

*Pastor Jana Schofield
Christ Lutheran Church, Ferndale
Third Sunday of Advent
December 11, 2022
Isaiah 35:1-10; Ps. 146:5-10; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11*

You might remember that during the summer of 2015, the Wolverine wildfire, part of the Chelan Complex fire, burned over 62,000 acres in Chelan County and threatened the Lutheran retreat center of Holden Village from every single angle. Well, thankfully Holden survived, and our family visited the following summer. If you've ever been to Holden Village you can picture the ride you take on an old school bus from the Lake Chelan dock at Lucerne up an 11-mile dirt road with switchbacks through the forest, and that summer I remember riding in the bus past miles and miles of burned trees that looked like tall, black matchsticks against a blue sky. You could see through what was a once thick forest to the bare mountain on the other side of Railroad Creek Valley. It was bizarre and even painful to see what was once so lush and thick turned to ash.

But below all those charred trees, on the bottom of the forest floor amidst the dead tree limbs and rocks, were these little patches of green poking through the debris. In some places it was hard to see anything, but if you looked closely, if you walked up to the scarred parts of the mountainside, you could see new life pushing through the ground. It felt like catching a glimpse of what could be and eventually would be. Returning to Holden last summer we saw that the forest floor is now lush with new growth and even where dead tree trunks still remain, there is life and hope and beauty. It may have only been little patches of green that we saw poking through the ground after the fire, but that glimpse was enough to give us hope of a restored and renewed forest.

I thought of that burned forest when reading again these beautiful words from the prophet Isaiah that we heard today:

“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.” Like the green patches of new growth around Holden Village,

an abundant blossom in the desert would certainly be cause for joy and singing.

The prophet Isaiah used these images to speak to God's people who had been exiled to Babylon due to their injustice and idolatry. Isaiah was restoring their hope that they would return to the land promised to them. “And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing,” Isaiah says. The image of the blossoming desert offered them a glimpse of hope when they thought that all was lost. And even though it was only a glimpse, for God's people waiting in exile, it was enough.

I wonder if you are living right now in a time that feels barren, like the dry desert or the charred forest. The holidays tend to exacerbate any loss or inadequacy that we feel. We are reminded at this time of the year about all the people we used to celebrate with who are no longer with us. Commercials and social media posts try to tell us how inadequate we are if we don't have the perfectly decorated tree or the perfectly curated gifts or the perfectly laid out holiday plans. On top of what already is a stressful life, during this season we often feel loss and less than, and it can be hard to feel certain or hopeful. Even worse, it might make us wonder if God is even out there, if the one we're waiting for is really going to show up like these Advent candles and season and scriptures tell us.

There is a tiny part of our gospel text that you might have missed when you heard it read today – it's right at the beginning of the gospel reading when Matthew writes, “when John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples.” When John heard *in prison*.... The one about whom Jesus says “among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist” is in prison in this gospel text. Prison in the ancient world, much like today, was not a place that held much hope. As Jeremiah has told our OPOP team, prison is hard and it hardens the spirits of those who are incarcerated. It makes sense, then, that in this gospel John is showing doubts about Jesus: “are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” John is living in a time that feels barren, like being in a dry desert or a charred forest.

Jesus doesn't answer John's disciples with a simple “yes, go tell John I am the one to come.” He doesn't even go visit John in prison himself. Instead what Jesus does is give John glimpses of hope in the signs of his work: the

blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.

Even though it was only through the stories of Jesus helping *others* that John caught glimpses of Jesus, for John, those glimpses were enough.

When we are living through the dry, charred times in life, we, too might only catch glimpses of Jesus. Jesus might not come visit us like we would hope. We might not receive the kind of future that we had wanted. Things might still remain hard. But we might hear a story from a friend or loved one about how God sustained them through grief or difficulty. Through them we might catch a glimpse of God's promise of presence and peace.

We might read in the psalms like we heard today:

“The Lord sets the captive free. The Lord opens the eyes of the blind; the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord cares for the stranger; the Lord sustains the orphan and widow, but frustrates the way of the wicked.” Through scripture we might catch a glimpse into what God can do for us.

Around this table, we might taste only a small bite of bread and a sip of wine and yet it is a foretaste of the feast to come. It is a glimpse of the grace God has in store for us, both before death and after death.

This Advent when we are feeling less certain and less hopeful, we may only get glimpses and hearsay of the coming of the Lord. But like the green pushing up through the ash in a charred forest, like the dry desert blossoming, like a hopeful word in exile or prison, that glimpse can sustain us and remind us that a new age of life and love is coming, and is breaking through even now. God promises you that the dry, charred times of life are not the end of your story, and you are loved beyond measure.

It may only be a glimpse, but God promises that it is enough. Amen.