

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

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Luke 1:46-55

Isaiah 35:1-10

ON DISPLAY

Parched - what is the most desert-like place where you have ever been? Arid – have you been where there seemed to be so little of the blessings from the heavens above that it looked like life could not be sustained there? Years ago, I stumbled into a desert at a hospital in Georgia. I went there to visit a woman named Carrie who was expecting, but it was a long while before she was to be full term. For a variety of reasons, the doctors decided very suddenly that they needed to do a C-section on her and get the premature infant out of her womb and into the neo-natal unit. The baby was tiny – she could have been held in one hand. She looked so fragile – she was so fragile. She was on a respirator for a long time because her lungs were not yet mature enough for her to breathe on her own. Carrie and her husband, McKay, had not been in such a foreboding landscape before. Could the life of their child be sustained? As their pastor, I wondered if the life of the parents' faith would survive if the child did not. Every sip they took for days and weeks tasted like fear. There would be a little encouraging news, but then there were numerous challenges that arose indicating that the little, little girl might not survive. They named their baby Parker and they wondered whether the neo-natal unit would be a place of wonderful miracle or woeful misfortune. I didn't know whether to encourage their hopes or not.

Have you ever been in such a figurative dry place that by appearances looked to be godforsaken? Perhaps it was during a time of great loss, or a bewildering time where you didn't want to be where you were, and you could see little prospect for a good way forward. That's where the Hebrew people found themselves when Isaiah's words from our reading came to them. They were in exile in a foreign land, far away from anything that felt like home and with no good prospect for getting back there. Despair seemed to grow better than anything else in that location. That's when the prophet told them that their place of desolation was going to experience a great change. Like a long-range meteorologist, Isaiah told them that their desert experience was going to blossom and flourish, becoming as fertile as those rare areas in the region, Lebanon, Carmel, and Sharon that got good rains. The arid sands would become a luscious garden. The problem was that there was little more than Isaiah's words that gave any indication that there was reason for such hope, except there were those who said God had come through for them in the past and just might do so again. But based on such a prospect, Isaiah told the people to strengthen their weak hands so they could reach out to others who also needed encouragement. He said even before the desert was to bloom that they were to firm up their weak knees so they could go through the doorway that God would open for them. Perhaps, most challenging of all, they were to tell those who were of a fearful heart to be strong instead of being afraid. He told them their wilderness experience would turn into a garden. Even those with disabilities of vision, hearing, mobility, and speech, who normally would be the last to be included in some societal blessing, would receive healing to be fully included in an amazing transformation. Why were the people to do anything other than hide in their closets with hands trembling and knees knocking? Because God was coming in a powerful, life-giving way.

In 1986, a man who lived in a figurative desert wrote the following. "Hope is a state of mind, not a state of the world. Either we have hope within us or we don't. Hope is not a prognostication—it's an orientation of the spirit. You can't delegate that to anyone else. Hope in this deep and powerful sense is not the same as joy when things are going well, or the willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but rather an ability to work for something to succeed. Hope is definitely NOT the same as optimism. It's not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out." ¹

Vaclav Havel had been in prison for four years in response to his resistance against the communist government of Czechoslovakia. But his innate hope strengthened his hands, knees, and voice so he could be a leader of what would come to be called the velvet revolution, a powerful, non-violent uprising against the communist regime that had squashed human rights for decades. Three years after he wrote what I shared about hope, Havel was imprisoned again for his activities as a dissident. But then, just six months after he was released, the communist regime fell in the face of massive nonviolent protests and the following month, Havel was elected President of a newly free nation in one of the great turnarounds of modern history.² His experience and expression of hope realized led many others to a transformational hope as well.

Let me get back to baby Parker's story. She was finally released from intensive care and then released from the hospital. But the times of challenge were not over for her or her family. Like some premature babies, Parker had severe hearing loss which would challenge her development in numerous ways. But when she was a year old, the family had Parker undergo a cochlear implant, that gave her a way for her auditory nerve to be stimulated, giving her an electronic way to hear. And hear she could! And learn how to speak, she did! The Advent season after Parker's operation, I preached on Isaiah 35. As you heard, the passage included these words: "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy." For Christmas that year, now fifteen years ago, our family got a present of this ornament to hang on our tree. Written on the front, it says "Isaiah 35:1-10." And on the back it says, in her mother's handwriting: "Love, Parker." It is not the prettiest of the ornaments we hang on our Christmas tree, but of all of them, it most beautifully represents the child of God whose birth we celebrate during this season. For the God who comes to us does transform deserts into lush gardens. Our God who comes takes away the impediments to full inclusion and to fullness of life. Our God is the source of our hope and our joy even when, particularly when things look desolate around us or within us. "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. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God... And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away." No longer parched; no longer arid – thanks be to God!

¹ Vaclav Havel, Disturbing the Peace, chapter 5, written in 1986, translated and published by Knopf in 1990.

² I relied on this timeline:<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/czechrepublic/8964070/Vaclav-Havel-timeline-of-the-former-Czech-president.html>