

Third Sunday in Advent

WAIT! THERE'S MORE!

Isaiah 35:1-10

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Analysis by Paul Jaster

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.

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.

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

Say 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."

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

then 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;

the 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.

DIAGNOSIS: Wrenched

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Dry & Dispossessed*

Like Jesus speaking to John the Baptist, Isaiah speaks to prisoners who are waiting for God's deliverance and redemption, that is, Advent people. In Isaiah's case, Isaiah speaks of diaspora Jews who are dry and dispossessed. Their dryness and distance from the land of promise (and the accompanying sad effect it has on their homeland) is reflected and expressed by the Judean wilderness itself—a stark sign that something vibrant and vital is missing. Almost six hundred years later, John the Baptist would go into that very wilderness to say that something absolutely vital is missing. Namely, a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Oddly, around the Christmas season, our dryness and our dispossession is more typically expressed by a gluttonous feast of shopping, eating, drinking and partying

rather than a drought. The American consumer hangs tough even through the dips at Wall Street. We gorge ourselves. And yet, we end up dry, empty and hungry—thirsting for something more. Somehow we feel “captive” to other pursuits and interests, and we are “imprisoned” by the trends of our own culture. Herod Antipas (the “someone dressed in a soft robe” and “living in a royal palace,” Mt.11:8) was just as “captive” as John the Baptist. Herod’s antics show that he was always looking for something more; as if his daddy, Herod the Great, didn’t leave him “enough.” This “emptiness” is vocalized by our children, who on Christmas morning rip through a zillion presents in five minutes and then say, “Is that all there is? Aren’t there any more?”

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : Feeble & Fearful
There is more. Unfortunately, however, there is more “bad” news before the good news. The captive exiles who were wrenched from their homes, force-marched across dry deserts and dispersed were the “cream of the crop” (the young, the rich, the well-educated, the powerful and influential), and yet, they grew weak and fearful along the way. Disconnected from the fons, the real source of their strength and confidence, their hands grew weak, their knees feeble and hearts fearful. Not only did many die, but the faith of many died along the way only to show that their original faith was misplaced and misdirected. Although we have it on reliable authority (Christ’s own) that John the Baptist was “the greatest of those born of women,” he, too, grew nervous and fearful in prison that his original faith in Jesus might be misplaced, especially when Jesus did not act like the steadily threshing of grain that he expected. In prison, even John became a “desert reed shaken by the wind” (Matt. 11:7). And rich and powerful as he was, John’s captor, Herod Antipas, felt fearful and vulnerable too, which is why he had John arrested in the first place. When our faith is misplaced, we grow feeble and

fearful.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Impotent & Imperiled*

And worst of all, without faith in Christ, we are impotent and imperiled, not only presently, but even more so eternally. Without faith in the promises of Christ, the enemy is God! It was God (working through the nations) who attacked Jerusalem and dispossessed and dispersed exiles in the first place. God did it as an Advent “wake up” call to the coming Day of the Lord. If Israel would not faithfully and obediently respond to God’s grace, then God would confront Israel in judgment. God will come with “vengeance, with terrible recompense” (v. 4), Isaiah says long after the first exile. In other words, “You ain’t seen nothing yet.” The first exile is nothing compared to the judgment yet to come. And John the Baptist cried out in the wilderness so ardently (and confronted Herod Antipas so directly) precisely because he knew there was a “wrath to come” (Matt. 3:7)...from God, of course. Dry things whither and are blown away or burned never to be seen again. We all know that. (“You saw what happened in California because of the Santa Ana wind. Well, just wait until God’s wrath blows in all its fury!”) It’s just like any desert climate. Once we are dispossessed, cut off from the source, marched off and imprisoned, there is no longer anything we can do about it. Help must come from outside of us. And so the question of John the Baptist to Jesus is an urgent one: “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” His question is our question, too. Even before he was imprisoned, John knew that his baptism for the forgiveness of sins was not enough. It would take something stronger. A Stronger One and a stronger form of baptism—with water AND the Spirit.

PROGNOSIS: Wrenched & Drenched

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Wrenched & Drenched*

But, wait! There's more! This time good news to counter and overturn the bad news. Exile is not the end of Israel. Having his head cut-off is not the end of John the Baptist. Being crucified and buried is not the end of Jesus. To feeble and fearful hearts, Isaiah proclaims that God will come in two ways, not one: God comes with "vengeance, with terrible recompense" (the law, v. 4) and God will "come and save you" (the promise, also in v. 4). Echoing that promise, John the Baptist proclaimed that the day of which Isaiah spoke is near. And fulfilling that promise, Jesus proclaimed that day has come (both the judgment and our reprieve) in his person and in his ministry and especially in his "baptism," i.e. his death and resurrection, which results in the pouring out of God's life-giving Spirit. Jesus is the font, the fons, the source of life and salvation. Through our baptism into Christ, we are "wrenched" and "drenched." We are wrenched away from the powers and the forces that hold us captive (including our mistaken notions of God and our mistaken ideas of our calling in life). And we are drenched with his life-giving Spirit. Through that outpouring into our dry and dusty hearts and bones, Jesus fulfills what Isaiah, in particular, envisioned: a pool of grace poured over the burning sand, crocuses (an early harbinger of spring) abundantly blooming in the desert, thick forests like in Lebanon on every hill.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Strong & Faith-filled*

This proclamation of the Good News (Gospel preaching), its positive reception (Confession and Forgiveness; repentance and faith) and acting out in the Bath and the Meal (sacramental worship) strengthens weak hands, firms up feeble knees, and

comforts fearful hearts. Rather than grow weaker and weaker, we grow stronger and stronger. For the ransomed and the redeemed of Jesus Christ are liberated from their futile ways to return to Zion with singing and to walk on God's holy way. This is not a "return" to Jerusalem as Isaiah envisioned. Rather, it is an engagement in worship and in ministry (as Jesus practiced and envisioned) "radiating out" from his cross to every corner of the globe. The people of God are meant to be the diaspora, the dispersed, evangelists, the sent ones. In short, our Advent task, as we wait for "even more to come," is to continue to be those John-the-Baptist types...those messengers...who prepare Christ's way by walking, talking and living his way. The fons (the source of this strength) is a faith that is properly placed in the Christ who is always full of surprises and who always exceeds our expectations. John the Baptist had it right the first time when he first saw Jesus and said, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." "He must increase, I must decrease."

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : Powerfully Possessed & Promising

Those who are possessed by Christ's spirit are powerful and promising for the life of the world. For they proclaim a word that enables the blind to receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers to be cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead to be raised, and the poor to have good news brought to them. Some of this happens now physically and spiritually. But, wait! There's more! Even more of it will happen in the future—totally and completely. This is no vague hope, but a certain promise. For Christ has come once already, and our Lord's own ministry was a powerful preview of it. The healing miracles of Jesus were impressive. But, they are nothing compared to the heavenly healing yet to come. And so, our "advent waiting" is not so much a waiting and preparing for Christmas, but rather that waiting and preparing

for Christ to come again. And with that day, his final return, there comes that ultimate "Wait! There's more!" which includes even more gifts and blessings than we can ever now imagine or expect. Who knows what shape or form this will all take? The ultimate kingdom of God remains awesome and surprising. We can draw as many poetic images as Isaiah did, for undoubtedly poetry gets us closer than does prose. But, finally it will happen: "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 sorrowing and sighing shall flee away" (v. 10). This is the ultimate joy. A true cause for rejoicing. As they used to say in days of old: "Glaudete!" Rejoice! So, on Christmas day when your kids rip through a zillion presents and then say, "Is that it? Aren't there any more?" just smile and say, "Yes, there IS more. Just you wait and see!"