

Waters Shall Break Forth

God's message draws us to the margins

a Homily by The Rev. Andrew Downs

Advent 3A | Isaiah 11:1-10
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When I first visited my grandparents in Green Valley, I really didn't know what to expect. I was in grade school, 8 or 9 I think. And what I knew of the desert is that it's covered in sand and there is nothing. Desolate. Vultures circle over the dying prey. What I had seen in movies. But my vision couldn't square with the idea that people could live there. Deserts are deadly.

Leaving the Tucson airport, we soon found ourselves in an unfamiliar wilderness. Things grew besides cacti. The bleak desert of my imagination was uninhabitable. And somehow there was life here. Different life. But life.

We passed mountains and mesas and the terrain continued to bewilder me.

And when we left the freeway and entered the city, turning onto twisting residential streets and curving cul-de-sacs, we arrived in front of their house. It was a small bungalow on a modest plot. It, of course, looked like all the houses around it. Just like a normal house anywhere.

It had a yard with a walk up to the front door. Just without grass.

And this vision, this house standing there, looking just like a house I could see in Alpena, Interlochen, Lansing, Livonia, was the picture of normal.

Except the grass. It was like the sort of incongruous confusion of something just barely wrong, like when you see the word red printed in green, your brain has to process what it is seeing and it just trips

over the evidence, like a cord on the floor that shouldn't be there.

Deserts are for the hearty.

[Isaiah 35:1]

Have you seen a cactus flower? It didn't fit my imagination of these big, round green plants with their arms and their sharp prickles.

I still saw deserts as death and a place where only the strongest survive.

The polar opposite from northern Michigan lush with ever green, even when the whole world is snow, green shoots through the drifts.

Where summer colors are green and blue. Everything alive. The soil rich with new growth in old forests. And rivers run cold, even in July. Water surrounding us like a false island. It's might and power to sink the Edmund Fitzgerald and countless titans.

Life, death, power, ferocious. The very vibrance of wilds alive in fawns and black bears, wolves and in ages past, the famous wolverine.

[Isaiah 35:6b-7]

The Call of the Wild is Alive.

These places are intense. From the ferocious north where midwinters are bleak and black bears roam to the choking deserts scorching those foolish enough to come unprotected or to bring their own water. Deadly and frightening.

But also majestic and exciting. They are home to countless creatures and plants who prove the weakness in the human character.

And just as we were challenged by the prophet last week to see how the challenge of that future peace comes when the lions of our world make dinner out of straw like the oxen rather than feasting on them, we get this vision of a future as majestic as our GOD is good.

A place where death's reign is reined in and life bursts out like a baby from a womb. Where there are two, there now are three.

These images reveal the beauty of creation and of GOD's mission in the world. Of a dream that is not yet realized but will be. Will be!

And we're told about it now so that we can be a part of it. Not merely as recipients, receivers of GOD's love and mercy, living in a world transformed by love, but now as partners. That from our deserts, fresh water may flow. From our ancient wilderness, new life may blossom. That GOD's creative power might explode from us.

And transform the world again. Just like it was 2000 years ago.

A wild transformation of power itself.

And it all starts with an angel and these unlikely people. A couple too old to conceive, a girl engaged to a man, cousins confused and thankful and a promise too miraculous to contain.

Announcements to the people who come from the cities and out into the wilderness to be baptized.

Announcements to the shepherds in the fields.

Here he will be! He's coming! The anointed, the chosen, the one we've been waiting for.

These announcements, from angelic and human harbingers of GOD's blessed arrival, come to poor and the worker and the outcast. Not a royal decree from one king to another, from GOD to the anointed of Israel, for there is no anointed. He's coming. That's what is announced. The anointed is about to be born.

The message rings out from the margins and thrives in the wilderness. It comes to the

tender fields and to the mighty river. The people who live here and those called to join them. Out here in the wilds. Among animals and verdant life driving rocks away; a hunger satisfied with hope.

We expect to find life here.

Out here in the wilderness. Life. Not death. Life.

This is where we are called to find it. To see it.

Our story of expectation and birth is a story for us and about us. A story about all of us. An "all of us" deserving of love and mercy.

This week, we are invited to Love All with a spirit of life and expectation. That for us, all means all. Which means we start with those who don't feel included in that all.

The announcement came to shepherds rather than the king. GOD has a thing for shepherds, remember. Because in David, God chose one to be king. But Herod? Definitely not a shepherd.

The message comes from the margins, not the Temple. From the wilderness, not the civilized. To the people, not the powerful.

A message of hope. A world transformed. By the birth of a baby.

In Advent, we see this story in parallel. In expectation for the birth story we'll hear once again on Christmas. But also in the future return of Jesus in the Christ. Two visits. One long ago and one in the future.

But in the meantime, we're reminded of the wilderness, of life and death. Of the hope and expectation announced in those difficult places to those so unaccustomed to receiving the royal treatment.

And we receive this reminder of the margins from the warmth of our church, the comfort of community, the beauty of this space and our common worship.

We hear the word of GOD and it says to look out there. To the wilderness. The margins. Streets and troughs. To all those places where people go when family kicks them out and there's no room for them.

Look there and we'll see the new world we long for. For out there isn't death. It's life itself. Life we're called to love.

