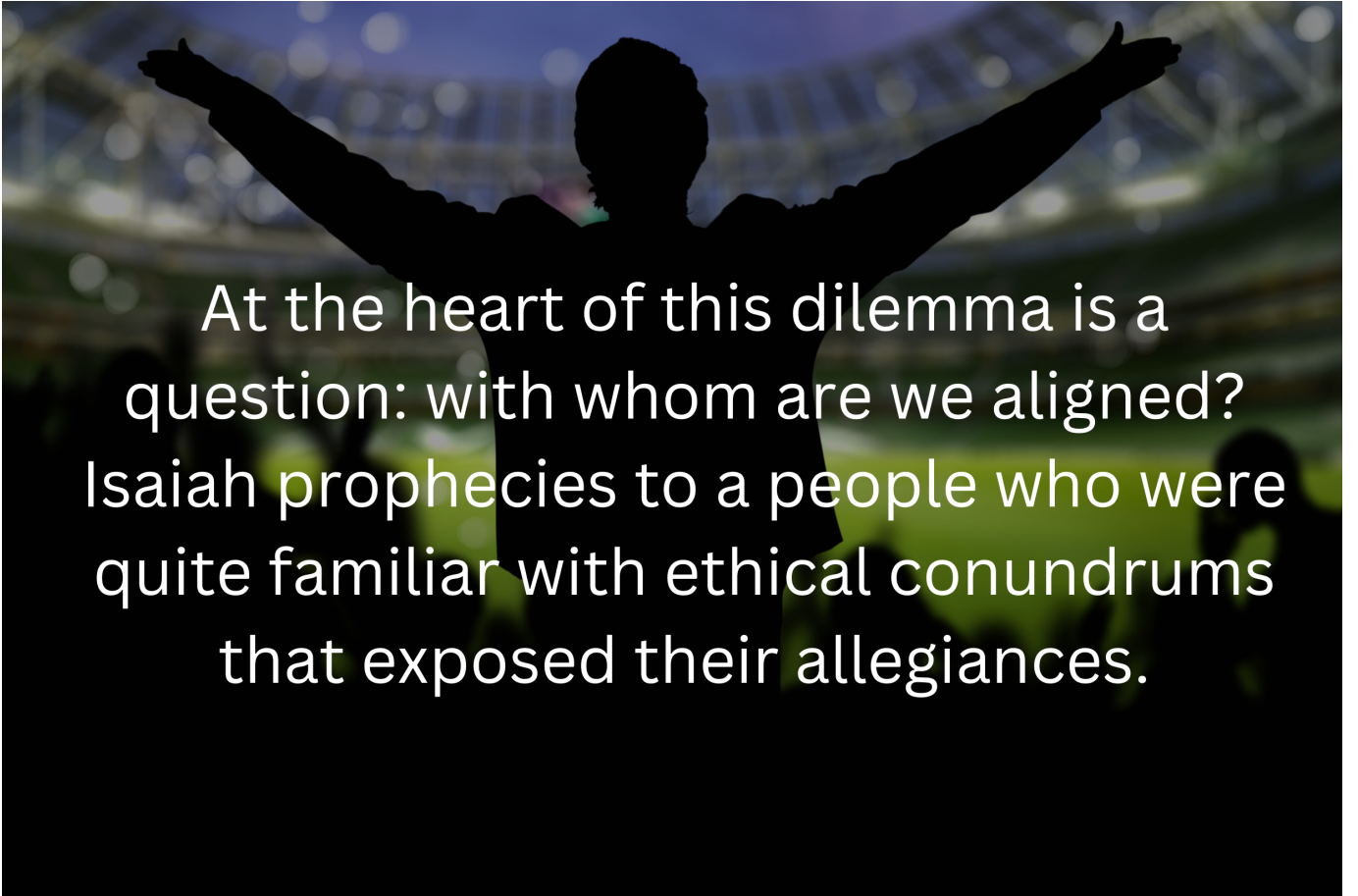


Third Sunday of Advent

A silhouette of a person with their arms raised in a gesture of triumph or celebration, set against a blurred background of a stadium at night with lights and structures.

At the heart of this dilemma is a question: with whom are we aligned? Isaiah prophesies to a people who were quite familiar with ethical conundrums that exposed their allegiances.

Team Spirit (from Canva)

ISAIAH AND THE WORLD CUP

Isaiah 35:1-10

Third Sunday of Advent

Analysis by Ben Williams

*1The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus 2it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.
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.*

*3Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.*

*4Say 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."

*5Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;*

*6then 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;*



Jan Brueghel the Elder, The Prophecy of Isaiah, oil painting (Alte Pinakothek – Bayerische Staatsgemaldesammlungen)

*7the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.*

*8A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it,
but it shall be for God's people;
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.*

*9No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,*

*but the redeemed shall walk there.
10And 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.*

At the heart of this dilemma is a question: with whom are we aligned? Isaiah prophecies to a people who were quite familiar with ethical conundrums that exposed their allegiances.

DIAGNOSIS: DEEP IN THE WILDERNESS

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): On the World's Stage

The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar is well underway and nearing its conclusion. This iteration of the quadrennial tournament has been shrouded in controversy. From allegations of bribery and various forms of corruption to a tenuous social climate to the abusive treatment of migrant workers, the world's sport has faced an ethical conundrum: how to respond to the World Cup in Qatar. As some commenters have stated, "If you don't like what is happening in Qatar, don't watch." And yet, many around the world, including myself, have tuned in to watch the spectacle unfold.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Our Implicated Hearts

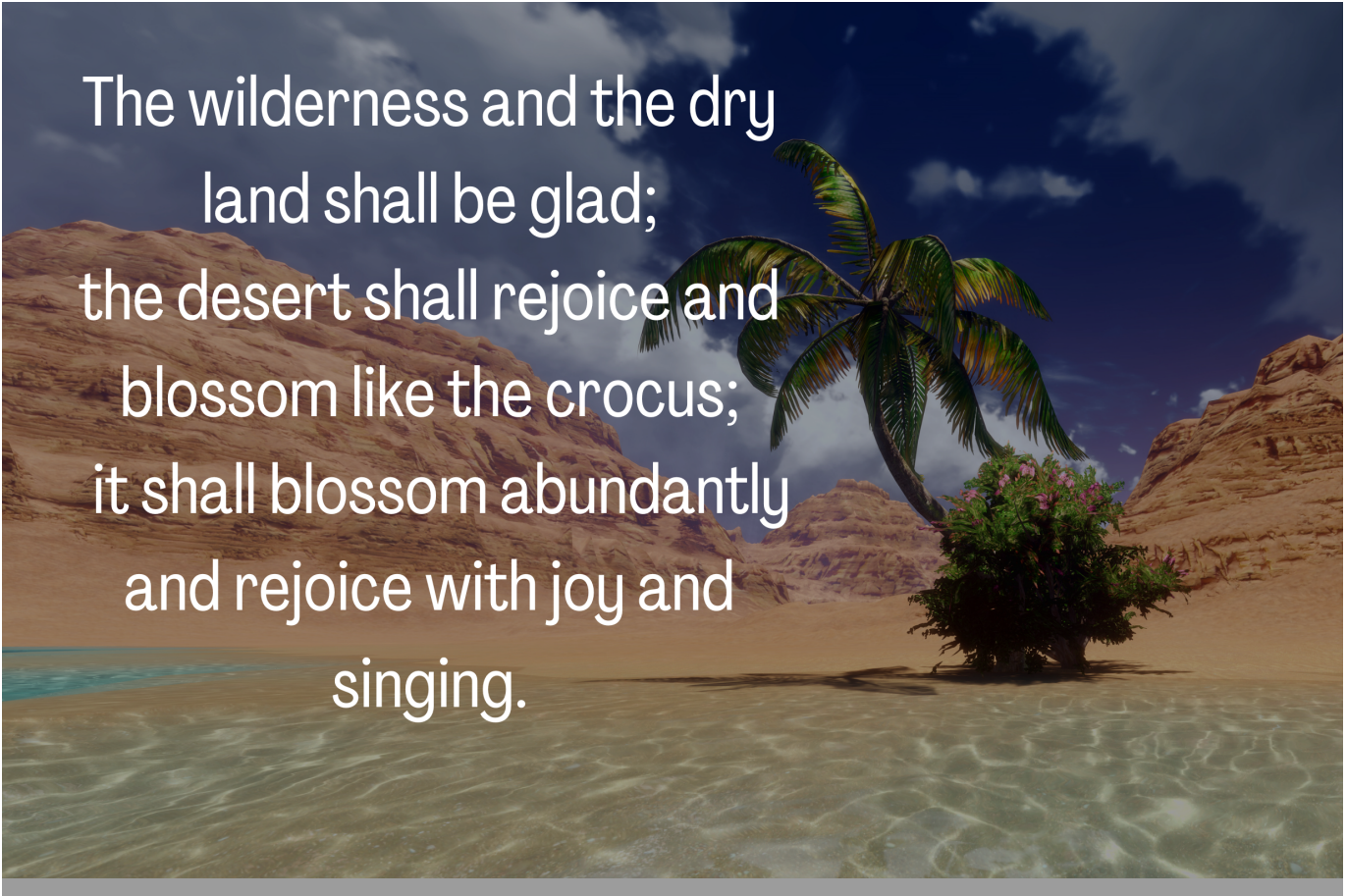
At the heart of this dilemma is a question: with whom are we aligned? Isaiah prophecies to a people who were quite familiar with ethical conundrums that exposed their allegiances. After proclaiming the judgment of the nations (Isaiah 34), Isaiah tells of a future reality in which waters break forth in the

wilderness and streams in the desert. It is a hopeful and beautiful dream given to a people who long for such a reality. And yet, when we are given such a vision, will we believe it and act upon it? Or will we get lost in the wilderness of the ethical conundrums we face? More often than not, I become a functional atheist and content myself with wandering aimlessly through all of life's dilemmas.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Our Indecision Kills

God is not content with us being lost in the wilderness (even if God calls us there for a time). God has a vision of sorrow and sighing fleeing away from God's people. And yet, we entrust ourselves to hemming and hawing endlessly. And that sort of waiting is not good for anyone, especially those of us who supposedly believe God is still speaking. Our indecision leaves all involved parched and wandering.

PROGNOSIS: STREAMS IN THE DESERT



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
singing.

Isaiah 35: 1-2a (from Canva)

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): God's Decisiveness Restores

God, on the other hand, is decisive. God cast a vision for Isaiah to proclaim. God carried that vision through history culminating in the life of Jesus. And God fulfilled that vision in the cross and empty tomb of Christ, so that eyes will be opened, ears will be unstopped, and tongues will sing for joy. God is so decisive, in fact, that no fool will go astray.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Our Baptized Hearts

God brings forth water in the wilderness of our hearts to remind us of the promises made to us in baptism. But rather than solve our dilemmas, God gifts us with the Holy Spirit. Dwelling deep

within us, the Holy Spirit gives us wisdom to live in the tension of the wilderness and move through our dilemmas. Rather than hemming and hawing over what to do, we are empowered to travel along the Holy Way.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Returning to the World's Stage

Walking along this path transforms our conundrum into a fertile field for witness. Rather than wondering whether to watch the World Cup, we can keep an eye out for God's streams of justice and peace in the desert of Qatar. Rather than pit our love of sports against our love of justice, we witness to the transformative power of both in our communities. Rather than behave as functional atheists, we trust in God's promises, waiting expectantly for God to show up and use our witness to change the world.