

Advent 3, 2025, Year A
Isaiah 35.1-10, Matthew 11.2-11

I love Isaiah 35 – Andrew and I had this reading at our wedding. It captures something about true joy. Isaiah uses desert imagery to depict the sufferings and afflictions of this life, and the promises of God as streams of water transforming the desert into a blossoming garden. The desert is simultaneously both a real physical place and a symbolic or spiritual reality.

In the desert there is dryness and burning sand – an environment inhospitable to life and growth, a parched and withered landscape. There is sorrow, sighing and weariness. There is weakness, feebleness, fearfulness, blindness, deafness, lameness and muteness – that is, people experience having their zest for life, their strength, their vision and their speech and stories stripped away. There are predators – the desert is the haunt of jackals, lions and ravenous beasts – those whose position in the chain of being is to hurt, kill, destroy and make fearful and miserable the lives of those smaller and weaker than them. And finally there is lostness – those who can't find their bearings in a featureless land, deprived of landmarks and places to rest and dwell, those who might have begun their journeys with purpose but have ended up astray – living diminished or even wicked lives.

We don't have to search terribly hard to see the desert encroaching all around us. Of course there are the macro global calamities of war, literal desertification and the hunger that goes with that, natural disasters, species extinction, nuclear threat, corrupt governments and corporations and genocide.

But closer to home, the desert is the experience of those in our communities who don't know where their next meal is coming from, women and children terrified of the violence in their home, and those trying to bring up children while living in a car or garage.

The desert is the home of those being forced by gangs to carry out horrific crimes, those living from meth hit to meth hit, stealing and lying to fund their habit – and of course all their victims.

There are the catastrophically bereaved, those who have suffered or caused lethal accidents, those suffering dementia or living with chronic pain or undiagnosed illness.

There are those who are beaten up for cutting in front of the wrong car, victims of random stabbings and gun violence, those who've lost their life savings to scammers, the dangerously mentally unwell who can't get help or refuge, and women on the run from sexual predators.

There are those who have had their jobs taken, those who work in unsafe environments, those on benefits facing punitive sanctions, or sick people turfed off ACC.

And then there's the anxiety of an entire generation who have had their thought patterns and mind chemistry altered by unregulated technologies that have unmoored them from the meaning, wisdom and connection they need to thrive.

I'm sure that given enough time we could all tell stories about what it means to suffer the burning sands of weakness, weariness, pain, isolation, lostness and fear.

But Isaiah does not leave us in this depressing place. This is a text of promise, of almost unimaginable hope. In the desert will flow waters and streams and pools, causing beautiful plants to bloom and blossom. The silenced and voiceless will rejoice, shouting and singing their gladness. The strength of God will encourage and give firmness to the feeble. Those who feel cut off from others will find healing and restoration to community. And, on this holy way, there will be no predators, and no-one will be lost or astray – all will walk with joy and purpose in the company of the redeemed.

This is the shape of our longing, it is what the prophets help us to imagine, and it is what we wait to see fulfilled...while knowing that many of the changes we ache for may not come in our lifetime, and indeed, knowing that the ultimate fulfilment of these promises awaits us on the other side of death.

What does water in the desert look like here and now? What answer might we give to the question “has God’s anointed one come, or are we to wait for another?”

Water and blossoming in the desert look like communities where everyone can find belonging, where people accept their own vulnerable humanity, where we’re taught to pray and connect to the wellspring of the Spirit. It looks like relationships where healing and trust are possible, loving connection for everyone who needs support. It looks like wisdom being passed on from generation to generation, and the joyful embrace of differences of age, perspective, culture, gender and life experience. Those experiencing weakness or limitation are honoured, and courage is defined as the strength to live from a place of deep interiority and reflection. The church is imperfect, but at its best, this is exactly what we see unfolding.

Those on the holy way sing joyfully because we are grounded in our identity as God’s beloved even when life is hard, our hearts and minds are lifted beyond ourselves in gratitude because we have access to the goods of life.

In a community anchored by God’s grace there is enough food, enough support, enough love, enough safety – no-one is disparaged, abused, or suffering lack – communities and environments thrive because people are engaged in meaningful work, satisfying creative practices, and deeply connected with the natural world.

Wrongdoers are held to account, and people feel safe, while space is held for forgiveness, rehabilitation and restoration wherever possible.

Individuals and communities have a sense of direction and purpose because we understand how our story is held within the greater mission and purposes of God. We know we can’t ever be really lost, because we are held in God’s embrace for ever.

Even in times of difficulty, those who walk on the holy way are aware of the deep underground pull toward peace and healing that dwells always under the surface of things.

And, we know our way to the places and the people that strengthen our access to this life-giving underground stream. We are both pilgrims and guides, because those who have found their way into the promises are called to widen the scope of our care, to be with and alongside those people and places that are marked by an unchosen desert.

Something in John the Baptist knew that his role was to proclaim that the Messiah had arrived in his generation. The coming of Christ was the beginning of a new epoch, the time of the Spirit, when more and more people would find their feet walking the holy way in a blossoming desert. But not everyone can accept the new thing that God has done and is doing on our earth – there is still so much desert, so much unnecessary struggle and injustice, still so much sin. Sometimes it feels as though the desert is winning. It can be hard to remember the prophet's call to look for signs of renewal and ask each other "what do you hear, what do you see?"

Faithfulness means looking expectantly to the ways that the Christ comes to us anew day by day, year by year. In every generation, God's people must dig new wells and uncover the clogged up streams and springs so living water can flow through and make things grow fresh again. This is the work of the Spirit in us. We need to become the communities we seek – nurturing our connection to God's Spirit, tending the gardens (both literal and metaphorical) that provide food and shelter and medicine for the wanderers.

So be strong, do not fear! Here is our God, coming to save, pouring out the living water of the Spirit in the desert. Where have you found water? Where are you seeing life blossom? Where are you hearing a new song? Let's keep telling each other these things.

St John's Royal Oak, 2025
The Reverend Brenda Rockell