

Advent 3, Year A
Dec. 15, 2019
Saint James, Wheat Ridge

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A thaw has come to Narnia.
In Narnia, where for many years
it was “always winter but never Christmas,”
winter is ending.
Father Christmas has come.

The scene in “The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe”
where Father Christmas suddenly appears,
delivering gifts to the Pevensie children,
as well as to the Beavers,
is one of the most joyous scenes in the book and the movie.

Father Christmas does more than just bring gifts, of course.
His appearance signifies that Aslan is on the move,
and his gifts are meant to help the children prepare.
They need to be ready
because the rightful king is on the way.

In this, Father Christmas is much like John the Baptist,
A messenger who prepared the way,
Emerging from the wilderness
To share the news that a new time has come.

This morning, the prophet Isaiah
tells the story of a spring thaw, too.
Remember last week's reading from Isaiah,
in which animals would witness to the new age of peace,
the wolf and the lamb, the calf and the lion,
all living together in gentleness,
instead of predators preying on the weak?

This week's reading expands that picture
to include the parched earth itself
and the entire wilderness is being transformed.

Water will flow in the desert,
 And a wide, safe road will be cut
 through the formerly tangled, hostile wilderness,
 so all of God's children,
 can make their way to Zion,
 and "everlasting joy will be upon their heads."

We hear this reading on this, the third Sunday of Advent,
 Which is known as Gaudete Sunday,
 From the Latin word meaning "Rejoice!"
 And that is what we do today.
 We can rejoice. We *should* rejoice.

Originally, Isaiah's words were meant to be words of comfort
 To the Jewish exiles, taken to Babylon,
 Who were in mourning over their lost nation.
 The mighty Babylonian army had conquered Judah,
 shattered the walls of Jerusalem,
 and left the temple in ruins.
 The leading citizens had been forced to relocate.
 And the only way home was through 500 miles
 Of vast, bleak wilderness.

It appeared to many that God had forgotten them.
 Their hands were weak, their knees had grown feeble,
 and their hearts had become fearful.
 There appeared to be no hope, no help,
 and no way home.
 The good news that Isaiah brought
 Was that God does not abandon God's people to their despair.
 God would come to save them.

It was a long, long winter for the exiled people of Judah.
 But finally it ended.
 Finally, they walked that long highway through the wilderness
 That led them home again.

You know, sometimes it may seem
 as if we are also living in a wilderness –

a barren desert from which we have no hope of deliverance.
 Those around us seem oblivious to the danger,
 And they don't understand our fears.
 Or perhaps they understand all too well,
 And they grow hysterical and overreact.
 Sometimes, even the little things of daily life
 become insurmountable obstacles
 for our fainting hearts and feeble knees.

Can you relate?
 Where are those scary, wilderness spaces in your life?
 Where are those spaces in which your hands weaken,
 your knees won't support you anymore,
 and your courage vanishes?
 What traps you in a prison of doubt
 and disappointment and despair?
 What blinds your eyes from seeing God's presence
 or stops your ears from hearing God's promise?
 What closes your mouth from proclaiming the joy
 of the coming Christ?

Just like God's people in exile,
 we each have our own personal wilderness space,
 and each of us yearns for a way through it.

Today, God promises that way.
 It is God's holy way
 through the very wilderness space in our souls.
 "A highway shall be there and it shall be called the Holy Way ...
 it shall be for God's people:
 no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray."

Please notice that in Isaiah's beautiful metaphor
 God doesn't eliminate the wilderness.
 God's people don't get to step into a magical teleporter
 That will instantly transport them back home.
 They still have to put forth the effort to make the journey.
 But God enters the wilderness with them,
 And transforms their experience there,
 So it is no longer so frightening, so threatening,

So impossible to get through.

The same is true for us today.
God does not eliminate the wilderness from our lives.
God changes those scary spaces
By being present within them.

And not only that,
God equips us to handle
Whatever trouble we may encounter.
God not only lays down the highway,
God gives us the hiking boots and the backpack.
We may wish for a nice SUV instead,
And we might not get that.
But we're given what we need.

Think back to the scene in "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe"
Where Father Christmas delivers those gifts.
They are, he tells the children,
"tools, not toys."
They are gifts of extreme usefulness.
To Peter, he gives a sword and a shield.
To Susan, it's a bow, a quiver of arrows,
And a horn to blow in times of trouble.
To Lucy, he gives a vial of healing medicine
And a dagger.

Not exactly the things most parents
Would want their young children
opening on Christmas morning.

But they are gifts that are tied to each child's
Individual personality and talents.
Even as children,
They're being equipped to join Aslan
in fighting the white witch.

Likewise God has uniquely equipped each of us
To do our part to advance the Kingdom of Heaven.
God is with us,

And God calls for us to stand courageously,
And join in the struggle to rout evil from the world.
As Isaiah put it,
Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
“Be strong, do not fear!”

Be brave, knowing that God has equipped you
To make a difference in the world,
And rest assured that Jesus comes among us
To lead us in that struggle.

Yes, in Narnia,
The snow has melted and the flowers are blooming.
A long terrible winter is over,
And the white witch is on the run.

In Wheat Ridge,
And in our own individual lives,
We are in various states of spring thaw.
But we can rest assured
That the winter will end.
Our king is coming.
And we can rejoice!

Happy are they who have the God of Jacob for their help,
Whose hope is in the Lord their God.
Rejoice. Again I say, “Rejoice.”
Amen.