

**Joy Blooms in a Cactus**  
**A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church**  
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**Isaiah 35:1-10**  
**12-15-2019**

Admittedly, the front lawn of my home could look better. But it has its moments. When May finally arrives, our grass turns a gorgeous green, our azaleas and gardenias begin to bloom, adding much-needed color and fragrance, and our trees put on their summer attire. And for about three weeks, I think, “Wow, this place looks like it’s full of life!”

November brings the first frost, and with it, our lawn opts for a beige overcoat, and those pesky oak leaves decide to cling to their branches a little longer than we’d like, and when they do finally decide to fall down, they stick like Velcro to the grass. Our blooms vanish, and our little habitat looks kind of bare. And after all that raking and picking up sticks, I sometimes wonder if we’ve just made our lawn completely vulnerable, completely open, completely exposed to every wintry element. Doesn’t it need a blanket? I feel like it’s too cold!

I can’t help but feel as if I’ve been exiled away from all of the fullness of spring and summer. And right about the time I’m ready to concede, that maybe, probably, definitely, the winter’s gonna hide away any new life until well past the time the groundhog sees her shadow; I notice that Christmas cactus of ours.

If you’ve ever had a Christmas cactus, you know that sometimes, especially when it’s very hot, and very arid, that thing can look a little haggard. Its edges brown. And sure, it’ll turn greener as the fall approaches, but it looks more rugged than pretty. And it’s stubborn, too. Its growth is so subtle, it’s often hard to tell that the cactus is doing anything other sitting around.

Each December, resigned to winter’s certainty, I am always SO surprised, and SO excited to see that little green plant shoot out the most wonderful pink blooms. Our cactus seems to say, “Hey Bob, hey Jacqueline, wake up! God’s doing something new. Pay attention to this newness. Get ready. Be joyful!”

For me, the Christmas cactus is a striking reminder that God has the ability to draw new life out of the wilderness.

In today's text, the prophet Isaiah is dealing with a much weightier kind of wilderness than winter melancholy. His people are dealing with the wilderness of exile. Here are a people under the cruel, forceful, humiliating grip of Babylon. Their homes have been destroyed. Their temple has been destroyed. They have been removed from all that is sacred, familiar, and dear. And they feel exiled from EVERYTHING.

The prophet harkens back to images of the wilderness in the Exodus. Like those first Israelites, Isaiah's people face a similar wilderness: they are travelling an unknown road, without resources, without security, without provisions, without direction, without form and shape. And many, if not all, are travelling without hope.

Many are injured, even permanently disfigured and disabled from the warring and violence associated with their capture.

And for Isaiah's people, the brokenness of their present prevents them from believing that the wholeness of their past can be restored. For they have seen the rubble of Jerusalem. And they hear the cries of the captured. And they resent the taunts of their tormentors. And they lack the strength of their youth.

But Isaiah tells them that this very wilderness is gonna be a source of joy. The desert's gonna blossom. Tall trees are gonna spring up reaching for the sun again. Faithful cities and faithful people are gonna be restored. Those who have been exiled from strength, from courage, from hope, from love, from confidence, from security, are gonna be reconnected to abundance and vitality. The terrors of war are gonna be righted, its victims able to see, and hear, and leap, and speak with peace again.

In that first wilderness, the Israelites had a pillar of cloud and fire that forged a trail to a bright and purpose-filled future. In this wilderness, Isaiah imagines a highway. Maybe it's like a moving walkway in an airport. It'll carry the tired, and the sick, and the confused, and the fearful, and even the doubting, leading them when they don't have the strength to lead themselves. This highway has guardrails that will protect them, kind of like those gutter guards when you go bowling. And for those who DO have the strength to walk, this highway will propel them even faster.

Isaiah foretells a homecoming. A return to what was. A return to Zion. A return to God. A return to the world God intends.

Fortunately, the great majority of us have not been conquered or captured, nor exiled from our homelands, nor removed from all that is sacred. But such privilege doesn't make Isaiah's words benign, nor any less meaningful.

The blooms of what we hold dear, what we hold sacred, often wilt when the seasons change. Grief can exile us from our happy past, holding us captive to loneliness. Stress can exile us from a peaceful present, holding us captive to tasks instead of relationships. Privilege can exile us from our connectedness, holding us captive to divisiveness. Technology can exile us from community, holding us captive to chatrooms, social media sites, and devices where our anonymity eliminates our need for empathy. The polarization of our politics can exile us from reason, holding us captive to manipulative sound bites that seek to confuse truth rather than clarify it.

Sometimes it's hard to imagine that new life, new hope, and new divinity can emerge from all of this blah. December looks and feels like a brown, tired, haggard cactus.

But where we see a thirsty cactus, Isaiah sees a bundle of Christmas blooms. New life emerging from what once seemed so tired:

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.  
(Isaiah 35:10)

Sardis Baptist Church, God is coming back into the world (Not that She ever left!!!). Better yet, new things, in this new season, are blooming, reawakening us to God's presence among us.

Perhaps your happy past seems way too distant from your present. Perhaps happiness, community, and connection are a little closer for some than others. No matter. Isaiah tells us that God's making a way home, a road we can all walk together. One that pulls when we need pulling, pushes we need pushing, rests when we need resting. I believe, like the prophet, that such a road becomes more tangible, and more communal, each and every time we make ourselves aware of God's presence.

And it seems to me, this Advent season presents the perfect opportunity to be aware of God's presence in the neighbors who surround us. Because God's highway isn't a toll road. It's a place for all to gather, and to be drawn home to a chorus that sings away our sorrows and sighs. So let's grab a hand, perhaps one to help us, or maybe one to offer help to, and start our walk back to Zion together. It'll be prettier than a Christmas cactus!

Star light, star bright, first light I see tonight. I wish I may, I wish I might, have this wish I wish tonight!

With joy, we ask that it may be so, and that it might be soon. Amen.