

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Ronald W. Botts, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, December 30, 2007, the first Sunday after Christmas and dedicated to the glory of God!

“Isaiah 63: The Flowers of Winter”

Part VI of VII in Sermon Series: “Isaiah’s Vision: Welcome the Messiah” Isaiah 63:7-9; Matthew 2:13-23

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of your hearts be acceptable in your O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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On some bitterly cold night in winter, with the wind howling outside the window and the snow swirling around, I will get a cup of hot chocolate and head for my favorite chair. It’s comforting to have a special place where the troubles of the world seem very distant.

Once there, I reach for a seed catalogue and a couple of back issues of *Better Homes and Gardens*, a clipboard with fresh paper and then begin the delightful project of planning my yard for the spring. The more frigid it is outside, the more pleasure to the task.

My tools for the evening are memory and imagination. Only later, much later, will I need to get out the shovel and rake and wheelbarrow. There will be plenty of time for that as the days become longer and the air begins to warm. Then I will need those kind of hand tools. For now, I need memory and imagination. They’re essential for getting this phase of the job done.

When I put my mind to it, I can clearly remember each bed around the house and where we usually position the hanging baskets.

Then I envision what our usual pattern would look like with a change of plants or colors, or with additional planters that might be added. There is assurance in knowing that the bleak and stark beds will bloom again profusely once spring returns.

While photographs are wonderful and enjoyable, there's nothing sweeter for me than to visualize the scene with my mind's eye. Not only does it appear in full three-dimension, but I can also place myself square in the middle of the picture. I even have the projection equipment I need with me at all times and, should I fly across the continent, it will work just as well there. I can be in my backyard any time in the blink of an eyelid.

Whenever people are physically separated from those places and things they love, memory is the lifeline that keeps alive what's important. So, perhaps, it was for the Hebrew people as they waited out a long exile in Babylon, far away from their ancestral home. The book of Isaiah speaks directly to them as they wait and wait and wait.

It seems as if they were always on the verge of giving up completely, but were brought back from the edge by the prophets and other visionaries who encouraged them to keep their faith in God and to give thought to where they have been and where they will be returning. As for the time in-between, the operative thought is persevere and hang in. A better day will be coming.

We commonly think of the book of Isaiah as if it were the product of one person, but our Biblical work has at least two voices and possibly three. The latter section of the book, starting with chapter 40, has many similarities with the original Isaiah, but dates from a couple of centuries later. "Second" Isaiah — as he is referred to by scholars — writes from captivity with a message of comfort and hope, perhaps around 540 B.C. and in Babylon with his people.

Life is hard as the Hebrews serve the labor needs of their overlords. This was grunt work in exchange for the barest necessities of life. There wasn't much to be happy about. The current generation had never even set foot in their homeland. Second Isaiah was one of those who helped keep his people from giving up. He gave them words of comfort for the present and kept possibility alive for the future as they dreamed of the time when they would be back in a land of "milk and honey." Then all their aspirations would be fulfilled.

Fast forward now another 10 years, about 530 B.C., and now the situation has changed again. The land of Judah is no more that distant wish of the people, for a return home has become reality for most of the Hebrews. A **reverse** exodus has taken place. Instead of enjoying a time of prosperity, though, the common person discovered that the struggles of life continued. Immediate happiness had not materialized in the way they imagined it would.

Instead of all the people pulling together as one, some who had greater resources used their favorable situation to enrich themselves. Power and wealth were sufficient incentive to economically exploit their brethren. [Not all that different from today.] Average people, with their high hopes dashed, looked to whatever pleasures they could find. Many also turned to the pagan gods worshipped there while they were away.

These two concerns — the exploitation of the powerless and the rise of paganism — were the evils denounced by the **last** voice identified as Isaiah. This might have been yet another prophet but, since the scenario is just 10 years later and the styles are so similar, it may be that Second and Third Isaiah are one and the same.

The message is a harsh one meant as a warning. There isn't the same word of comfort here as was offered to the people in the last years of the exile. Still, and importantly, there are passages of hope interspersed in the more strident words. Our scripture today is one of those places.

If the people are bogged down in the winter of their emotions, then this is where the prophet tells them to remember the flowers in full bloom. It is not time to lose heart in the promise of deliverance. Restoration for God's people needs to be understood as more than just a return to a place, a geographical spot. It is also a transformation of the heart brought about by recalling and believing in the promises of God made long ago. He writes:

I will tell of the Lord's unfailing love;
I praise him for all he has done for us.
He has richly blessed the people of Israel
Because of his mercy and constant love....
In love and compassion God rescued them.
God's presence has saved them.

Can we identify with those ancient Israelites for whom almost all hope was gone? I doubt if that link would be with their story because we haven't been forcibly taken from our land, only to return at a later date. That's foreign to us; still, I think, we can connect on a deeper level. We, too, have known disappointment, profound disappointment. We have experienced pain so great that it has sapped away most of our external strength. This similarity between us and them is evident, despite all the years that separate us.

Experience teaches you how desperately some word of hope is needed at a time when your heart is breaking, when you realize that you have no other way to look but up. It's on occasions like this that we come to understand that there is no place to turn, except to God. God shows us that there is no other reality in which we can put our ultimate trust.

As I worked with this sermon on Friday, late at night, I found myself greatly pained. One of our houseguests carelessly left a door open to the outside earlier in the evening and our little male cat, Desi, was gone. He's almost always been inside so has no real

understanding of the dangers that lurk in the larger world. He came to us as a kitten two years ago when my brother-in-law found him lying on his side in the intersection of Broad and Nelson. He had not been hit, but was emaciated. Yet, even then, he had the brightest eyes as he tried to lift his little head.

At that moment on Friday my heart was breaking as I feared for his safety. My heart was breaking as I was saddened by the thought of never seeing our little guy again and the pleasures that he has brought to us. Every half hour I went out to search the neighborhood, but to no avail. Not a sight or a sound that was encouraging. Back inside I had tears in my eyes because I felt so sad. And all this even though my tragedy was little compared to the challenges of life that I know many of you are experiencing. Your worries, your losses, are so much greater than mine. Your faces came immediately to mind as I sat there trying to write.

Suffering takes us to the very depths of our souls; yet, it can also bring us two things for good: first, it can strengthen us for the future if we are willing to confront it directly and work our way through its maze; and, second, it can teach us where the source of our strength truly lies. To look at it in another way, there is a redeeming side to our suffering that may come as a gift if we can recognize it. Though I don't believe that God brings about the suffering, God can use even this to show us how much we are loved. God's presence is with us always. Always. We are not alone in those hardest of times.

Icy winds blow across each life. January freezes threaten the balance we carefully create for ourselves. When they do, we need to remember even more often what the Lord has promised us and then has shown us in Jesus Christ. We also have to use the breadth of our imaginations so that we can appreciate that God may choose to be expressed through others who reach out to us at those moments.

At 3:30 am, early on Saturday morning, a little face appeared outside our kitchen window that leads in from the porch. Our friend had found his way home and to the security of those who love him. God's presence helped us to wait through those long hours of not knowing. And perhaps, just perhaps, it was God's presence that also turned him back home again.

James Barrie, who wrote *Peter Pan*, once said. "God gave his children memory that they might have roses in December." Hope, that comes in our times of greatest need, is a surprise garden that graces our winter lives with fragrance and beauty. It reminds us of divine promises given and of love unexcelled and unending. In this hope, we are sustained. In this hope, we **can** trust.

Amen