

## Old Testament

### Isaiah 35:1-10

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.

Strengthen the weak hands,  
and make firm the feeble knees.

Say to those who are of a fearful heart,  
"Be strong, do not fear!

Here is your God.

He will come with vengeance,  
with terrible recompense.  
He will come and save you."

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 waters shall break forth in the wilderness,  
and streams in the desert;

the burning sand shall become a pool,  
and the thirsty ground springs of water;

**the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,  
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.**

A highway shall be there,  
and it shall be called the Holy Way;

the unclean shall not travel on it,  
but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.

No lion shall be there,  
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;  
they shall not be found there,  
but the redeemed shall walk there.  
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.

## **The Gospel**

### **Matthew 11:2-11**

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. *And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.*”

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John:

**“What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind?**

What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written,

‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way before you.’

“Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; **yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.**”

**[DJMC - do not look up, but reach a hand - your significance is not to be discounted]**

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**Chapter 35 is a bit further on in Team Isaiah than last week, but still working with themes of the moral and therefore actual transformation of a landscape from injustice and unfruitfulness to the blessings of lushness and a rather benign biodiversity, as well as the hope that what seems forbidding and inaccessible in this natural environment might become a place which can be respectfully safely and traversed by humans who approach without malice.**

A visionary transformation. It all depends on the given wilderness as to what you might dream of: I'm standing, it seems, in the midst of the damp dream of Isaiah 35, that :

**the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,  
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.**

**And although the writer longs to see a landscape and habitat - which they experience as hazardous and unproductive - to see this habitat realise their potential as gentle and fruitful, it's striking that the vision is not of fields sown with crops but of a wild and holy place well supplied with the element which completely and abruptly transforms dry places with occasional rain , namely water. Even more sensitive in the long run, even than oil!**

**In this vision, the wilderness remains wilderness, even as the holiness and beauty blossoms into view. A wilderness, which is still beyond absolute deterministic control of human activity, though living at its full potential, beautifully retaining the identity of a biodiverse habitat.**

**I don't think the poet shared our delight in predators, [No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;] and yet perhaps their value to an ecosystem, which we've seen in the introduction of wolves in US national parks, fits in with those visions of the lion and the wolf lying down with prey animals with whom they do share a habitat. At a deeper level, predators and prey need each other.**

**Rain in dry wildernesses causes an explosive outburst of life and growth. With peat bogs, things go more slowly. Over centuries even, but the efforts to restore blanket bog where, perhaps unwisely, the wrong trees had been planted in the wrong place, have shown encouraging results over just a couple of decades.**

**I wonder what Isaiah would have made of more than 25 species of Sphagnum moss, working away to capture more carbon than all**

**the UK forests and woodland combined. The tiny plants, performing their miracle, making the peat. But a wildfire in 2019 blew that sky-high, doubling Scotland's carbon emissions.**

**The wilderness, in the vision is cared for. Managed. Wild, but not left entirely to their own devices. Especially when our activities on the periphery can literally spark a disaster. In the days of steam trains, peat fires were always waiting to happen. We still have to take care in our wild places with barbecues and camp fires. Even in a landscape that holds this much water.**

**The transformation brought about by dormant plants and creatures when water is added is given an even sharper focus by a nature-literate description in the previous chapter of how, when humanity's self-destructive obsession with war and destruction has run its course, the wildlife is waiting to reclaim what we might think we had utterly possessed. Not unlike the landscape of Chernobyl, the one-time habitat of people, whose foolish, abusive unjust ways ( in the view of the poet) led to their own destruction becomes a paradise of biodiversity. Isaiah was a bird-watcher, it seems, finding unambiguously in the ways of wildlife, the cunning hand and the generosity of God towards creatures other than human.**

**Indeed this gives me a chance to share some unambiguously good news: that whether or not the nations ever did flock to Jerusalem to learn the ways of the Creator and Sustainer, we do live in an age when wisdom's voice is heard, and acted on, even if not universally heeded. The needs of people for food need not be set against the protection of the wild spaces and other creatures who are vital to the life of all including ourselves, even if in the global North we're only just beginning, once more to grasp what indigenous and other peoples never lost sight of: that we belong and depend and live at the mercy of the Earth, whom we not only inhabit, but are called to serve and tend.**

**In all the gloom and doom that it's easy to find, let it be an Advent discipline to seek out the good news, the gloriously positive and hopeful things which seldom reach out headlines. I found it**

essential, in my work as EcoChaplain, not only to subscribe to such quality news sites as 'Positive News', and EuroNews.Green but also to soak in the joy and encouragement I find in churches who really get stuck in to reducing waste, repair cafes, litter-picking, the rewilding of their church grounds, feeding the hungry with good food that might otherwise be wasted, encouraging the sharing and exchange of preloved clothing. Even a Green Graveyards initiative like that embraced by Danish churches. German churches have something similar.

Finally, it's important for me, respectfully and cautiously as even the most exuberant love should also be, to seek out chances to fall in love with the wildlife who is all around us, though, seldom appreciated face to face. As well as rethinking our relationship with the domestic animals whom, as predators, we eat and exploit day by day.

Is this the way we should be going as people of faith? Do the blinds receive their sight, the lame walk, are the lepers are cleansed, do the deaf hear, are species thought extinct brought back from the brink , and the and irrespective of money and buildings and everything that hangs like a millstone round are our churches, are we ready as the mission opportunity of Christmas does approach, to be and be seen to be good news for every creature.

These reflections are about Advent as a season in its own right, but Advent is also a preparation. If you've got a Christmas tree in home or church, have you pointed out that it's a tree first and foremost: that you've invited in something to remind you as you celebrate the solidarity of the Word become flesh, of the miracle in each leaf and needle, breathing out the oxygen that we breathe in to praise God, to laugh, to sing, to greet our neighbours at this dark time of year as we wait for the light to return.

**A final thought, form out here on the blanket bog: I've wondered for years about Jesus' final comment on John: expressing both what sounds like admiration and dismissal:**

**"Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."**

**Let's take it this way and see what you think: always be inspired by the great deeds of those who have the chance to do them. But never, in looking up, be discouraged or intimidated. I know nothing of the struggles that are part of your day today. Whether even getting out of bed to face the state of the planet was an achievement in itself. Likewise with our award scheme: congregations can rightly delight in awards, bronze, silver or gold, and be spud of what they've achieved and the journey they've travelled - only to encourage and delight and reach out a hand of friendship to this who are just starting, and even those who have tried and stalled.**

**Blessed are you if you can take this to heart:**

**In Advent, remember we are a community of faith dependent on grace: thus with Christ, we offer whatever we are and whatever we have, for God to heal the world.**

**AMEN**