

One of the strange aspects of the Christmas season is the forced cheer. I'm not talking about Buddy the Elf's totally authentic joy and merriment. I mean that there doesn't seem to be any place in Christmas for difficulty. If your family doesn't look like a Norman Rockwell painting, you sort of feel like you have to plaster on a fake smile and keep going about your business.

Christmas is hard if you have family drama. Some of us are still recovering from Thanksgiving and we're already dreading Christmas. Blended families. An empty spot at the Christmas feast because a loved one has died. Fewer presents under the tree because 2016 was a rough year. Another Christmas spent alone. It can feel like you're staggering through a desert, searching for an oasis, and you're tired of pretending you're not dying of thirst.

I'm all for Christmas Cheer. But as someone who comes from a less-than-perfect family, I want to offer some words of hope to all the rest of you who can relate to a less-than-perfect Christmas.

This is exactly why we need Advent. Advent is the four weeks leading to Christmas. Our Advent series this year is called Pure Imagination. For those with less-than-jolly Christmas seasons, a hopeful Christmas seems like pure fiction, nothing but wishful thinking. But Advent teaches us how to live a hopeful life now, inspired by the promise of Jesus' return.

Advent teaches us how to live in these desert places. The message of Advent is, "Hang on. Don't give up. God is working, right now, in the desert, to bring hope and healing." Today, we'll see that as we wait for Christmas, our waiting is the anticipation that God is making us holy, a people who bring God's peace to a world of conflict.

For a lot of people who choose a life of faith, these desert places feel like a bait-and-switch. We think, "I didn't sign up for this when I started following God. I thought I was getting abundant life and joy and happiness (you know, all that Christmas stuff!)."

That anguish we feel is not unlike what the Israelites experienced as they waited for Jesus to come. Israel began as a slave people, under the whip of Pharaoh in Egypt. God freed them from slavery and invited them to be his chosen people, brought together by God's covenant: If you will be my people, I will be your God.

The people agreed, but then what happened next? They spent 40 years wandering in a desert before they were finally able to settle in the land God had promised them.

Which they did *not* expect. The desert isn't a fun place to be.

Unfortunately, even after Israel made it to the Promised Land, they never kept the covenant they'd made with God. They never remained God's people. Again and again, they strayed from God's way, refused to keep God's law. They worshiped other gods, oppressed the poor and marginalized.

So finally, God gave them what they wanted: a nation without their God imposing his way on them. God left the Temple and the Babylonian Empire swept across Judah, conquering and enslaving the people.

They had abandoned God for so long that God finally abandoned them. For those Israelites who lived through the Exile (and their children), they were right back in that wilderness. They were lost, hurting, alone.

[Scripture Slide 1] And this is where Advent hope comes in. If you have a Bible, turn with me to Isaiah 35. Even here, in Israel's darkest hour, all hope was not lost. In fact, it was after the Exile they began to hope for a Messiah to come to rescue them. This true king would establish God's rule one and for all. He would bring justice and peace. He would lift up the broken. He would defeat God's enemies and rescue God's people.

In this passage, Isaiah is looking forward, to what will happen when the Messiah returns. And what we see over and over are images of recreation. God isn't just rescuing Israel; God is making the whole world new again, restoring every broken thing. Pay attention to what will happen to the desert, especially:

Even the wilderness and desert will be glad in those days. The wasteland will rejoice and blossom with spring crocuses. Yes, there will be an abundance of flowers and singing and joy! The deserts will become as green as the mountains of Lebanon, as lovely as Mount Carmel or the plain of Sharon. There the Lord will display his glory, the splendor of our God.

With this news, strengthen those who have tired hands, and encourage those who have weak knees. Say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, and do not fear, for your God is coming to destroy your enemies. He is coming to save you."

And when he comes, he will open the eyes of the blind and unplug the ears of the deaf. The lame will leap like a deer, and those who cannot speak will sing for joy! Springs will gush forth in the wilderness, and streams will water the wasteland. The parched ground will become a pool, and springs of water will satisfy the thirsty land. Marsh grass and reeds and rushes will flourish where desert jackals once lived.

And a great road will go through that once deserted land. It will be named the Highway of Holiness. Evil-minded people will never travel on it. It will be only for those who walk in God's ways; fools will never walk there. Lions will not lurk along its course, nor any other ferocious beasts. There will be no other dangers.

Only the redeemed will walk on it. Those who have been ransomed by the Lord will return. They will enter Jerusalem singing, crowned with everlasting joy. Sorrow and mourning will disappear, and they will be filled with joy and gladness. -- Isaiah 35:1-10

Isaiah promises this desert they're in won't stay a desert. When God returns, creation itself will be remade. It's a beautiful, powerful promise.

But if I can be honest, when we're in a desert, good feelings only go so far. How does this vision of what's next help us in the here and now?

To understand fully what Isaiah is communicating to Israel, we have to understand more fully what the desert was for Israel.

Those 40 years they spent wandering in the desert weren't just wasted years. As later generations looked back on that time, they realized that all through those desert days, God was teaching them what it mean to be God's people.

One prophet, when he was criticizing Israel for their continued faithlessness, spoke for God. God said, "Then I will win her back once again. I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her there."

God wants to take Israel back to the desert. Put on some Barry White and fall in love all over again.

The desert is where Israel learned to love God. Which sounds strange. But consider the desert experience: every day, all Israel had to eat was what God provided. All Israel had to drink was the water God provided. All Israel did was move where God said to move, camp where God said to camp. God protected and sustained them *every day* for 40 years.

And in that time, they learned to trust God. To love God. The wilderness taught them to be faithful.

That's why after he describes the desert that will become a paradise, Isaiah says, **With this news, strengthen those who have tired hands, and encourage those who have weak knees. Say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, and do not fear, for your God is coming to destroy your enemies. He is coming to save you."**

Strengthen your tired hands! Encourage your weak knees! Keep going! Isaiah's words aren't for someone who's already made it. They're for the people who are still in the desert.

Of course, we know that Isaiah's people didn't wait forever. Their Messiah *did* come in the person of Jesus. But oddly, we still have deserts. We still have brokenness and pain. That doesn't mean God is not with us.

Rather, the writers of the New Testament reflect that our time on this Earth is much like that of Israel in the wilderness. Jesus has freed us from slavery to Sin and Death, and now - as we anticipate the coming Promised Land - we are in our own desert places.

Which means God is wooing us right now. Teaching us to fall in love with him. Teaching us to rely on him. Teaching us to be holy. To be "holy" means "to be fit for God". It means "to be like God (and therefore not like the world)." Isaiah's prophecy talked about that too. He said,

And a great road will go through that once deserted land. It will be named the Highway of Holiness. Evil-minded people will never travel on it. It will be only for those who walk in God's ways; fools will never walk there. Lions will not lurk along its course, nor any other ferocious beasts. There will be no other dangers.

Only the redeemed will walk on it. Those who have been ransomed by the Lord will return.

If you were an Israelite, you knew that a whole bunch of people were considered unclean. All Gentiles were unclean. So was anyone who had any sort of disability or birth defect. And in fact, many Israelites, having lived through these days of anxiety, bore the marks of Exile on their very bodies. They were crippled, blinded, maimed. Babylon had rendered them unclean. Unable ever again to enter God's presence.

But Isaiah promises they will not wander forever, aimless in the desert. God will make a road and God will heal the wounds of Exile. God will make God's people clean, able to walk on God's holy highway. God will redeem and ransom them again as long ago when they were ransomed from Egypt.

We too, bear the marks of our broken world. Many of us bear marks of our own mistakes - broken relationships, lost jobs, callings ignored, habits indulged, roads not taken. Many of us too have suffered the sins of others. We are the products of broken families, betrayed relationships, systemic evils, oppression and injustice, violence and abuse.

Isaiah promises us: this desert is not the end. In fact, right now, God is with you. God is with us. God is still working to make us holy. To heal us, restore and redeem us. To make us into a people who can walk the holy highway toward God's new kingdom.

This is always painful. Always. The desert is never fun when you're in the desert.

The first time my world fell apart was when I was 13 and I found out my parents were getting divorced. It happened again when I was in high school, when the Church that had been a haven during that painful time split. It happened again when I lost my first church job because another pastor in my town decided he didn't like how I talked about God, and managed to get me fired. And those are just the big moments. They don't count all the relationship pains, the friendships lost, the friendships saved only through hard struggle.

I have a friend who recently got divorced. We had the chance to catch up the other day, and she told me a big part of her heartbreak was that she had always been a good Christian girl. She followed all the rules good Christian girls are supposed to - followed them to a T (she's a little type A so that helped). She met a guy, fell in love, got married.

And it turned out he wasn't who she thought he was. She was devastated.

But she told me as she's been working through all the crap that comes with a divorce, she's learning so much about God and about herself. She's learning that God isn't a god of rules and regulations. She's finding a freedom to be herself, to speak for herself, that she never had before. She told me, "I would never wish what happened to me on my worst enemy, but I wouldn't trade it for the world."

Friends, this is the good news of our deserts. Not that God sends us to the desert. But that God leads us *through* the desert on the way to salvation. The desert is where God woos us, where we learn to trust and love God. And as awful as it is, as much as we wouldn't wish it on our worst enemies, when we reach the other side, we look back and say, I wouldn't trade that for *anything*.

So here's what we do, those of us who have less than perfect families, those of us for whom the holiday cheer is a bit forced. Quoting Isaiah, the writer of Hebrews said:

Take a new grip with your tired hands and strengthen your weak knees. Mark out a straight path for your feet so that those who are weak and lame will not fall but become strong. Work at living in peace with everyone, and work at living a holy life, for those who are not holy will not see the Lord. Look after each other so that none of you fails to receive the grace of God. Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many.

We know the desert is not the end. We don't die here. So get a grip! Get back up! And start walking. Pick up those around you who have fallen.

Work at living in peace with everyone.

Work at a holy life so the people around you can see God.

Watch out for each other.

And don't let the root of bitterness grow among you.

How will your Christmas look without bitterness? How will it look if that peace the angels announced at Jesus' birth is what you bring to the family dinner?

You're not alone. I'm with you. Catalyst, we are in this together. And best of all, God is with us. In the desert, with us. Wooing us. We are learning to trust and love God. And when we get where we're going, we'll look back and say, "Wow. I wouldn't trade that for anything."

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] The Table is God with Us, Jesus in the wilderness with us. It's a Love Feast.

1. Where in the last week have you sensed God's presence?
2. How have you felt like you were in a desert?
3. Where in the next week will you feel like you're in a desert?
4. How can you choose faith this week in those desert places?