

## **In a Thirsty Land... Streams of HOPE**

Saved as Sermon Streams in a Thirsty Land

**Isaiah 32:1-3, 35:5-6 (AFBC 12/2/18)**

Take a moment and look around this beautiful sanctuary. It's always a special place, but it takes on a unique glow each year during Advent and Christmas. Thank you to everyone who puts so much into making this happen.

Not only do we have these wonderful decorations, each of our four Advent worship services take on a particular spiritual focus. Hope, peace, joy, and love—these are the blessings of heart and soul that we try to bring into focus during Advent.

It would be nice if we could just wrap up these qualities and place them under the Christmas tree for each other just as we do so many other gifts—but we can't do that. The only way that these gifts can be ours is for us to open our hearts and receive them as God's good gifts to us in Christ.

Our focus this morning, on this first Sunday of Advent, is on HOPE. Do you ever find yourself discouraged about life? Maybe, about our country? About the divisions and hatreds, shootings and bombings, and our seeming inability to come to terms with any of the pressing issues confronting us?

We're very good at deciding who's to blame—always somebody else, of course—but we're not good at making any kind of progress toward some resolution of our conflicts that would actually serve the common good of all of us, not just the partisan interests of some of us.

Hopelessness is not just about the world at large, however. Sometimes it strikes much closer to home. There can be so much despair about our own personal circumstances that we have nothing left over to devote to the bigger picture of life.

The Prophet Isaiah sought to address the hopelessness he saw in the lives of his people—in the lives of God's people—who, if they understand the nature of God and what He is up to in His world, should never see themselves as being in a hopeless situation. Let's take a look at what the prophet said:

**Isaiah 32:1-3**--See, a king will reign in righteousness  
and rulers will rule with justice.

<sup>2</sup> Each one will be like a shelter from the wind  
and a refuge from the storm,  
like streams of water in the desert  
and the shadow of a great rock in a thirsty land.

<sup>3</sup> Then the eyes of those who see will no longer be closed,  
and the ears of those who hear will listen.

**Isaiah 35:5-6**--Then will the eyes of the blind be opened  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

<sup>6</sup> 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.

Did you pick up on the phrase found in both of these passages, the hopeful phrase that speaks of “streams in the desert?” In a dry and thirsty land, a stream is a powerful symbol of hope.

Isaiah, inspired by God, is very gifted at using words to paint a picture—a very hopeful picture of a desert being changed—being transformed--into a place of life and beauty. As we reflect on his writings, I want us to see these vivid images.

What I mean is, I don’t want us to merely hear these words, I want us to visualize them. Let’s try to see this transformation take place.

Isaiah was speaking to people who had by-and-large lost hope. They saw their situation as hopeless. Maybe you’ve been there.

Life charged at you with so many pains, discouragements and disappointments, you questioned how you could possibly go on. Your hope was running on empty.

Twenty-five hundred years ago, God’s people were beaten down, defeated, and hopeless. They were exiled in a foreign land. By now, it had been two generations that they’d been living in captivity in Babylon.

Their home in Jerusalem was over 500 miles away. And the only way to get there was to travel across burning desert sands, tall rugged mountains, and a dangerous wilderness. It would be an incredibly difficult journey for them to make.

So getting back home seemed rather hopeless--until they received a word from God. Listen as God continues to speak through His prophet Isaiah:

**Isaiah 35:1-2--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.**

See the picture? It begins with desert—dry, parched land; burning sand; no water in sight. To be there is to be thirsty, with no means of quenching your thirst.

But Isaiah is not talking about physical need. He's using this image to speak of spiritual needs that exists in each of our lives when separated from God.

He's pointing to a spiritual longing, a heart-felt desire, for something better than what we're experiencing in life right now. Really, it's a thirst for God!

Suddenly, though, there is joy in the desert. It begins to blossom. We hear singing--no one expects this in the desert.

We're told to picture "the glory of Lebanon" and "the splendor of Carmel and Sharon" there. Snow-capped Mount Hermon was called "the glory of Lebanon."

Mt. Carmel, on the other hand, was lush and green, as was the valley of Sharon. None of this is what you expect to see in a desert!

But all of these are in this beautiful picture; yet everyone listening to the prophet knows that the desert—the real desert between them and home--is not like that. It seemed cruel to tantalize these hopeless exiles with such images.

Isaiah's intentions are good, though. He is simply reminding those who had turned their backs to God in years past (this is why they were in exile) that this is the difference God can still make in the lives of those who open themselves to His love.

Hot sand can become cool garden. Exiles can become people set free. Despair can be transformed into radiant hope.

Are you seeing this? Now watch as we get to verses 3 and 4: **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."**

Who is this message for? Those with "weak hands" and "feeble knees"—today we just have knee replacement surgery—right?—but the prophet speaks of "weak hands, feeble knees," and "fearful hearts." There's no surgery that can fix that!

But this will: **"Be strong, do not fear; your God will come... and save you."** There's HOPE: God is coming to save you. He's already on His way to set you free. This is what God is telling His people through his prophet Isaiah.

But what does this have to do with us? Simply this: Christmas is our once-every-year celebration of the Good News that God has come to us in His Son Jesus Christ. He has come to us through this incredible Gift to save us; and if we receive Him by faith, our lives are transformed—they're made brand new!

It's a precious gift that God offers us. Christ gave His life for us on Calvary's cross, taking our burden upon Himself to set us free from sin and death. Receive Him by faith and follow Him as Lord of your life, and the desert of your heart becomes a beautiful garden that grows hope, peace, joy, and love.

This is what we all need most for Christmas. This should be our heart's desire. No other gifts begin to compare!

Now, there's still more to the picture. Look again at verses 5 and 6a (Is. 35): **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.**

The picture changes here. Isaiah sets aside one canvas and begins work on another. He paints a portrait of people who previously had various afflictions, but no longer: for the eyes of the blind are opened, the ears of the deaf are unstopped, the lame are leaping like deer, and the speechless are shouting for joy!

And where do we see this prophecy fulfilled? We see it in the life and ministry of Jesus.

You know the miracle stories. When John the Baptist was in prison, he sent messengers to Jesus to ask if he truly was the Messiah? Jesus replied: 'the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up.' Jesus assured John that yes, His credentials were solid.

Now, the journey home would be tough for any of the exiles to whom Isaiah spoke, but how could someone with a handicap possibly make it? God's answer is part of the picture here.

Those blinded to God's love by the terrible conditions of the exile, Isaiah told them, would be able to see God's compassion once again. Just as later, those of us blinded by sin would be able to see God's forgiveness and salvation in Christ Jesus.

And those of us who can hardly walk because we're so loaded down with burdens can leap with joy when these burdens are handed over to the Lord who tells us to bring all our cares and burdens to Him. This should fill our hearts with HOPE.

Let's return to the picture now in verses 6b and 7. Isaiah takes us back to the desert, that can no longer be recognized as desert because of this:

**6b 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.**

How frustrating for those jackals. Jackals are scavengers, roaming about looking for whatever couldn't survive the heat of the desert, but now there are bubbling springs and pools with lush vegetation—that's no place for a jackal!

See the picture?: "streams in the desert." There are churches that have made this their name: "Streams in the Desert" Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, or whatever flavor, Church.

It's a great name! Every church should be as inviting, and should offer something as vital to people's lives, as a cool stream in the middle of a hot desert!

This is the change God promised to bring into the lives of His people in exile. And then, just a few centuries later, when the time was right, God sent to us His Son, because this is the change He wants to bring into our lives as well.

Jesus Christ refreshes our hearts like a life-giving river flowing into the midst of a dry and thirsty land. If we know Him as Savior and Lord, He is our “water of life!”

Isaiah finishes this work of art with just two more verses. Listen to verses 8 and 9 (Is. 35):

**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.**

That sounds rather modern, doesn't it? A highway will cut across this desert that's now become a garden! This freeway starts in Babylon, the place of exile, and goes all the way to Jerusalem, their beloved homeland.

It has a name—but not I-26 or I-85. This highway is called “the Way of Holiness.” And it's filled with God's people who are making that long journey back home. They're set free now and they're going home.

It's safe—there are no lions or any other wild animals that you might worry about out in the wilderness. There're just people, God's redeemed people, all moving together in the same direction, toward the City of God.

If you listen, you'll hear music—beautiful, joyful music like we hear in worship each Sunday--and that we will hear for the entire service Sunday-week as the choir presents its gift of Christmas music. Listen to this final verse (Is. 35):

**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.**

With their hopes renewed, these pilgrims start singing. Picture these people who've been in bondage—set free now!

Despairing people, filled with hope! Sad folks who are singing now because of the transformation God has brought their way!

On this first Sunday of Advent, 2018: "Can we find ourselves among these pilgrims?" You see, God intends for us to be part of this picture too!

Our deliverance is not from captivity in Babylon, but from bondage to sin and death. The road we travel is not "the Way of Holiness"—we know we aren't that good. We journey instead along Jesus' "I am the WAY, the truth, and the life."

He is the One who fills our hearts with HOPE and our mouths, with songs of praise. And if you've got this, friends, it really doesn't matter if you get anything else for Christmas—you've already got it all! Anything more is just an added blessing.

But if the HOPE that comes through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ is not yours, you can have all the gifts in the world, and still be hopeless, and thirsty, and empty, and lost.

Good news. There's a stream in the desert. Jesus Christ is with us in the desert, and He is the water of life.

Reach out to Him with hands of faith, drink deeply of His forgiveness and love, and receive the sweet blessing of HOPE that He offers you now.