

## **Sermon: Desert Shall Rejoice and Blossom**

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, December 14, 2025)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Did you know that humanity is already capable of turning desert into arable land, suitable for growing crops? I am not talking about the science fiction stuff, of large scale planetary terraforming, but a more localized efforts to stop deforestation, to slow down or halt all together the process of desertification, and in some cases, to transform a desert terrain through irrigation and water diversion.

In China, where 27.2% of its land mass is actually desert, a massive reforesting effort is underway in the northern part of the country, since 1978 and to be completed by 2050, to halt the expanding Gobi desert. Some have called it the Great Green Wall, but officially it is known simply as the Three-North Shelter Forest Program. Progress to date is mixed, but the government did report in 2024 that a 3,000 km green belt has been built around the smaller Taklamakan Desert. And the fraction of the country covered by deserts has declined slightly to 26.8%.

In the Middle East, ever since the signing of the Oslo II accord in 1995, Israel has been diverting water from the Sea of Galilee and the river Jordon to irrigate its kibbutz and farmland. While this has transformed the landscape of its north, and has vastly expanded its agriculture capacity, it came at the expense of the south, down river, particularly the Kingdom of Jordan. Complaints have long been raised by its neighbours that Israel has been hoarding this precious water resource upstream. The historical high tension in that region is partly caused and continually being inflamed by this unequal sharing of water.

I am glad to learn of a new effort by Israel, to pump desalinated seawater from Mediterranean backwards into the Sea of Galilee, in a massive effort to stabilize the water level, and to create a strategic reserve. Let's hope they would do better in sharing this new pool with others.

Of course, Canadian would do well to remember Donald Trump's rhetoric during his presidential election last year. He seems to be of the opinion that large scale water diversion is possible from Canada to irrigate a rapidly drying California, as easily as turning on the tap. But of course, it is not—not to mention the near impossible geo-engineering efforts required, nor the fact that Canada is still not yet, the often touted by him, the 51st state. Water and politics do not tend to mix well.

All that is to say, the vision of Isaiah in our Scripture reading today, is not too unimaginable to us; it is not too far out of the human reach.

*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 shouting.  
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. (Isaiah 35:1-2)*

Mount Carmel is a lush, mountainous area in the northern part of Israel, while the Plain of Sharon is a fertile coastal plain lying just south, famous for its abundance of flowers and forests in ancient times. This pairing together in Isaiah 35 symbolizes beauty, prosperity and more importantly, the glory of God.

Of course, Isaiah is speaking more than just a transformation of physical terrain. He is speaking to a people soon to be in exile. For despairing people far from their homeland who saw only darkness and experienced only homelessness, this passage from Isaiah continues his message of good news.

So we read in Isaiah 35:3-4

*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.”*

We have seen how the book of Isaiah expressed God's saving actions in the political world through the expectation a Davidic king in Isaiah 11 and the appointment of the Persian emperor as God's shepherd in Isaiah 45. However, Isaiah saw a larger, more cosmic scale for God's restoration and righteousness. In some of the most beautiful poetry in Scripture, Isaiah announced that God would heal and restored the nature world so that the whole cosmos would reflect God's power and holiness.

So we read in Isaiah 35:5-6,

*Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,  
and the ears of the deaf shall be opened;  
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.*

Like the image of the shoot that emerges from stock of Jesse, the incredible images of blooming deserts and springs of water in a dry land picture the wholeness brought to creation when God's reign is made known.

So we sing in Hymn 151, verse 1

Lo, how a Rose ever blooming  
from the tender stem hath sprung  
of Jesse's lineage coming,  
as prophets long have sung.  
It came a flower bright,  
amid the cold of winter,  
when half-spent was the night.

Elsewhere we sing in Hymn 783, verse 2 and 3,

The desert shall rejoice and blossom as a rose,  
for the ears of the deaf shall hear  
and the blind, their eyes be opened.  
The desert shall rejoice and blossom as a rose,  
for the tongue of the mute shall sing  
and the lame will dance with gladness.

The anticipation of that reign is echoed in Jesus' response to the question posed by disciples of John the baptizer, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" And Jesus answered them, "*Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those with a skin disease 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.*" (Matthew 11:5-6)

Blessed indeed are those who is not ashamed of Jesus, not ashamed of the Good News of Jesus. So the anticipation of that reign fills the weeks of Advent with joy. For our hope hinges on Christ Jesus, of what he has begun to do, of what he continues to be, and the future he shall bring forth. Oh come, oh come, Emmanuel, God with us. Oh come!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**