

Isaiah 35: 1-10
Matthew 11: 1-6
December 12, 2010
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
Third Sunday of Advent

In the 1960's cartoon movie, "Yellow Submarine" the happy musical world of Pepperland is attacked by the terrible "Blue Meanies". The Blue Meanies hate all happiness and turn the colorful world of Pepperland into a frozen wasteland of black and white. However one citizen escapes and takes the Yellow Submarine in search of help. He finds the Beatles who then with love and song repel the Blue Meanies and restore joy to Pepperland.

I mention this bit of pop culture because the story of the yellow Submarine captures for me the spirit of the passage we heard from the prophet Isaiah.

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. (35: 1-2)

When God through Isaiah speaks these words, the Blue Meanies rule. God's people are in exile. The land of Judah and Israel is a wasteland. Yet Isaiah addresses the people not to describe the barren wilderness of the physical world. He recognizes that the dry trackless wasteland where nothing grows is a mirror of the internal life of the people. And so when he speaks of the renewal that is promised to the wilderness the message is clear: just as life will return to the desert, so life will once again blossom in the deserted souls of the people.

Friends, this morning it is the rare person who does not know what it is like to suffer the pain of an inner landscape which is empty, abandoned, and with little sign of life. This time of year we confronted with the spiritual desert like no other time. This is ironic since the official occasion for the season is sacred—the birth of a savior. Those of us who struggle to find Jesus in the midst of this holiday festival often feel the desolation of the world's having transformed the celebration of the birth of a baby to humble parents in a lonely cave set aside for farm animals into the economic engine which every year promises to save the economy.

There are many other reasons why this season is difficult. I need not name them. You know what they are for you and your family. But it boils down to this: on a bad day, it feels like the Blue Meanies have taken over our lives. We are in exile, not from Jerusalem, but from the joy of life and the promised joy of the season.

But now I am done with the obligation we preachers feel to proclaim the darkness of this darkening season. If what I have said is news to you then hang around. You are a sign of hope and we need you.

The real point of Isaiah's message is that this state of abandonment is temporary. The deserted wasteland is destined for a renewal of life. The dry and trackless wasteland will, in God's time, break forth in joyous blooming. A riot of color shall return to the dull and empty wilderness which will announce the return of the exiles to their true home.

Once again God through Isaiah means for this to be a promise for the interior landscape of the people. Just as the desert will break forth in blossom and song, so will the deserted and hopeless souls of the people revive and new life will break through the

hardened rocky ground. It will be filled with the delicate blossoms like that of the crocus—that early and precious harbinger of spring.

Now two things are important about this.

First this renewal *will* happen. God is not in the habit of making false promises. The people of Israel know all too well that God promised to send them into exile if they did not stop worshiping false gods. God was true to his word.

Of course, as we know, it is easy to believe in punishment. We take the pain and suffering of life and find it relatively easy to believe that it is the true condition of life. When the half empty glass dips below the mid point the darkness is the reality. We smile weakly at the nice people who try to cheer us up and know they mean well; but they have no clue.

Friday morning I was saved from this burden by the music of the blues. I was driving to meet my spiritual director and brooding about the pain of the season when a song came on with a simple message: “It’s bad, you know.” Far from deepening my dismal meditation I started smiling and rockin and laughing! By the time I got to my appointment the desert of my soul was positively bursting with life. As I pulled up another song announced, “I’ve a mind to give up on life and go shopping for a tombstone!” I walked into the room where were to meditate on Jesus on the Cross and I burst out laughing!

The flowers of God’s reviving grace spring up in the craziest places. Sometimes all it takes is for someone to say out loud, “It’s bad you know.” Somehow life seems manageable again.

This encounter with the life giving power of the blues illustrates the second point. The revival is going to come and—God is going to do the reviving. We cannot manufacture hope and joy. We cannot create true joy, peace and relief of the heavy burden of worry on our own. At best we achieve *virtual happiness*. But even then the temporary effects of the escape from pain become a prison. We know what we are doing and wish we could find a way to true peace of mind and heart.

That is why we are directed to live in the hope that God will be faithful. By hope I do not mean what is called “wishful thinking.” Biblical hope represents the conviction that God has promised and will fulfill God’s promise. Therefore as God says there will be flowers in the desert, *there will be flowers in the desert*. To be people of hope is to live in the deep trust that, whatever the outward circumstances may be God is faithful. There is a day coming when the frozen landscape of the world ruled by the Blue Meanies will give way to life and color and song.

In Advent we are called to remember that God was faithful. The people did return from exile. We remember that in the birth of Jesus God was faithful again bringing the life of God to humanity. In Advent we claim that the work of God in sending Jesus is not done. The landscape is still often barren for long stretches and we wonder if there will be an break in the desolation.

It’s bad, you know! But before you’ve a mind to give up on life and go shopping...for tombstones, hear the word of the Lord:

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! Amen.