

## **Sermon Draft**

**Text: Isaiah 35:1–10**

**Sermon: “Rescued From The Wilderness”**

The season of Advent is a time of hopeful anticipation not only for December 25, but even more for the second coming of Christ. Christians live in constant hope for that day. But during the season of Advent, our longing becomes more explicit and acute. The annual celebration of the incarnation reminds us that, as surely as Christ first came hidden as a newborn child, so also will he come again with glory for all to see. On that day, he will exercise vengeance on his enemies and restore all creation.

Each of the Scripture readings points to this restoring work of Jesus. Psalm 146 contrasts those who hope in princes with those who hope in the God of Jacob. The Lord looks with favor on such people and promises to help them. The Psalm concludes with the confession that the Lord will reign forever. The Epistle from James 5 calls Christians to wait for the day of Jesus’ coming with patience, which is a lesson that John the Baptist learned the hard way in prison in the Gospel from Matthew 11. The good news throughout these readings is not only that Jesus has come in the past, but that he will come again with vengeance to bring life to those who languish in the wilderness.

The Third Sunday in Advent is traditionally recognized as Gaudete Sunday, from the Latin word for “rejoice.” We continue this tradition as many churches do by lighting the pink candle in the Advent wreath. The theme of joy and rejoicing frames the Old Testament Reading from Isaiah 35, as the prophet calls the people to joy and gladness in light of the promise that all creation will rejoice at the Lord’s coming.

It says something that national parks and other recreation areas require backpackers to get a wilderness permit before setting out. When you head into the wilderness, you’re not only going off the grid, but you’re leaving behind the safety—to say nothing of the conveniences—of subdivision and suburbia or city or small town. For example, it also says quite a lot when this is the last sign you read as you leave the trailhead: “Most recent mountain lion sighting . . . yesterday.” And the sign proceeds to give you instructions like, “Hold small children on your shoulders to protect them and to look as tall and menacing as possible” and “Carry stones to throw if you see a lion.”

The wilderness is a dangerous place. Especially if you run out of water or darkness falls or you simply get lost. Even a seasoned hiker can suddenly feel helpless.

Suddenly your self-reliance evaporates and you realize you need someone to bail you out, to rescue you.

Our text today uses “wilderness” as a metaphor, an illustration, for many things you and I experience that are anything but illustrations, metaphors, picture language—things we live with that are very, very real. Tragic things. Painful things. Dangerous things. But the point of the text is that in a very real way, Christ’s coming delivers us from all those things. As the prophet Isaiah puts it, God will come with vengeance to bring life to the wilderness.

Life in the wilderness is dangerous. Wilderness well illustrates what truly is the difficult reality of life in a fallen world. Isaiah pictures burning sand, a haunt of jackals, lions, and ravenous beasts. God’s Old Testament people had experienced these challenges very literally as they traveled through the wilderness.

Our own “wildernesses” of different kinds we also know very literally. Some are our personal guilt or shame. But many dangers we encounter simply because the whole world is sinful. Some of these are physical, others are relational, still others are mental or emotional.

We deal with physical ailments and limitations each day but this time of year can especially be hard emotionally as we navigate through the holiday season.

You know what your own struggles are, what your wilderness feels like. Or perhaps it's difficult even for you to name them yourself. In any case, our sufferings in this fallen world, this wilderness, are real, and we need deliverance, rescue.

God promises to come into the wilderness with life-restoring vengeance. Christ's coming will make all things right again. Visualize what Isaiah wants us to see *<sup>1</sup>The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus; <sup>2</sup>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.*

*<sup>5</sup>Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; <sup>6</sup>then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; <sup>7</sup>the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; in the haunt of jackals,*

***where they lie down, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.”***

The wilderness itself will flow and flower. The sufferers of personal “wildernesses” will rejoice in health and vitality. These promises were fulfilled in part during Jesus’ life and ministry. Jesus points this out to John’s messengers in today’s Gospel (Matthew 11:4–5). But they will be fully realized when Jesus returns in glory on the Last Day. At that time, he will restore all of creation—including life, health, and joy to each of us.

The heart of Isaiah’s promise, however, is this: ***“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’”*** (v 4).

Notice, first, God will come with vengeance. He will exercise vengeance on his enemies—sin, death, and the devil (and those who remain in league with them). For them, the promise of vengeance is obviously not good news.

But we are no longer God’s enemies! Christ Jesus coming and going to the cross has reconciled us to God. We have been baptized into his death. We believe in Jesus which is why you came to worship this week! God’s vengeance against his enemies is good news for God’s people because it means relief and rescue.

Because Christ's death has reconciled us to God, he is with us in all our wildernesses.

It may seem a little odd to think of God's vengeance as we prepare to celebrate Christmas. After all, the image of a babe in the manger hardly elicits fear or trembling. But this baby is no ordinary baby. Not only would he reign over sin, death, and the devil in his life and ministry. Even more, he would reign over these enemies in his resurrection from the dead and in his session at the right hand of the Father. For now, his reign is hidden to us (Hebrews 2:8). But when he returns, his reign will be visible for all to see as he restores his beloved creation for the rejoicing of his redeemed people.

Our celebration of Christmas invites us to rejoice in advance of Jesus' return. See how Isaiah frames our text with this invitation to rejoice in the coming of the Messiah. He begins with the wilderness itself rejoicing (vs 1–2) and ends with the people of God gathering together in “*everlasting joy*” (v 10). This is much more than the shallow and super-ficial feelings that characterize many Christmas playlists. Instead, Christian joy is the natural response of the people of God who are beginning to enjoy the fruits of a creation that will be restored to paradise.

Picture how different this coming joy will be from the world in which we live now! Unlike today, there will be no more “sighing” and no more “sorrow” (v 10). There will be no more weak hands or feeble knees (v 3), no more blindness, deafness, lameness, or muteness (vs 5–6). There will be no thirst and no ravenous beasts to devour us (vs 7, 9). Instead, the people of God will gather in the city of God in joy and gladness forever. At its best, Christmas provides a hint, a glimpse of this joyful condition, but these are always only partial and temporary. We can (and we should) give thanks for these moments of rejoicing, especially during this holy season. But these glimpses are ultimately only a dim pre-view of the fullness of rejoicing that will arrive and remain with the return of Jesus.

Together as a congregation, and individually in our respective vocations, we proclaim this promise to encourage those who remain weak and feeble. “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’***” (v 4, emphasis added). Yes, Isaiah says to us, “Say it!”

Those who are anxious, weak, suffering—tell them that in Christ, God has come and will come again in vengeance . . . to bring life to their wildernesses, to save them! All Christians of every station are called to proclaim God’s saving promises.

Luther called this the “mutual conversation and consolation of brethren” (SA III IV). This takes place outside of worship, in daily life, as ordinary Christians speak the promises of Christ to one another. These promises encourage the people of God. The joy of those whose rejoicing has begun is contagious.

Imagine what it looks like to share this joy with others. Some of you have opportunity to share this joy with homebound and lonely members of our congregation. Others of you have opportunity to share it with people who aren’t yet part of the Body of Christ. All of you have the honor and privilege of speaking joyful words of hope to those who struggle in their own personal wilderness: Christ will come with vengeance to make right that wilderness. He will come and save you.

Amen