drink in the sweet water of forgiveness found in the OASIS IN THE DESERT. Be refreshed by the cool joy of God’s promises.

I’ll close with a movie comparison. Several years ago a trilogy of movies came out called *The Matrix*. Long story short, humans are fighting a war against the machines. The only human city left is built deep underground and it is appropriately named Zion. The city of Zion is the hope of all humans, coming to Zion brings a sense of joy and gladness. It is the same way for us as Christians. We hope and wait for Zion, the city of God. We have heard all of these wonderful things about it, and now we can’t wait to get there. But in the meantime, we are on the journey there. We are on the journey there only because of the oasis God provided in the desert. Remember Christmas, that oasis in the desert. Amen.