

Strengthen the feeble hands,  
steady the knees that give way;  
4 say to those with fearful hearts,  
“Be strong, do not fear;  
your God will come,  
he will come with vengeance;  
with divine retribution  
he will come to save you.”  
5 Then will the eyes of the blind be opened  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.  
6 Then will the lame leap like a deer,  
and the mute tongue shout for joy.  
Water will gush forth in the wilderness  
and streams in the desert.  
7 The burning sand will become a pool,  
the thirsty ground bubbling springs.

My brothers and my sisters in Christ Jesus. When I was in high school, my Father and I took a trip to Egypt. At the start of the journey, we made our way South down to the city of Aswan on the border with Sudan. This area of the country was in the Sahara, and being a Wisconsin-raised boy, I was absolutely not prepared for the reality of desert life. There is no rain; it's 110 degrees by 10 in the morning. As a result of this, there is no vegetation, no trees, no shrubs, not even grass—nothing to bring shade and shelter from the sun and heat. The only animals that live there are scavengers, eating and being eaten by one another or preying on those animals that make the truck across it. It's a landscape of radiating heat, struggle, and death.

This is the landscape that is being described to the people of Israel. Isaiah uses the words **“Parched land, wilderness, desert, burning sand, the thirsty ground, where the jackals lay, the lions, and the ravenous beasts.”** Isaiah is describing utter and complete hopelessness. These are words and creatures that show the utter stagnation, the hardships, and the fear that comes from a desert wasteland.

You couldn't pick a more perfect image for the life that God's people would be suffering. They would be going into exile. Their sins would cause suffering that would come at the hands of foreign rulers: the kingdoms of Assyria and Babylon. In the future, their homes would be destroyed, villages pillaged, armies destroyed the temple itself broken to pieces. And eventually, much of their people would be carted off through a literal desert to a different city. A time when their homes would be uprooted, loved ones ripped apart by distance or by death, financial stress, and mental struggles. There was nothing they could or would do that could change that. Sin casts a dismal desert.

And I don't think that you and I must think very hard. I don't believe that you have to look very far to see that a desert accurately describes our existence on this sinful earth. This fallen world is so chock-full of problems that it will make your head spin, a world of scavengers, death, oppressive heat, and hopelessness.

Globally, even up to the present day, there are wars where people, soldiers, and civilians alike, who lose their lives. Poverty and hunger exist abroad and also here in the most wealthy on earth. Even when physical danger and creature comforts are present, 20% of the global population suffers from a form of mental illness, where life, in general, can be downright unbearable. The world we live in is definitely a desert.

But I don't think I have to tell you that, do I? Every single of you knows the difficulties and the pain of living in your own personal desert. The effects of sin that hurt you. The ravenous beasts that stalk you. The burning sands on which you walk. Your desert that is ever shifting but is always difficult, the traumas that haunt you. The physical illnesses and inconveniences that are here or will be soon. The mental barriers that will continue to hurt. The loved ones you have been forced to mourn. You know your desert: its intensity, it's death, its hopelessness.

And despite the fact that the world has seen it and knows its pain, there is no scheme of man that has ever been able to fix this desert. No Age of Enlightenment has ever stopped war. No emphasis on education has been able to stave off pain. No enforced morality has been able to cure hurt. No president, no policy, no genius, no political party, no institution, no amount of time has been able to transform the desert into a paradise. No one can find water in this desert.

However, there is a stark contrast that exists in Aswan. As make a turn from the West to the East, the landscape is starkly changed. As you look to the East, there shines the Nile. There is water. And was a difference water makes. There are date palms that grow tall and strong along the banks, with limbs where birds sing. Grass grows tall and feeds the critters that live in its shade. The hot air drives along the water and brings a cooling breeze to the warm air. There is life; there is relief; there is hope that exists. Water makes all the difference, there is life when there is water in the desert.

And you probably noticed that stark contrast in Isaiah's inspired writing, the danger of the desert is overshadowed by the joy of the life that it is transformed to. **"It will burst into bloom, blossom, water will gush forth, streams and pools, a bubbling spring, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow."**

And what is this water? What is it that brings rejoicing? That gives sight to the blind, that strengthens the knees, that transforms an arid and hopeless land to one of rejoicing? Of peace and restoration? It comes with critical and crucial words: "God will come; he will come to save you."

God came to save his people when he, just as he promised, brought his people home from Babylon. God led his people back to their homeland just as he had promised. From their time of exile, he brought them to be reunited with their homeland, their people; God led them through their desert with his life-giving water, and gladness and joy overtook them, and their sorrow and sighing fled away.

This is the message of Advent that we focus on every year. This is Jesus. This is your Savior. It is the God-man whom John the Baptist heralded in the desert, the one which is affirmed to his disciples while he is in prison. Jesus came to transform this desert world into one of life's flowing waters. In his entry to the world, he fulfilled these words literally when he healed the diseased and blind and made the lame to walk. But more importantly, he did this for people spiritually. He gave all those souls he met hope and consolation, letting them be assured that God had not forgotten his promises and had sent his Son, the Messiah, to save them. To save them from their sins and to give the promise of life everlasting. He gave their thirsty souls water to drink when he gave their sin-burdened souls the promise of forgiveness. Gladness and Joy overtook them, and sorrow and sighing fled away.

God gives water to you in your desert. Because your God has come to save you, Jesus makes all the difference for you as a Christian. It doesn't matter what your personal desert might look like; Jesus gives you what you need to make it through that desert. When your body is pained, your God comes to save you with his power to heal or the strength that is required to endure it. When your mind seems to be a prison that you cannot escape, your God comes to save you with his words of comfort and knowledge that he alone understands completely the hardships you face. When you are distraught and sad and weak and tired, your God comes to save you with his promise of love. And when all else fails in this desert, when death is near, God comes to you with the guarantee of eternal life in heaven.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, what a difference water in a desert makes. What once was a hopeless land springs with joy anew. What was arid and full of death now has life. While you and I walk this desert, this earthly plane. Continue to go to your water. Go to your water of your Savior. Go to him where he will be found, in his Word. And he will bring you water that will give you life.