

Third Wednesday in Lent

Seasons of the Heart: “The Joys of Spring”; Isaiah 35:1-9

This sermon was preached by Pastor Jim Page at Trinity Lutheran Church

It's great to see all of you gathered to worship on this Wednesday afternoon/evening. Our mid-week Lent sermon series “The Seasons of the Heart” uses characteristics of the four seasons and relates them to our spiritual lives.

Last week, Pastor Brahm focused on winter and that like winter, our lives can, at times, feel cold, dark, challenging and barren. God can seem to be absent. Through it all, God is present, working in our lives for our growth while we wait for winter to pass and brighter days to follow.

Spring is our topic today and it's a fitting topic since it is spring break for many in Eau Claire. A time where people venture off to warmer climates for rest and relaxation in the sun. You obviously did not book a trip to Mexico or venture out on a Caribbean cruise so here you are, joining many who along with you, are yearning, anticipating, waiting, hoping, dreaming...of spring. You may be praying at home for the season of winter to raise the white flag of surrender, for cabin fever to be a distant memory, for your furnace to take a much needed break and for you parents-to be gone the days of tirelessly bundling up the kids to go outside.

A joyful change, a joyful transformation from the darkness of winter to the light of spring. Isaiah, the Old Testament prophet, wrote about such a transformation. He uses the word desert and desert here can mean a place that is barren, where life is floundering, where the mood is despair and lacking of joy. The desert can represent many things in our lives...a tortuous road of poor health, a twisting road of emotional upheaval, a season of conflict in your home or workplace. Such events leave our heart bitter soil or frozen ground, too hard or too parched to nourish any seed of life.

God doesn't want people to live amid such dire circumstances...God wants renewal for us. One day, that bitter soil and frozen ground of our heart breaks, we are renewed within by the growth of joy and a new outlook on life. The only way to explain it is that God did it. God acted and God intervened. Like a flower seed breaking through the soil to the surface for the first time, you can't explain it but you know God was behind it.

Isaiah writes of God bringing transformation into our lives, from desert to abundance: “The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.” “Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way;” “Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.” Isaiah uses rich imagery in writing about a spiritual longing, a new beginning to come to fruition. He does this with a foundational sentiment: hope.

Hope is a simple but powerful word that speaks to a greater reality beyond the present. Hope inspired President Kennedy's 1961 speech to Congress when he stated an audacious goal: "I believe that this nation

should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the earth.” On July 20, 1969, the world watched as Neil Armstrong stepped on to the lunar surface saying that timeless phrase: One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.

In our spiritual lives, hope is a longing for a better reality and a happier life through God’s presence. Hope trusts when God acts, creation responds. When God acts to bring about a season of spring in our spiritual lives, it entails emotional, physical and moral renewal.

Emotional renewal is overcoming the critics or those who have hurt you. Isaiah was writing to the people of Israel while they lived under the threat of the Assyrian Empire, a brutal and bloodthirsty regime. They had vast military campaigns that left the earth scorched and rubble and death in their wake. Isaiah wrote that their hands were feeble and knees were weak. For this weakened, insecure people...there was this feeling, “Man, I wish they’d get what they have coming.” That sentiment is vindication: the feeling that the wrong done to us-insults, criticisms and gossip is set right, fully and publicly.

When vindication happens, that something inside us that crawled into a hole and curled up to die is suddenly given a new start and a fresh resolve. Each spring reminds us that death doesn’t have the last word. Each spring, words of cheer reflect this emotional renewal to be strong, stand tall and live confidently. Isaiah writes, “Say to those with fearful hearts, ‘Be strong’.”

This was modeled 250,000 civil rights supporters on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963. Martin Luther King, Jr. stood behind the podium and spoke into the microphone words that were convicting, timeless and grounded in hope as he said, “I have a dream.” Imagine the emotions of those who heard statements such as “I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

Emotional renewal gives birth to physical renewal. There’s a gospel story that tells that John the Baptist was locked in prison and a few of his disciples came and asked Jesus, “Are you the Messiah or should we wait for another.” Jesus’ answer was from these words tonight from Isaiah, “Tell John that the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.” Jesus displayed his greatest handiwork in spring...bringing living water to thirsty souls, strength to faltering hearts and physical wellness to the sick and the lame. Quite simply, with the season of spring, God’s presence will be reflected in a person’s physical demeanor. A brightness in their eyes, a bounce in their step, a joy in their voice.

This spring season of the heart was present in every Mission Jamaica trip that I participated in. Living with next to nothing did not hinder their resolve or joy in God. There was a subtle beauty in their defiance of their circumstances and their standing in blessings of God and hope that is theirs. From those on our team, I’d hear people say, “Everyone here is so happy.” “I gave them a soccer ball and it was like I gave them the world.”

Spring is a time of moral renewal. Look around and we can see people who compromise on their Christian beliefs, allowed a destructive attitude to creep in or an unhealthy habit to take hold. Our heart can be darkened by the dirt of pessimism, criticism, and frustration. Then, there are moments where God is present and active where we see the light of spring where optimism, love and joy abound.

In this time of basketball tournaments, this video clip gives us a glimpse of moral renewal and the feeling of spring on our hearts. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=naRCf18oCos>

God is bringing about spring in all of our lives where new possibilities and scenes of joy are ours through emotional, physical and moral renewal. Our hearts become vessels of fruitful growth, our spirits are uplifted and our outlook hopeful. Thanks be to God for the season of spring in our lives. Amen.