

God's Splendor Will Be Seen©

Isaiah 35:1-10

Advent 1

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How many of you have actually been in a desert? Where was it? What did it look like? How did it feel? Did you like being there?

When I was traveling with my work for The Upper Room ministries, I had to go to San Bernardino, California. I flew into Palm Springs and rented a car to drive to San Bernardino, where I spent the night in a hotel and did the training I was there for. Then I traveled back to Palm Springs and spent another night there before flying home.

I had never been in a desert before. The closest I came to a desert was growing up on the prairie in Oklahoma. Believe me, in the heat of August when everything is parched and ready to burst into flames, when the dust is blowing, the tumble weeds are rolling across the land, and the heat is about 105 and you can see the heat waves flowing up from the cracked earth, it feels like a desert.

As I was driving from Palm Springs to San Bernardino, I realized that I had a kind of sick feeling inside. Everything was dry and white, and honestly, it made me think that maybe this is what it looks like when a nuclear bomb goes off. And the temperature was 113 degrees, which I most certainly did not like.

I did the training, I went back to Palm Springs – a place where I knew many people love to go to for golfing. I thought it might be better. I went to find a nice restaurant to eat in and drove around a bit. There were lawns that were green only because they were artificial. Everywhere else, it was white, hot, dry, parched earth or sand.

I traveled to many places during my time of working for the Upper Room and I honestly enjoyed every place I visited. Except that desert. It actually felt like something was drying up inside me. I almost felt a sense of hopelessness. Of panic. Of anxiety, wanting to get out of that place.

I know people who love the desert, but that was not for me. At least not at that time of the year; not when it is parched and dry. Give me green trees and grass, flowers and shrubs. Or give me snow or rain. Just not that desert look.

Our Advent theme this year is all about the desert. We start this first Sunday of Advent thinking about that dry desert where everything feels withered – thirsty – perhaps we have that same feeling of hopelessness and need for life giving water as we enter in.

I want to draw your attention to our banners. If you look around a moment you will see some hanging on the walls. Our Creative Spirits Team have been working diligently to create our banners for the Advent theme. They not only have worked, using their artistic abilities, but they have meditated on the theme and had visions leading to this beautiful art for our sanctuary.

Notice this banner here in the front. You may be thinking – “That doesn’t look anything like Christmas. What is this about?”

But friends, I invite you to be patient and to enter the journey of Advent with me. Advent is about preparing for the coming of Christ. We prepare for the celebration of His birth but also for His coming anew into our hearts and entering our lives in new and meaningful ways. It is about thinking about His second coming and getting ourselves ready for that.

This first Sunday of Advent is focused on hope. The angel lit the first candle on the Advent Wreath – the candle of Hope. Our dramatic call to worship focused on the feelings of hopelessness and the promise that there is hope for renewal once again. Advent is a great time for noticing how we’re feeling and for waiting and preparing with expectation and anticipation for the hope and renewal we need.

Look again at this banner. It very much depicts a withered branch – something we might see in a dry desert. And perhaps it is also something we might be feeling inside.

The first Sunday of Advent is also the first Sunday of the new year on the liturgical church calendar. We start a new cycle with the Scriptures we read. We look back at our lives – our ministry – our successes and our losses.

There has been a sense of loss among us here with the deaths of several members, and with some members moving on away from us. But we also have losses in our personal lives that have drained us and, in a way, withered us, sucked us dry.

Isaiah’s word to the Israelites is a great promise of hope to a people who had lost hope, who were feeling very distant from God. These were people who had been exiled, who had lost the gleam of feeling God’s favor because of their own actions and because of wars and being in captivity.

They felt very much like they were in a dry, parched desert. These beautiful words had to have been so refreshing, so full of hope and promise at a time when they were surely about to give up.

The promise is that the desert will bloom again. It will have cool water flowing through it. It will have flowers blossoming with color. Isaiah promises that everyone will see the splendor of the Lord.

Today, we see our banners representing the sense of dryness that many of us begin Advent with. But as the weeks progress, we will see, right before our eyes, the desert in bloom. It will be here in the sanctuary. It will be here on the banners. It will be refreshing and beautiful and symbolic of how our God comes to us anew and refreshes us. And we will see His splendor.

Sometimes I think people get a little irritated in Advent. Why can't we be like everyone else and just jump into the season with full fledged decorations and singing all the Christmas carols? Why are we singing these slow, somber songs when there are Christmas songs to be sung?

I think there is something to be said about decorations and Christmas music that is certainly positive. There is something about all that that cheers us up, lifts our spirit, makes us feel happy.

But sometimes that happy is more of a cover up. It might last for the season, but does it last for the months to come? Have we really prepared our hearts and minds for what it means for Christ to come? Have we fully allowed ourselves to walk in the desert, slowly looking at where we've been and how we feel? If we don't go there, how will we see and experience the transformation of the desert – in our hearts? Won't that joy be more long-lasting?

There's nothing wrong with celebrating the season with decorations and Christmas music, with parties and friends and movies. But, I encourage you to stick with me in this place – let this place be the place where we gradually are transformed from being in a dry, parched desert to a fully blooming desert that rejoices in God's renewing splendor.

And as we get there we realize how grateful we are for the Christ-child – Emmanuel – God with us. We come to have humble, thankful hearts that He came to us so long ago so that we might know Him and know His love and grace. We are renewed in our deep gratitude that we have a Savior – Christ the Lord.

And we come to think again about the meaning of His returning someday to establish, finally, a place of peace and unity. It is a time for asking ourselves, very honestly, if we really believe He will return. And whether or not we sincerely want Him to. Does it scare us? Or are we longing for it to happen?

We had a very good discussion about that at Bible Study. I encourage you to come join us as we study the meaning of Advent – men and women together in the next three weeks.

Be of good cheer, my friends – be full of hope – for the promise is yours, as it was the Israelites. There is hope in the Lord. The desert inside your hearts will bloom again and will rejoice.

Welcome to the journey of Advent. Believe the good news – the desert will rejoice. God's splendor will be seen again. Thanks be to God!
Amen.