

“The Lord’s Highway”

Advent 2022 – “The Hope of the Prophets” – part #3

Resource from umcdiscipleship.org

Isaiah 35:1-10

[title slide] *Welcome, opening prayer.*

Today we are continuing our series called, “The Hope of the Prophets.” Isaiah prophesied more than 600 hundred years before Christ was born that God would send a Messiah to set the world right. We have followed Isaiah’s visions of peace and justice, longed for the hope that he saw, desired restoration for ourselves and our world as we await the return of the Savior, Jesus. Last week we talked about what it means for Jesus to not only be the one who saves us, but also the one who is our perfect, righteous judge.

[Desert caravan] Our goal today is to journey into the desert on God’s highway. So to get you in the proper mindset, I’ve researched a few desert puns. Take them with a grain of sand; they’re not out-sand-ing.

1. What kind of witch lives in the desert? A sandwich.
2. Why can’t you see caravans in the desert? Because they’re camel-flaged.
3. What kind of paper is best for a map of the desert? Sandpaper.
4. What did the pig say in the desert? “I’m bacon out here.”
5. Who celebrates Christmas in the desert? Sandy-Claus.
6. What’s the best drink in the desert? Camel-mile tee.
7. What did Anna say when she found Elsa in the desert? “O-a-sis!”
8. What looks like a duck and sounds like a duck and is found in the desert? A quacktus.

Why are desert jokes funny? Maybe we like to laugh in the face of danger. We know that deserts are inherently hot, dry, dangerous places. Those of us in Michigan can hardly comprehend the intensity of the Sahara. Maybe some of you have been to Arizona, New Mexico or California. I can’t imagine living with rattle snakes, scorpions, jackals, or lions. Also, I’d really miss fishing, swimming and surfing. And lake-effect snow.

[Joshua Tree NP] My family once visited Joshua Tree National Park in south-east California. It was beautiful, but it was hot and very dry. My brother

did a trail run on the Boy Scout trail and ironically got lost. We never really panicked, but for about 4 hours, we wondered how he was doing. Eventually a ranger picked him up and brought him back to the park entrance. My brother regularly runs marathons, so it probably was no big deal to him. But the thought of being lost in the desert without a road is not something I like to dwell on.

[Oasis of Mara] Joshua Tree was beautiful, but what really surprised me was the Oasis of Mara on the north side of the park. If you look at a satellite map, there is a grove of trees and even a small marsh. For the first time all trip, I actually had to swat bugs away. It was shocking, and refreshing, to actually find real streams in the desert, and large trees where you could rest in the shade.

[Judean Desert] The prophet Isaiah, we know, lived in Israel on the edge of the Judean Desert. The Judean Desert is quite small compared to the Sahara Desert or the deserts of the American Southwest, but it’s just as harsh. Temperatures regularly hit over 100 degrees Fahrenheit (40 Celsius). The total annual rainfall is less than 18 inches a year (47 cm). We get that much in one week in Houghton sometimes.

If Isaiah wanted to explain the miracle of the Messiah’s appearance, transforming the desert into a safe, well-watered place would have been a perfect image for the locals to imagine.

[scripture: Is. 35:1-2] Let’s look again at the miracles God provides in the desert in Isaiah’s vision. “The wilderness will rejoice and blossom.... They will see the glory of the Lord, the splendor of our God.” (Isaiah 35:1-2) We don’t normally expect flowers in the desert. Not with less than 20 inches of rainfall in a year. Yet when it does rain, it often comes all at once. The desert flora is prepared to release petals and seeds at the very moment the rain comes, even if the plants have to wait for years.

[Atacama Desert] Check out this picture of the Atacama Desert in Chile, the driest place on earth. All these flowers appeared after one rare rainstorm. What Isaiah sees is even more incredible and beautiful. God doesn’t just renew the desert, God replaces it. God floods the place with water, and flowers grow where they have no business growing.

[Is. 35:6-7] In Isaiah 35:6-7, we read: “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.”

Not only are the plants renewed and water is abundant, God removes all the dangers from his people. In verse 9, Isaiah says this about God’s highway: “No lion will be there, nor any ravenous beast; they will not be found there.”

Imagine walking the desert road with complete confidence. You have all the supplies you need, and you don’t have to look over your shoulder to see what is sneaking up on you. What a relief.

[Is. 35:3-4] God also heals the people so they can walk this road together. Listen again to Isaiah 35:3-6 - “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.’ **[next slide]** 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.”

[Jesus heals] Doesn’t that sound exactly like what Jesus did? He accomplished so many healing miracles. He cured the blind, deaf, lame and mute. Sometimes he did it in the face of those who opposed him and hated him. In the desert of faith, Jesus brought the water of life.

There is something we need to know. Jesus, whose birth we celebrate every year on December 25th, will come again. Our hope in Advent is that Jesus will come and repair the world, and lead us through the desert into eternal life. In fact, his mission today is still the same: to heal, to bring life where there is death, hope where there is despair, living water where there are only dry, sandy hearts.

Jesus came to show us the pathway back to God, to life. Not only that, he came to heal us so that we could walk with him, both in this life and the next.

[Man alone in park] The desert is pointed analogy for our souls. How often are we dry inside, craving spiritual water? How often are we weary from the harshness of this world, the pandemic, war, conflict, hunger, and poverty? Wouldn’t it be great if someone cared? Wouldn’t it be great if someone called us

to walk, not on the lonely, barren two-tracks in the desert of our souls, but a well-maintained, safe pathway to living water and eternal life?

[Sunflower] That’s what Christ has done, is doing, and will continue to do. Christ renews us when we follow him. If we look for Jesus in unsuspecting places, we will find him. In places like the Omega House, the local hospice facility. In places like hospitals, funeral homes and homeless shelters. In places where volunteers are risking their lives, like war-torn Ukraine and Africa. In service organizations like the United Methodist Committee on Relief, the Salvation Army, Dial-Help, and Little Brothers Friends of the Elderly. Even in place like the local church in a fragmenting denomination. Friends, look for Jesus. God is providing resources in unexpected places.

[John 7:37-38] In John 7:37-38, Jesus offers an emotional invitation. The place is the temple in Jerusalem, a city of conflict, a stone’s throw away from that awful Judean desert. During a festival, Jesus said this: “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.”

Think about what that would mean to a people who didn’t live on the Portage Canal or one of the Great Lakes, to a people who had to draw water from a well, daily, in order to survive. What would it look like if you couldn’t turn on the tap and have fresh water pour out instantly? In the scarcity of water, Jesus’ invitation was simply astounding.

Perhaps the vision of Isaiah is about our own souls becoming flooded with living water again. That is the choice we can make this Christmas: either we can let the busyness and commercialism dry out our souls, or we can celebrate the birthday of the one who brought us living water, the one who heals us and protects us.

[Isaiah 35:10] The Hope of Isaiah was to see a Messiah who would not only change the desert surroundings but also build a safe highway so that everyone could climb the mountain back to God. Isaiah didn’t know when his vision would be fulfilled. Similarly, we don’t know the next time Jesus is coming back. But the big difference between Isaiah’s people and us is that we can know Jesus here and now. We don’t have to wait 600 years. The Messiah has come and will come

again. We can receive his love, mercy and grace, like powerful rain showers in our souls. We can leave the desert of loneliness, guilt, shame, and bitterness. We can leave sorrow and sighing behind. We can feel new strength in our hands, our knees, our feet, our bones, our souls and our church. We can sing with joy again, the joy that the prophets saw. God came to rescue us and set us on the right path of life.

[Title slide] The Band Rascal Flatts wrote the song, “Life is a Highway.” They got one thing right in their lyrics: life is a road we travel on, although we can choose which road to take: walking through the desert on our own, or taking the path that leads us back to God if we follow the Savior. Which road will you choose?

Let’s pray.

Memory Verse: John 7:38 (NIV)

[Jesus said,] “Whoever believes in Me, as the Scripture has said: ‘Streams of living water will flow from within him.’”

Reflection Questions:

1. Are there times in life when you feel like you’re wandering in the desert? Describe what those moments feel like.
2. Have you ever witnessed a surprising moment of refreshing? An unexpected rainstorm, or a note or gift from a friend? How did it restore your soul?
3. What places in the world right now are spiritual deserts? Our schools, our offices, places of war and poverty? How do you feel about them? What would God have you do to bring refreshment to others in need?
4. Can you walk the road God has placed in the desert for you? Will you ask Jesus to be your Messiah and remove sorrow, sighing and sin from your life and replace it with his living water?