

God Changes Everything©
Isaiah 35:1-7; Ezekiel 37:1-10, John 11:25-26

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For those of you who were here last week, you may notice a few changes here in the sanctuary. Those of you who could not be here last week need to know that we started Advent with some beauty but it was sparse. Our banners reflected a dry withered branch – the kind of thing you would see in a desert that hadn't seen a rain shower in a very long time.

As you may know by now, the desert theme is our focus this Advent season. As Advent progresses and moves toward Christmas, we will see a transformation happening before our eyes, here in the sanctuary. Our hope is that we will also experience some transformation within ourselves – our hearts, our spirits.

We began Advent, last week, just recognizing that many of us may feel like that dry, parched desert due to circumstances and events over the past year. Not only have we dealt with loss and grief, with sickness and uncertainty but, even if nothing happened to us personally, we are human and we live in a world that is getting smaller all the time. It is a small world after all.

We can't miss the news of devastation caused by hurricanes and wild fires. We can't close our eyes and ears and pretend that random shootings aren't happening. We can't pretend for very long that the violence, or the hunger, or the homelessness we see on the news that happens in our own country, and in the world, doesn't affect us.

Whether all this touches us personally or not, eventually, all those things weigh on our minds and hearts and we can feel overwhelmed, weighed down, dried up spiritually and emotionally, if not physically.

We are a part of human family. God has made us beautifully, but with that perfection comes deep feelings and emotions that we either allow ourselves to feel or we try real hard to push them down, to cover them up, and tell ourselves we're fine.

But then comes Advent – again – a perfect time to remember once again that God changes everything. God saw the darkness, the fear, the grief, the hopelessness of his people long ago and God had a response. In fact, God, our Creator, saw into the future – into our own world, and even further, and God's response was, and is, effective even today – even on into eternity.

Advent is a time to remember that Christmas is so much more than Christmas trees and lights, cookies (although they are pretty wonderful) presents, and Christmas music. Advent is a perfect time to remember that God has a plan for causing the desert to rejoice again - that desert in our spirits, in our hearts and minds.

Advent is about living in a paradox. We are preparing for receiving the Christ-child who actually *has* come yet who *continues* coming to us in new and meaningful ways, AND, we are also preparing for the Christ who will come again. That is the Master plan for dry, parched, hopeless souls that are feeling like they are dry bones lying in the desert.

The vision in Ezekiel is so vivid. We can almost imagine being the prophet Ezekiel whom God shows this vast valley of a multitude of dried, bleached, skeleton bones - all lying there in the scorching sun.

“Can these bones live?” the Lord asked Ezekiel. The mortal. The human. What would your response be, looking at all those lifeless bones? I can imagine a tightness in my gut as I shake my head in a feeling of total despair. I would maybe even say “No way! It’s impossible.”

Ezekiel’s response was a good one, though. “Only you know, Lord.” Or, I like to translate it as “God only knows.”

Yes. God did know. God *does* know. He caused those bones to come together, to begin having muscle and flesh and hair. He began to form real bodies again that could be strong and alive.

Except they weren’t quite alive yet. They had no breath. They needed to breathe, and the breath they needed was the very breath of God, their Creator.

But God didn’t just breathe into them, as we are told he did with Adam, the first human. God commanded Ezekiel to prophesy to the *ruach* – the wind; the spirit. Ezekiel had – and would have a big role in helping the exiled Israelites to breath that fresh God-breath and to be revived once again.

Ezekiel – the human – had a part in God’s plan for renewal. And so, he preached, he prophesied, he commanded the wind – the breath of God to blow into the bodies and suddenly they were alive – a whole multitude of dried up bones were being resurrected once again.

Why? Why would God tell Ezekiel to prophecy to the breath, when God could certainly handle it?

I think it must have been very important for Ezekiel to be revived himself. He needed to experience that vision; he needed to see for himself what God was going to do. And to be a part of that whole transformation experience was key to him preaching and prophesying to the people who were feeling so dried up and hopeless. He had to be empowered with his own clear certainty that God could, and would, change everything.

How thrilling it must have been to obediently start preaching to the wind and suddenly see the results happening before his eyes. To be able to go back and preach this good news to the people

required his own personal resurrection experience; his own involvement as God used him as a vessel of hope and peace.

I think a lesson here for us is that, while God can do anything – all things are possible with God – God uses His people to channel His renewing power. He works in us in a way that we feel our own renewal and transformation and then it flows through us to others.

In fact, just by our own actions, our own witness, we are prophesying to the breath, and we begin to experience new life, new hope, peace and joy. As we proclaim God's love and participation in our lives, we can begin to come alive once again. And in that proclamation, and in our own caring for others, we are helping revive them as well. God works in us to renew us and to renew others too.

Have you ever been in a place where your spirit was down and feeling dry – where your energy level was low and you were feeling a little useless, maybe a little hopeless?

But then, someone comes along who needs your help; someone who is truly in a desperate place? Maybe in the beginning you start helping them just because you can and know you should. And you talk to them and you muster up your faith and tell them you are praying and you know God is with them and will help them.

And then perhaps you remember the blessings you have and how God really has done some amazing things in your life. And you start doing more and offering more care and you begin to see a difference in the person you are helping. They begin to take on some joy, some peace, some new life.

You suddenly realize your own spirit has been revived as you helped someone else and your witness and compassion was used by God to revive them as well.

God works in mysterious ways, right? Our theme Scripture this Advent season is from Isaiah 35. We hear the blessed promise from another prophet – from Isaiah – for God's people – a promise that God changes everything.

³ Here is a message for all who are weak, trembling, and worried:

⁴ "Cheer up! Don't be afraid. Your God is coming ...

⁵ The blind will see, and the ears of the deaf will be healed.

*⁶ Those who were lame will leap around like deer;
tongues once silent will begin to shout.*

Water will rush through the desert.

*⁷ Scorching sand will turn into a lake,
and thirsty ground will flow with fountains.*

Such beautiful images from Isaiah. Such assuring promises from the Lord.

But, how does God change everything?

The truth is, it's already happened, and it is happening, and it will happen again. Christ has come; Christ continues coming; Christ will come again.

Christ the Savior was born so long ago. As the song ***Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*** says “*Light and life to all He brings, risen with healing in His wings. Born that we no more may die, mild He lays His glory by, Born to raise us from the earth, born to give us second birth.*”

God changed everything when He came to us as Emmanuel – the Savior who would bring us grace and forgiveness; who would, by his own sacrifice give us new life – eternal life. God changed everything with this amazing gift of love.

God changes everything as Christ continues coming to us every day. His Holy Spirit lives in us, empowers us, comforts us, gives us hope, and even peace in the midst of all those life draining events we experience.

And we have the promise that God will change everything when Christ returns someday. The beautiful words from Revelation 21:4 promises this:

“And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.”

God changed everything when that holy child was born so long ago in a manger, when that child grew and gave his life on a cross. God changed everything when He was raised from the dead.

God continues to change everything for us. Jesus said *‘I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?’ (John 11:25-26)*

Do you believe this? That is key to our own transformation experience. Believe the good news, my friends, God is changing everything.

*Thirsty deserts will be glad;
barren lands will celebrate
and blossom with flowers.
² Deserts will bloom everywhere
and sing joyful songs.*

It *has* happened. It *is* happening. It *will* happen again. May the hope, peace, joy and love of Advent cause your heart and spirit to begin to bloom once again as we wait for joyous Christmas.

Come, thou long expected Jesus.

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