

A SERMON FROM ST. PAUL'S, FAYETTEVILLE

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# Gardening in the Desert

Sermon preached by the Rev. Lowell E. Grisham, Rector  
St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Fayetteville, Arkansas  
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Episcopal Revised Common Lectionary

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**Isaiah 35:1-10** –

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,  
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;  
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,  
and rejoice with joy and singing.  
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,  
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.  
They shall see the glory of the Lord,  
the majesty of our God.

Strengthen the weak hands,  
and make firm the feeble knees.  
Say to those who are of a fearful heart,  
'Be strong, do not fear!  
Here is your God.  
He will come with vengeance,  
with terrible recompense.  
He will come and save you.'

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;  
then the lame shall leap like a deer,  
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,  
and streams in the desert;  
the burning sand shall become a pool,  
and the thirsty ground springs of water;  
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,\*  
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

A highway shall be there,  
and it shall be called the Holy Way;  
the unclean shall not travel on it,\*  
but it shall be for God's people;\*  
no traveller, not even fools, shall go astray.  
No lion shall be there,  
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;  
they shall not be found there,  
but the redeemed shall walk there.  
And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,  
and come to Zion with singing;  
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;  
they shall obtain joy and gladness,  
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

**(Matthew 11:2-11)** – When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go

out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written,

'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way before you.'

Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

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**L**ast week I tried – with apologies – my first sports metaphor in many years. I can't tell you how many people told me afterwards that they actually enjoyed it. This congregation is full of in-the-closet sports-theologians. I'm thinking about having a sports analogy every week! Or at least until I see Kathy headed off to a visit with a lawyer. (If you weren't here last week – my wife hates sports analogies in sermons.)

But did you hear about Razorback Tight End D. J. Williams' winning the 2010 Disney Spirit Award, given each year to "college football's most inspirational figure"? D. J. grew up with an abusive, alcoholic, drug addicted father. When he was eleven, his mother Vicki fled their Dallas home with D. J. and his sister. Advised that a local shelter was too dangerous for them to live in, Vicki turned to eleven-year-old D. J., showed him a map, and asked him to pick a place for them to live outside of Texas. His finger landed on Little Rock.

Today, D. J. is an active advocate for domestic abuse awareness, and he volunteers with Big Brothers Big Sisters, the Boys & Girls Club, and Children's Hospital. He's on track to graduate this month, and just won the Mackey Award

as the best Tight End in the nation. Receiving the Spirit Award, D. J. said this: "Watching my mother, who never quit, is the inspiration for me each day and a lesson for us all. My hope is the story of my family will show those who are experiencing a similar ordeal that they are not alone and there is help and a way out."

I heard another story this week about a woman who lived a hard life, with virtually no resources except her own stamina and faith. She has now sent six children successfully through college. When she was asked how she did it, she answered, "I saw a new world coming."



"The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom..." (Isaiah 35:1) Scholars are divided about when this vision was written. It might have been during a time of great threat, as when Assyria appeared poised to conquer and destroy Judah. Or it might have been during the Babylonian exile, when the people were taken from their homes and lived as aliens in a foreign land. Or it might have been after the restoration, when the rebuilding was not progressing and the nation had no life or energy.

It is a word that speaks to us at any time when things feel like a wilderness or a desert – when hands are weak and knees are feeble and hearts are fearful. “Be strong, do not fear!” shouts the prophet.

In the desert, the prophet sees flowers bloom and he hears joyful singing. Healing happens. Water breaks forth. There is a path, a Way through the wilderness – a Holy Way, where there is “joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.” (35:10)

How does Isaiah see something like that when everything around him looks like a wilderness? How does a poor woman of six children see “a new world coming”? How does an eleven year old’s finger on Little Rock turn into a highway in the desert?

It is a consistent message in scripture that God is always working to bring life out of death. We are invited to look at our circumstances with realistic eyes – to see the dryness and wilderness, to accept the disappointment and suffering, to witness the injustice and foolishness – but never let that be the last word.

James offers a metaphor from nature. “Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts...” (5:7-8a) A farmer can wait because he knows what a crop of wheat looks like. A mother can persevere because she knows what a college degree for her child looks like.

John the Baptist sends to ask of Jesus, “Are you the one?” He asks because Jesus does not look like the Messiah that John imagined. John imagined an ax at the root of the trees, a winnowing fork clearing the threshing floor, gathering the wheat and burning the chaff with unquenchable fire, especially the oppressive chaff of the occupying Roman army.

Jesus gives him a very different vision than what he expected, what he hoped for. “The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised,” (and this is particularly important) “and the poor have good news brought to them.” Bless you John if you are not offended.

But John remains in jail. We know the rest of the story. He will die there. I wonder. Did he die disappointed, maybe even bitter, because there was no chaff-burning Messiah? Or did he embrace the vision of a Messiah who did those little things – healing a few and giving good news to the poor? Was that enough for John in prison?

Sometimes I feel imprisoned. Sometimes I feel like we live in a desert or wilderness. I have such hopes, such dreams for a better world, a more just society; I look at so many people who are suffering and struggling – and I want something better for them. I see so many people doing such terribly destructive things, and I want some chaff burning.

How do you see the wilderness and imagine the garden? How do you accept

your prisons and enjoy the healings and good news? How do you persevere enough to see a new world coming? How do you keep going like a mother who won't quit?

It depends on what you focus on, I guess. I see a dysfunctional health care system, and yet I rejoice that a little outreach program started from St. Paul's is now a \$12-million-a-year network of clinics helping 20,000 neighbors who used to struggle for access. I know housing defaults have increased, but I'm thankful that 7-Hills Homeless Center, started from this church, helps hundreds each month and has kept over 200 from losing their homes. I see national unemployment at nearly ten percent, yet I rejoice that we feed a Parish Hall full twice a week and will soon underwrite a similar kitchen in Tibet. I worry about the struggling American education system, and I see bright-eyed children from nearby Washington Elementary getting tutoring and encouragement here twice a week. Last week we got a list of names of children whose mothers are in prison across the street, and before we could offer the list to our Sunday congregation, every child was claimed by our Wednesday Church and especially by our Choir, so each child will get a gift from their mother through one of our Santa's Helpers. Tonight we'll go into their prison to bring good news to the poor and to give the bread of life in an iron and concrete desert.

Isaiah shows us how to see the desert reality while simultaneously imagining a new world. Jesus shows us how to expose the injustice of empire while

healing and bringing good news to the poor.

**W**e are invited to a dual vision. This business of facing our desert while watering our garden also works for our personal lives. How many of us live with personal prisons and dry wildernesses of our own? Yet the prophet invites us to dream, and Jesus invites us to trust. Jesus invites us to embrace the hope that can turn our silent, dark stuckness into musical, lighted paths.

It all depends on how we frame it. From his prison cell, John had a choice. He could become demoralized, because the chaff-burning he had expected was not to be. Or he could become hopeful, because a healing compassion of good news was entering the world. Did John despair that there would be no burning unquenchable fire, or did he rejoice to know the unquenchable fire of Jesus' love bringing life out of death?

It all depends on what you focus on. D. J. Williams hopes that the story of his family will remind people that we're not alone – that there is help, and a way out. A highway through the desert. For everyone, and for every one of us.

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Episcopal Church is to explore  
and celebrate  
God's infinite grace, acceptance  
and love.**