

Isaiah 41:17-20 ¹⁷ When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I the Lord will answer them, I the God of Israel will not forsake them. ¹⁸ I will open rivers on the bare heights, and fountains in the midst of the valleys; I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water. ¹⁹ I will put in the wilderness the cedar, the acacia, the myrtle, and the olive; I will set in the desert the cypress, the plane and the pine together, ²⁰ so that all may see and know, all may consider and understand, that the hand of the Lord has done this, the Holy One of Israel has created it.

Psalm 63:1-8 ¹ O God, you are my God, I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. ² So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. ³ Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. ⁴ So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name. ⁵ My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips ⁶ when I think of you on my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night; ⁷ for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy. ⁸ My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.

Isaiah 41:17-20 and Psalm 63:1-8
10/07/2018 – World Communion Sunday
“Stewardship One: An Oasis In the Desert”
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Over the next four weeks, I am going to rely on some common images from Scripture to talk about the church’s mission in the world. Today, the theme is Oasis in the Dessert. It’s not an image with which Michiganders are particularly familiar. We’re surrounded by water. From the air, much of Michigan is green – covered in patches of farmland and vast areas of forest. We deal with flooding more often than draught. But anyone who has have driven across the Upper Penninsula knows that the idea of oasis is not complete foreign. When I used to live in Hancock, every trip back and forth involved a 50-mile stretch along M-28 through the Seney National Wildlife Refute. Particularly in the dead cold of a UP winter, the little town of Munising is an oasis where one finds gasoline, food, and a hotel.

But of course, ancient Israel was a real desert. Temperatures could approach 120 degrees Fahrenheit in the daytime, and yet plummet down into the 50s at nighttime. A 3-4 month rainy season allowed enough time for a harvest, but when the rains dried up, the earth can become so parched that it actually cracks. An anonymous writer shared his experience of the desert this way: “

“Nothing stings quite like the desert. I remember standing one time in the midst of a desert at high noon, overlooking a saline pond. It was so hot you could almost see the shoreline shrinking in front of you, as the sun drew the water into the air. On the far side of this dwindling water basin, cattle sought shelter in caves.

“For humankind, being in that desert was really a life threatening situation. I could not stay in that sunlight very long. Like the cattle, I too had to seek a cave or the shade of an Acacia tree. As I drove through that wilderness, sand grouse and hummingbirds flew in and out of the desert brush and succulents, but there was no escaping the relentless heat. There was no real relief to be found anywhere

“At one point in my travels that day I saw a windmill in the distance. It was not one of those gigantic windmills you see in Holland, but one of those spindly things you see over farm wells. As I approached this spindleshanks contraption, I saw that it was in fact a water pump. Some enterprising farmer had actually sunk a well in the desert to draw up fresh water. So miraculous was this water when

it hit the surface that a small jungle had grown right in the desert. Banana trees replaced spindly shrubs, and even a vegetable garden grew near the well.

“All around this little oasis was the burning land, its heat waves shimmering to the sky to warn any living thing that the desert could kill. [4 ¶s adapted from “Desert Springs” by Unknown Author, www.esermons.com.]

That was the world out of which our sacred texts have arisen. The prophet Isaiah speaks of the the work that God will do in the dessert. During Advent, we hear how the God will prepare the way for the Messiah: the wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, and the desert shall rejoice and blossom; 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... In this morning’s text, Isaiah notes that God will do this particularly for the poor and the needy. What Isaiah suggests here is that God is working to reorder the world: to make it a place where the most desperate find a place where they are cared for, provided for, nourished, and revived. An oasis is a place of where one finds water, shade, refreshment, rest. It a haven for the weary and the beat up. Isaiah uses that image to talk about God’s work in the world. And Isaiah is right to do so.

But let me push that a step farther. If oasis-building is the work of God, you and I are called to be part of that work. Several years ago, I recall hearing the story of a colleague in ministry. She was in the midst of a painful and contentious divorce. She sat in church one Sunday with her children, feeling alone, afraid, and like the weight of the world was on her shoulders. She had no idea how she was going to get by. Parenting alone was exhausting, and she was bone tired. She recalls sitting in the sanctuary as the time came for prayer. Around her, heads bowed reverently, and yet she could not pray. She could not even pretend to pray. She sat there, looking around, thinking to herself: “you people are so deluded. You’re prayers mean nothing. You’re praying to nothing. You’re seeking after a non-existent entity to be in relationship.” That is a spiritual desert. That is what it means to be spiritually dried up, withering inside, so dry that one is cracking under the heat. And there’s not a one of us here that can’t relate to her feelings. Most of us have had our dry spells. We’ve felt the pain of doubt, even despair. If we stop for just a moment to think about it, we totally get it. And we come here week after week in order to stop for a moment and think about it, so that we don’t forget compassion. Thankfully, the church rallied around that young mom. They helped her pick up the pieces of her life. And in time, prayer became meaningful again, and she became aware that they had prayed for her even when she couldn’t. In time, she sensed a call to ministry, went to seminary, and has become one who prays for those that can’t.

The reason I remember my colleague’s story is because it resonated with me. I was a senior in college at the time, home for the weekend. And I was now the one in that desert place. Earlier that week, I spent that night the U of M Hospital ER with a younger student – a freshman – who attended the Wesley Foundation campus ministry where I was on staff. He had come out of the closet as gay, and a couple of guys in the dorm where he lived responded to that by writing slurs on his door in lipstick. Then, they filled two giant garbage cans from the dorm lavatory down the hall with water, and leaned them against my young friend’s door so that when he opened it, water flooded into his dorm room. What they didn’t know is that this young man was a DJ, and he had several pieces of electronic mixing equipment stacked on the floor in his room. When the water flooded the room, electric current from that equipment zapped through the water, severely burning my friend’s foot. Thankfully, he was at the door, and leapt to the hallway for safety. The doctors told him he was lucky to be alive. He went home that weekend with an oozing wound on his foot, and all the complications of having been abruptly but effectively ‘outed’ to his parents. I went home that weekend with an open wound on my heart, for that was the first time that I witnessed for myself the cruelty and prejudice of the world. I went home questioning again my decision to serve a church that would tolerate a kid like that filling the pew or the offering plate, but certainly not a pulpit or a marriage license. I went home dry and tired and parched.

Interestingly, when I finished seminary three years later and prepared to head out into ministry, that same colleague and the children that joined her up front for the children’s moment gave me a gift.

She explained to the kids that was going to be a minister, and asked them to voice some prayers for me. And with each prayer, the kids dumped a scooper of water into this jar. 19 years later, I still have it, a reminder that others pray for me when I can't, that I'm loved and cared for, that God is already at work wherever I'm sent, that I can live a call to be that oasis of care and compassion for the next one down the line.

Ultimately, our work at being an oasis where others can experience God is the work of hospitality. If you think about it, an oasis doesn't exist simple for the few that live there. In ancient times, those who lived at an oasis lived a life of serving travelers. The oasis existed primarily for those passing thru. And that is true of the church. If we exist for ourselves, we will dry up. Indeed, that has often been the criticism of the church – that we don't welcome the misfits and the forgotten, that we roll our eyes at noisy kids, and gripe about teenagers' loud music, and offer unsolicited advice to young parents, and refuse to let a younger generation lead, especially if it takes us in a different direction, and carefully avoid those who smell bad or look ragged, or aren't like us. It's not entirely unfair, as criticism go, although it's hard to hear. Especially when we really don't want to be like that. We want to be an oasis – a place where people come for refreshment and nourishment, and then go on, go out again to the world to continue the journey. We want people to feel welcome here, and we work really hard to be a place of welcome, of outreach, of compassion and care for our community.

We talk about stewardship around this time every year to do much more than meet a budget. Stewardship is about remembering who God is and what God has done and is doing in our own lives. We do it so that those passing thru may find what they need in their driest moments, and the most parched stretches of their journey. One of the things that most excited me about coming to Saginaw was that for the first time in my ministry, I was actually going to be able to tithe, or at least come close. I've given, of course, but never what I wanted to be giving. You all pay me \$62K a year, and every month, Dina dutifully deposits my paycheck one day, and then deducts \$500 a month the next. I don't do that because I'm the pastor. That's a crappy reason to give. I do it because I'm so grateful. I'm so grateful to be doing this work, and with all of you. I'm so grateful for all the stuff I've been given, and all the opportunities I've been given. Brad and I give because in spite of the church's imperfections, the church has been that oasis when we needed it most, because others have prayed for us when we just couldn't, and because so many are praying along with us and standing along with us devoted to a ministry of welcome and hospitality no matter who or what. We give for those passing thru, those whose names we'll never know. We give because neither of us like the person we'd become if we kept it all to ourselves. Not that it's easy. We've got a kid heading to college next fall, and we're pretty anxious about that. But we'll be upping our pledge in 2019 to help cover this new project because we refuse to live our life in fear. We find meaning in trusting God to work. We give because we believe that God is in this church's work, it's mission, it's ministry, it's future, it's people, it's soul.

Long ago, King David hid out in that desert. It was the only place his enemies wouldn't chase him. He knew what it was to walk through the heat, to be thirsty enough to start hallucinating, to shiver in the dark for fear that a fire would be visible at night across a barren land. And yet, that horror brings out the best in him. In the Psalm we read today, David remembers what it was like to walk into the tabernacle and worship God. It wasn't a building, it was tent, but it was no less glorious, with those sweeping tapestries of gold and purple, soaring upwards some 200 feet to the frame of tabernacle, gently undulating in the breezes. You've never seen anything like it in the world because people don't build tents like that anymore. The rich incense, the fountains in the courtyards and the altar laden with a feast unlike any other, the sung prayers of the priests, echoing through vaulted canopies. He remembers, and the memory is enough to sustain him.

But even more, he remembers the songs he heard there – the stories of God who loves his people relentlessly, unfailingly, even when they turn away. David praises God for Hesed – for steadfast love. Because your Hesed, your steadfast love, is better than life, I will sing praise. My soul is satisfied as

with a rich feast. I have what I need because I have God, or rather, because God has me. He remembers his faith, and it is his oasis.

So let me close with a story about a church in a small town in middle America—probably not all that different from our church, really. It was a nice community. People knew their neighbors, children were safe playing in their yards, a lot of businesses were family owned and operated, and they supported one another. The chief officer at the Bank was a prominent, active member of this church. His children went through Sunday school and youth group. His wife was in the UMW. They each served on their share of committees. And they tithed faithfully—a model family. A respected family. One day, a simple tax audit at the bank, triggered a few questions, and one thing led to another, and an investigation ensued, and it was discovered that for 20 years, this senior officer had been embezzling funds from his clients—friends, neighbors, family, church-members, the church accounts themselves. And it split that town wide open. It split that church wide open. The sense of shock, breach of trust, abandonment, and deception that every person in town harbored threatened to close off all ties. Yet, that was in constant conflict with the fact that this man's wife and children suffered so many losses in that short amount of time that their family was in crisis. Moreover, the Bank officer was sentenced to five years in prison, and without his income, the family's ability to support themselves was drastically threatened.

And in the middle of all this, was the pastor of that church—trying desperately to figure out a) how to minister to feelings of pain and rage and betrayal in the community, b) how to minister to this family that had gone from respected to dejected because of the actions of one of its members, c) how to minister to a sinful man sitting in prison coming to grips with the reality and the overwhelming guilt of his crimes, and d) how to minister to the undercurrent of tension cause by all those very opposite needs.

It didn't happen right away, but it did happen. With a little bit of time, and a few key people who could see the Light of Christ in the confusion, that church began to mobilize. A fund was begun to help those whose life savings had taken a hit. Another drive sought to offer support to the bank officer's family—clothing, food, a loaner car, mentoring for the children, who after all, ought not pay for the sins of the parent. And little by little, as time went by, the church grew in faith. Grew enough so that when that man's five-year sentence was up, most of the church got in their cars and drove to the State Penitentiary. And there, in the parking lot at the prison, the body of Christ gathered in a circle, committed to being an oasis for a man and a family in the desert of lost ways, aware for a fleeting moment that every last one of them was guilty somehow and every last one of them was precious and loved. As the pastor broke the bread and passed the cup—the flesh and blood of Christ given for all of us—it was brought home that in this fellowship is healing, is life, is hope, is Oasis [*adapted here, original source of this story unknown.*] Thanks be to God. Amen.