Isaiah 35:1-10
Advent 3A + December 18, 2019
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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Peace Comes … in Paradise

In less than a week we will have again celebrated our Savior’s first coming. But in the sermon tonight our attention is going to be directed more on the Savior’s last coming. Our text from Isaiah gives us an image of drastic transformation and wonderful renewal. “The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus.” That’s a picture of Paradise restored. The Advent coming of peace that I proclaim tonight will focus on paradise.

We think of heaven as a place of no sorrow. Rev. 21 describes the new heaven and new earth, the paradise restored at Christ's last coming, as a place where there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain. It is a place where everything is made new. When our life seems like a wilderness, a desert of loneliness, of frustration, of regret and depression, we have a definite longing for paradise. We want to leave all those ills behind and start over. So we look beyond our present situation to better days: possibly here on earth in the form of improved health or financial situation, happier and more stable relationships, and the end of conflict and injustice, but definitely in the perfect peace and new life of being in God’s heavenly presence.

If you aren’t used to it, repeated days of cold can quickly make life seem dreary. When the sun doesn’t break through the clouds to brighten our days, it tends to affect our disposition. To counteract that tendency, God’s Son, Jesus Christ, chases away the darkness. As people walking in the darkness of a broken world, we look to the light of life that He reveals in His Word. Especially in the dreary bleakness of winter, people long for a sign of new life. Perhaps our custom of bringing evergreen trees and flowers into our homes at Christmas time indicates a longed-for renewal.

Just as people desire renewal, nature also looks ahead to paradise. Romans 8:19 tells us that the creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. Creation itself was subjected to dryness, decay and death as a result of the sin mankind brought into the world. So creation groans as it waits for the drastic transformation which our Lord's return will bring.

The future paradise which is a result of our Lord's second coming is a wonderful prospect for people thirsty for new life. The resurrection bodies we will possess after being raised from the grave will be perfect; no longer subject to deterioration, decay, and death. In paradise, present limitations will no longer exist. “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.” Think for a moment of those you know who suffer those limitations. Failing eyesight, inability to hear distinctly, and stiff joints that prevent them from using stairs are all part of life in this decaying world. But in paradise those difficulties and every other infirmity won't even be remembered. Glasses can be laid aside and you won’t need to remember where you left them, hearing aids can be tossed away, crutches, wheelchairs and elevators won’t be necessary. But since that reality is in the future, for now we have to continue using these temporary aids.
Creation will also be rejuvenated when paradise is restored. *For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert.* It seems that everything will be lush with blossom and ever-green. It will be a time and place of gladness and rejoicing.

But Advent reminds us that joy and gladness doesn't have to wait for the future paradise. Joy comes also through the incarnation, the Son of God taking upon Himself human flesh and bringing new life to our dry world. His coming transformed a bleak joyless existence into a paradise of rejoicing in certain hope.

We heard in our gospel reading how Jesus exhibited this restoration at His first coming. He told how He had fulfilled verses 5 and 6, "The blind receive their sight and the lame walk, the deaf hear and the dead are raised up." The people who experienced this healing must have rejoiced greatly and shouted for joy!

God's Old Testament people remembered how He had provided them with water during their wilderness wanderings after the Exodus. Exodus 17 tells how the Children of Israel were in a place called the Desert of Sin with no water for the people to drink. God had Moses strike a rock, and a stream of life-saving water gushed out. 1 Cor. 10:4 tells us that *the Rock was Christ.* Christ came as a new stream in the desert. As He did then, He still brings new hope to lives made dry by doubt and despair. He told the Samaritan woman at the well that He would give her living water; water that would become in her a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

The Desert of Sin would be an apt description of today's moral and spiritual climate. The content of TV and movie programming, the prevalence of drug abuse, and the ungodly practices that have become commonplace and accepted indicate that we live in a moral wilderness. So we individually and as a congregation can be a beacon of light in the darkness; an oasis of life in a desert of moral decay. Our words and actions can set us apart as a positive influence. But too often our thoughts, words and actions tend more toward the darkness than the Light. Advent is a season for repentance.

Trying to remain faithful to God in a godless climate can sap our energy. Living as children of light takes work. We can become all dried out and afraid of what's ahead. God has a remedy for that, a soul renewing flood. A familiar hymn tells us that Jesus is the refuge of the weary, a fountain in life's desert dreary.

We were born into this world dry and desolate, without a drop of love for God. But a stream of living water was splashed over us in our baptism and our lives were transformed and renewed with life-saving faith. The forgiveness of sin and new life given to us freely in Baptism gives us reason to rejoice with great joy, for we have a foretaste of paradise. That source of life within us carries us through any times of spiritual dryness. Our baptism is one sure indication that God's promise of paradise restored has already been kept in Christ's coming as a child and in Word and Sacrament. Isaiah in looking ahead often saw Christ's first and second coming as one picture. The life and ministry of Jesus was the first fulfillment of Isaiah's words, "*They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God.*" The Apostle John in his beautiful Christmas gospel writes of Jesus, "*The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the One and Only who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*" The vision of God come to rescue His drought-stricken people caused
Isaiah to write, “Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who have an anxious heart, “Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.”

Those words of prophecy are fulfilled in both comings of Christ. The Son of God did come to save you. His name Jesus means the Lord saves. He came with the divine recompense or payback of His innocent death on the cross, full payment by God Himself for all the sins ever committed against Him. On the Last Day your God will come with vengeance, with the payment of eternal punishment for all who rejected His gift of forgiveness and life. But He will save you who have believed in Him and have longed for His coming. He will bring you with Him into Paradise.

Remembering that Isaiah saw the two fulfillments as one picture we notice a unique feature in both the paradise now and the paradise to come. There is a highway called the "Way of Holiness." We think of paradise as unspoiled by anything human, like billboards or road signs. It’s strange to think of a highway in paradise. But this highway is personal. Some might mistakenly think that it's the way of obedience which Christians walk during their time on earth, but our own efforts don’t get us to heaven. This highway is the person who said, "I am the Way... no one comes to the Father except through me." Upon the highway of Christ we travel from the earthly Zion of the church, to the heavenly Zion of Paradise. Those who foolishly reject the living water of Christ will not travel that way. They will remain stranded in the desert and spend eternity in tormenting heat. But the redeemed in Christ will enter rejoicing with eternal happiness. And the best feature of the future paradise is that we will be face to face with our Lord.

The gladness and joy which overtakes us at Christmas is but a sneak preview of the gladness and joy we will experience at Christ's last coming. The peace with God that allows us to rejoice even now in dry times will then be transformed into the eternal peace of Paradise. God's peace be with you as you travel toward that destination. Amen.