

Rejoice, and Creation rejoices with you (not)

Based on Isaiah 35:1-10

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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by Rev. Dave Le Grand

First of all, a question: On this "Joy" Sunday, we know that there are many reasons to be thankful. But with Christmas is just around the corner, *How many of you feeling anxious or even sad?*

Looking up at the screen, what you see is what is called a "super bloom". I had never heard of a super bloom until this week, while gathering images that connected to today's remarkable Isaiah passage, particularly Isaiah's first verse:

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly...

Among the images I found was this gorgeous landscape of wildflowers you see before you. So bright in colour that a super bloom can be seen from space. It's interesting to know that many factors must come together in order to make it just possible for a super bloom. There must be prolonged dormancy – that is, many wildflower seeds must remain asleep through several seasons, then, they mysteriously wake up at roughly the same time after the long hibernation. The bloom is also helped by a long rainy season, followed by unusually cold winter to lock the moisture in.

BY **DANIEL AVERY** ON 4/4/19 AT 3:54 PM EDT

As the super bloom continues, rangers have had to unsnarl traffic jams, keep visitors from trampling wildflowers and even wave away helicopters



In short: a super bloom needs harsh, undesirable conditions over years to pave the way for the stunning explosion of colour.¹

This wonder only comes after struggle. This 2019 California super bloom served as a metaphor used by one Bible scholar describing the context as Isaiah speaks to the people about Yahweh's vision. Yahweh being one Hebrew word for God in the Bible.

Yahweh's people have lived in exile and suffering for a long time. Isaiah holds before these deprived people a remarkable vision. But Yahweh's children have not been following Yahweh's ways. Have you heard of this ever happening before in the Bible, God getting frustrated with God's children not behaving? We have heard it many times.

According to Isaiah's vision, God, as always, never gives up. Yahweh is establishing a highway, more literally a holy way, a path to redemption for the wayward people to find restoration. The signs of restoration are astounding - from the blind gaining sight to deserts blooming with flowers.

Take a look at this one headline I found related to this past summer's super bloom: From a distance, the bloom is a celebration of colour, but look closer and you will find traffic jams in the desert caused by tourists wanting to trod out into the wildflower fields to get the perfect camera shot – trampling flowers along the way.

We humans are such quirky creatures. Created with such a capacity to love and care: ***Look at the picture of human generosity here in the stable!*** (for those who were not there, it was White Gift Sunday and there were many gifts brought to our Advent stable and manger, gifts that will go to Better Beginnings Better Futures of Sudbury.)

But, can we not also be so very self-centred at times?

Our Biblical stories, time and again invite us to widen our focus, to lift our vision from our myopic perspective on our lives to see a larger world in all its beauty, and its heart-breaking brokenness. Said another way: *we are invited by the Bible time and again to see the world from God's big-picture perspective.* Sure, we can ask the children and adults around us to put down their cell phones, to stop texting. But **we** all need a regular reminder to look up, look for the star that guide us towards something remarkable that is in store for each and every one of us.

Isn't it refreshing to be reminded that there is much more going on in our world than the sensationalized politics we are barraged with? God is up to something – and something BIG. We just need to pay attention.

There is no better vision of God's radical ways than the story of God's choosing of young Mary. I came across an article last week, the thrust of it is not new to me, and maybe you've heard it before. Author Nancy Rockwell wants Christians to stop perpetuating what she calls lies, I'll call them myths, about Mary. One myth is that Mary was a submissive girl. Almost every image I see of young Mary is of a passive person, serving metaphorically as an empty container that God will fill up with meaning.² A very different truth of faith, I suggest, comes into sharp focus this Sunday, as God breaks the

¹ Casey Thornburgh Sigmon. Commentary on Isaiah 35: 1-10 workingpreacher.org December 15, 2019.

² "No more lying about Mary" by Nancy Rockwell. Patheos.com December 3, 2015.

news to Mary that she is going to mother the son of God. Mary's response, and her poetic words are startling, revolutionary! She was chosen, I suggest, not because of her passivity but because of her courage and strength and vision.

Mary's Magnificat is described by some scholars as nothing less than a political manifesto – listen to these words:

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty. ³

These are not at all the words of a passive or vacuous girl.

She is rejoicing, and within the course of a week-and-a-half with the star above a Bethlehem stable, Mary will be surrounded by pilgrims who rejoice with her.

Mary rejoices now, but her joy is not shared by everyone. Mary's Magnificat proclamation foretells of God overturning systems of power. Now in my experience, systems never change without conflict; those whose voices were previously stifled by the system feel the joy. But, those who stand to lose power in the system change will not likely feel joy.

Here at Christmas, we celebrate the miracle of birth. But in a short few months as we journey through Bible stories from Christmas to Lent, we move into the heart-wrenching moments where Mary stares up at her baby, dying on a cross. If we are honest, we will confess that this season can be fraught with anxiety and sadness, along with the joy.

Maybe you can relate to this experience of mine. I will read a story in a magazine or a cartoon on Facebook that makes me laugh. I share it on Facebook, and sometimes I might not get ONE "Like" (cue the congregation saying "aww"). Or, I share a compelling story with my dear partner-in-life, and perhaps the reaction I get is a bland "hmmm". Sometimes the world doesn't share my sentiment – joy or lament.

Sometimes, we just have to bask in the emotion we feel at the moment, regardless of whether or not the world shares that experience. Conversely, the culture is gleefully singing Christmas carols, but maybe our hearts ache because of a loss that we feel in this season. It is painful to feel out-of-step, discordant, with people around us. That hard work of paying attention to our hearts, whether we are lamenting or rejoicing, is Advent, soul work, my friends.

But, feeling out of step with the world around us as we may, the Bible stories time and again remind us that we need to trust that God is up to something remarkable for each of us. We are called to live faithful, intentional, generous lives, and to trust God to make a difference for and through us.

Dare to believe that we ARE part of a body, as Paul in the Bible likened our community connection to a *Body of Christ*, Interconnected, Interdependent. Like those wildflower seeds lying dormant, living through harsh conditions at times. When the moment is right, we **bloom**, and justice WILL prevail, and the hungry WILL BE filled, and Creation WILL BE restored.

The desert WILL bloom. Amen.

³ Luke 1 verses 52 & 53