



BIBLE STUDIES FOR GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2018

SESSION 4: Walking the Desert Highway (Isaiah 35:1-10)

[Biblical quotations are all from the NRSV]

Today's session might be a little more challenging as we're moving away from prose narrative to consider the poetry of prophecy. To a certain extent, the narrative context for our passage is something that the reader has to provide. This is because prophecies are often worded in a tantalizingly non-specific way. We might wish we had more precise information about exactly which situation the prophet was addressing, but if we tie the prophecy too rigidly to one specific event in history then we risk becoming less ready to see and feel its relevance in later situations. Specific historical details are often withheld by the prophets so we can re-apply their words to new situations as they occur.

The precise starting point for our journey today is never named – which is clever, because it means that wherever we happen to be as readers, that can be the starting point for us.

However, as we move through the text we'll find there are clues about a possible starting point and before we get to the end of our passage we are going to see that the intended destination of the journey is the city of Zion. Exactly what that might mean for us I'll discuss a bit later on.

As this is quite a long text we're going to look at it in three separate chunks. There's a lot in these texts that we could talk about, but we're going to focus just on aspects of the text that tell us something about a journey that God's people are going to make.

1) A TEXT OF PROPHETIC POETRY

What can we learn about the journey from our first bit of text?

You'll notice that I've missed out a bit in the middle.

That's because I've grouped verses together that address the same sort of topic.

ISAIAH 35:1-2, 6b-7

The wilderness and the dry land (Arabah) shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus ² 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.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert;
7 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.

These verses all talk about the terrain through which the journey will take place, and what's interesting is that the landscape seems to be affected by the fact of its being the way through which God's people are going to travel. It's as if the land and the people are inextricably linked – that what is going to happen to the people is going to happen to the land also.

Our text begins with a dry desert that is going to be transformed into a glorious garden with trees, flowers and an abundance of fresh water. If we take a look at a map of the region, we can see how dominant a feature the desert land is.



As we can see, the city of Jerusalem is located at the edge of the Judean wilderness and is surrounded by big deserts to the south and east. This meant that the image of a desert was a very familiar one – more familiar to the average Judean than to most of us today.

If you happened to be living in exile in Babylon while you were reading this, you'd know that the shortest route to Zion from where you are would be straight across the Arabian desert. ('Big Desert' on the map!)

But besides being dry and desolate this desert is filled with mountains, not to mention hostile Edomites, Moabites and Ammonites. Through



the desert would definitely not be the right way to go. You'd be far more likely to survive the journey if you followed in the footsteps of the family of Terah, going north along the banks of the Euphrates. In essence our passage is saying, 'Don't play it safe! Go right through the place where the desert used to be, because it isn't a desert any more. God has made it safe for you – and if you'll take the risk and go, the landscape through which you travel will rejoice with you.'

In a way, this might *seem* quite similar to the Israelite slaves being told to walk through the sea, except that they were in a situation where their options were severely limited. It was go through the sea or go back to slavery. By contrast, there *were* safe highways to Zion. There was simply no need to try to go through the Big Desert. Would anyone in their right minds have taken this suggestion literally?

i) What kind of a desert is this?

It can often be difficult, in poetic passages like this, to work out whether we're meant to understand the images at their face value or whether we're meant to understand them in a more metaphoric or symbolic sense.

There is something intriguing about the biblical notion that the physical environment reflects something of the spirit of the people who spend time there, though in practice I think it more reflects the affluence of the people who own and control the land. However, I like the idea that people of good spirit really can have a positive impact on how their physical surroundings are perceived and nurtured. Having said that, I'm more inclined to understand the imagery of this passage as poetic metaphor. I think it is primarily the Judeans in exile, not the Arabian Desert itself, whose transformation is being described.

If we imagine this prophecy being addressed originally to the exiles in Babylon, then the reference to 'desert' becomes a reference to the miles and miles of hostile terrain that stands between where you are now and where you were called to be. That apparently uncrossable gap is being re-imagined as something life-giving and beautiful.

People sometimes think of the desert as representing spiritual dryness or deadness, but the Bible regards the desert as a spiritual place. The desert is where we lean less on material convenience and so are enabled

to draw closer to God. It's where we learn to let go of stuff we thought was essential, in order to recognize what truly *is* essential in our walk with God. But the letting-go is hard, and that creates the distance between where we are spiritually and where we'd like to be.

ii) The literary context

To appreciate the full impact of Isaiah 35 we should really read chapter 34 first because the imagery of land-restoration in our text is a point by point, complete reversal of the imagery in the previous chapter where the condemnation and destruction of the land of Edom are described.



'Edom' is a bit like a code word. It stands for the ultimate bad place. The Edomites were regarded as betrayers of Israel because they had colluded with Babylon over the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 (Obadiah 11-14, Ezekiel 35:1-15). The mighty Empire of Egypt was dangerous because it was alien to God's kingdom – and yet it had its attractions. Egypt was like a seductress. At times it offered a place of sanctuary in times of war or famine. By contrast, 'Edom' was just plain bad. To make matters worse, it was right next-door – a little too close for comfort.

Remember, for the purposes of our Bible Study we're interpreting the concept of 'place' as a symbolic representation of our relationship with God.

We can understand 'Edom' as representing worldly forces that are actively hostile to the kingdom and people of God. 'Edom' wants us to fall, wants us to fail, and won't mind playing a role in our downfall.

Although we haven't read the previous chapter as part of our study today, the shadow it casts needs to be kept in mind as we look at the very positive imagery of chapter 35.

If we'd had the time to read through the whole of chapter 34 we'd have read about God's condemnation of Edom expressed in terms of environmental degeneration. In Edom everything is going to be rotting and withering away.



Here in chapter 35, the blossoming flowers in the desert (verses 1-2) contrast with the thorns and thistles that will choke the land of Edom (34:13);

the life-giving streams flowing through the desert (35:6-7) contrast with the polluted water sources in Edom (34:9);

the safety of traveling through the transformed desert (35:7-10) is contrasted with the danger posed by the wild creatures and demons lurking in Edom (34:14).

This series of contrasting images gives us a hint that our passage is talking about the fate of two diametrically opposed groups of people: those who choose to journey into a restored relationship with God, and those who are hostile to God.

Let's look at what comes next.

2) A TEXT OF PERSUASION?

35:3-6a

³ Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees.

⁴ 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."

⁵ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

⁶ then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

In the verses we looked at earlier, we were given a picture of a dry desert being brought back to life so it would sing and rejoice. Here in these verses the people themselves are being healed with the same result – they will sing for joy. So what we're seeing is a close parallel between images depicting the restoration of the environment and those depicting the restoration of God's people as they journey.

i) What could motivate people to undertake such a journey?

This is what the prophet is trying to do! The purpose of prophecy is to persuade people to change what they're thinking, feeling of doing and to inspire them to come into a closer alignment with what God is 'thinking', 'feeling' and doing.



The prophet is trying to encourage people with hope, to motivate them to take the risk (or maybe just make the effort) of setting out on this journey. It's interesting that he doesn't try to persuade them by saying much about the destination itself. The emphasis is very much on the journey.

ii) Acknowledging a couple of things we might not like

The theology that excluded certain people from having access to the temple has here been circumvented – sadly, not through full acceptance of physical differences, but through their removal – so, for example, blind people can see; the deaf can hear. Still, the underlying vision is that all people can be granted the privilege of access to God in worship.

We might not like the reference here to vengeance and 'terrible recompense', but for ancient readers real healing involved the restoration of the correct balance of things. This is comparable to the great reversal we find in the gospels, where the weak become strong, the poor become rich and the last will be first, etc. It is as if a great cosmic equation were being worked out to produce the right answer. Naturally, for our Hebrew author it meant that those who had done Israel harm would suffer the consequences of their misdeeds. So, for example, in Edom everything would die and wither while the fortunes of Israel were being restored. The aggressive tone arises from centuries of being dominated by surrounding powerful empires.

Fundamentally, this whole poem in Isaiah 35 speaks about the removal of fear and shame, and any other difficulties that prevent us from journeying on the way that God has set before us. All the impediments referred to in these verses can be understood as metaphors for things that weaken our faith, that distance us from God, that provide us with excuses for staying exactly where we are. Cast those things aside, says Isaiah, because God has made it possible for you to do so.

iii) A highway through the desert

The next verses talk about a highway through the desert.

35:8-10

⁸ 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.

⁹ 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.



¹⁰ 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.

Here, at last, we find out exactly who is being called to make this journey: the redeemed, the ransomed of 'the LORD'. Elsewhere in Isaiah, the 'redeemed' are those in exile in Babylon who are being called to return to Zion. (E.g. Isa. 48:20).

Bearing in mind other texts in Isaiah that call on people to leave the lands where they have been scattered in order to make their way to Zion, it seems reasonable to assume that we should understand this text at one level as referring to a physical journey – but a physical journey that had a theological significance: that of realizing that God is offering his people a new beginning.

The problem is that people can get too settled wherever they happen to be

- Terah settled down in Haran rather than completing his journey.
- The Israelites settled in Egypt and became slaves rather than returning home.
- Similarly, the scattered people of Israel and Judah living in exile were getting settled in the places where they were, where they risked becoming assimilated with the surrounding cultures and their foreign religious practices.

iv) What kind of a highway is this?

The image of a highway through the desert is a recurring metaphor for the redemption and restoration of God's people after they have suffered some sort of fracture in their relationship with God.

It refers us back to the story of the Exodus when a highway was created through the sea. It also refers us back to the desert wanderings, when food and water were provided as and when they were needed. The difference here is that there'll be no need for forty years of wandering about. There'll be no anxiety either about where food and water can be found. This time, all the people need to do is to get on the highway and walk.

It is called a Holy Way because it's the road that leads to the place where the highest expression of worship known to our Hebrew author took place: Zion. The whole book of Isaiah is orientated towards Jerusalem.



There can be little doubt that for the Isaianic school of prophecy, Jerusalem was an important place but for us we can understand this as referring to the circumstances under which we can experience the presence of God as a life-changing reality.

3) DRAWING ALL THESE THREADS TOGETHER

The passage suggests more than one type of journey.

We can picture the return of Jewish exiles from captivity Babylon and from any other place where they have been scattered. The obstacles that once stood in their way will be removed, as will the shame of exile;

We can also picture a religious procession of pilgrims making their way from wherever they have come to call 'home' to worship at the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

Finally, we can picture ourselves, walking on this highway. For us, 'Zion' is wherever the light of God's presence is experienced as shining brightest; it's a high point at the very core of our faith and our shared identity, where we are filled with awe and joy, and we are inspired to glorify God together in worship.

PAUSE FOR REFLECTION

What do the Big Desert and life-giving waters represent for you in your context? (And what about Exile, Edom and Zion?)

What kind of thing serves to inspire and motivate people in your context?

4) IDENTIFYING SOME THEMES

RESTORATION.

The image of a desert flowing with water and in full bloom is a visual expression of what God is doing to restore and forgive his people. We might like to think specifically about where revival is needed in the church and in our local communities.



ACCESS TO GOD.

God has created a way to bridge the distance between where we are and where God wants us to be. Whatever the 'big gap' might be for us that stands in the way of our being the people we are called to be, God is able to provide a highway that will enable us to get through it – and it won't be as hard as we fear! Furthermore, no one is excluded.

The image of a highway implies movement, travel; it isn't designed for sitting down on.

WORSHIP.

The destination of those who would journey along the desert highway is an experience of God's presence. God's people gathering together to worship and to glorify God is the high point of the journey, but the celebration begins on the journey itself.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT.

The image of a desert restored to life by God encourages us, as a people of God, to seek ways of protecting and preserving, perhaps even restoring natural environments, especially those that have been damaged by human activity – often by people who don't live where they've caused the damage.

At the level of human society, the sense I get from this passage is that in communities where the church is vibrant in response to the call of God, the entire social landscape will feel the benefits of that positive spiritual presence in the midst.

INSPIRATION.

The imagery and poetry of this prophecy were designed to inspire, to reassure and to motivate people to believe that renewal was not only possible but was being offered to them by God *at that very moment*. In many of our churches today people are waiting to hear good news like this. Perhaps the URC's vision of 'Walking the Way' can be like the call of Isaiah who pointed God's people towards a divinely created highway through the wilderness. If so, it has a job of persuading to do – that of providing the inspiration to motivate us all to step up and step out in faith and confident expectation. Can we all help to do the job of inspiring others?



TO SUM UP

God can create new life where there appears to be no life.

God can bridge the gap between who we are and who we're called to be.

God wants all people to have access to God.

Our journey prepares us to give glory to God in the highpoint of worship.

We are called to care for the natural world and the human environment.

People in our churches are looking for inspiration