

**Sermon Preached
by Doug King
Advent III
Isaiah 35:1-10
December 12, 2004**

Television advertisements have permanently ruined this text from Isaiah for us. Images of desert and wilderness are pictured as pleasant background vistas as we roll along in precise climate controlled air, on leather S.U.V. seats with the DVD player showing cartoons to the kids in the back seat. When our modern ears hear “wilderness” or “desert” a lovely Ansel Adams print comes to mind. In the ears of the often nomadic ancient Israelites these words are a foreboding challenge to their very survival. These were places that clearly demonstrated how vulnerable and weak and limited humanity is in this world of ours. The desert and the wilderness were places where you could run out of food and water; you could be overcome by the heat in the day and frozen by the dropping temperatures at night; you could be attacked by wild animals.

Our technology has afforded us a protection that serves to mask our very mortality. We are able to protect ourselves to such a degree that frankly we are shocked when our vulnerability is demonstrated to us. When we receive the news that a cancerous tumor is inoperable or blood condition is untreatable we feel as if we have been cheated somehow. The many protections we possess serve to create an illusion for us that we may indeed just be invulnerable.

But in the deepest parts of ourselves we know this is not true. We know all too well of the places we are broken and wounded in this life physically, emotionally, and spiritually. We remember all too clearly the dark times. We are all too aware of the weaknesses in ourselves that burden us down. We may not quite get the fear of the outdoor wilderness but we know about the metaphor of wilderness for those dark places and times in our lives.

We also know the old advent promises. We hear them every year. Jesus is coming and he will make everything right with the world and everything right with all of

us. Most of the time we translate these promises of powerful transformation into some watered down warm and fuzzy feeling, some thought of the babe lying in the manger. We do not often allow for the possibility that God in Christ will actually radically change our lives. We refuse to consider a reality in which the desert places within us bloom abundantly with flowers and the wilderness parts of our lives are tamed and made welcoming and safe.

Every Sunday we proclaim the mighty power of God but during the rest of the week we do not put much stock in that mighty power being at work in our individual lives. I know I have a hard time believing it. There is a quote from Frederick Buechner that I have on my desk. Every day I read it and every day I struggle to believe it. Buechner writes this about humanity's expectations of God, "It suddenly dawned on them that the wildest dreams they'd ever had hadn't been half wild enough." We limit the power of God in our lives. We are afraid to believe that God can indeed be remarkably present with us. We fear the disappointment we will feel, if we turn wholeheartedly to God and do not receive the result we wish. We are like children crafting a Christmas wish list in a family of limited means. We do not want to feel bad when we do not get all that we want so we keep our requests to a reasonable minimum.

We are afraid to be the existential trapeze artists at the circus high above, leaping into the nothingness, trusting that we will be caught. We keep our feet on the ground. We pray that this Christ child might take the edge off of the loneliness we carry in our hearts rather than praying that our lives be enriched by true community. We pray that we might fight a little less often with our spouse rather than praying that the love that brought us together be rekindled. We pray that the needy not go hungry this Christmas rather than praying for an economic revival of this city in which everyone participates in a robust economy. We make these hedge bet prayers that things might get a little bit better because there is less risk to it all. We pray that we might be changed in some small way rather than prying that we might be transformed. Experience has taught us that everything we pray to God for does not occur in some magnificent presto chango fashion so over time we have learned to lessen our expectations.

Well in this advent season let us throw that conventional wisdom out the window. Let us take a risk and pray to our God with prayers of exuberance and extravagance and abandon. Let us demonstrate our belief in the power of God by calling on that power in our lives. Now I don't want you coming back next Sunday and complaining to me that you prayed for ten wonderful things and none of them happened. From our limited mortal perspective we have no idea of the why, when, where, and how of God's specific response to prayer.

But if all we do is offer our God tepid and safe prayers that do not allow for us to be either disappointed or amazed we might as well not pray at all. In these days as we wait for our God to literally take human form and walk among us, let us seek out a tangible relationship with the divine. We can challenge and debate, seek to cajole and convince this God of ours. We can sweet talk and shout, and seek to persuade this God of ours. We can dream dreams beyond anything we have dreamed before, of a life and world of abundant joy and peace, and ask this God of ours why not and why not now?

We have been given amazing promises of transformation from a God that loves us beyond all boundaries. Instead of trusting only in ourselves and our technology to change the world, don't you think it is time we start believing in these promises and start trying to have them fulfilled? I can promise you that if we pray like that; if we pray with exuberance, extravagance, and abandon, letting go of the safety of our self imposed limitations and leaping toward our God; regardless of the scorecard of our prayers fulfilled will be transformed in a remarkable way. We will indeed see "the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God." Amen.