

"O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing"

A sermon preached by Theodore S. Atkinson, pastor of the Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the third Sunday of Advent, December 14, 1986. Scripture lessons: Isaiah 35:1-10; Psalm 146:5-10; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11.

In the Revised Standard Version of our Old Testament lesson we read in Isaiah 35:7, that "the burning sand shall become a pool". The older Revised Version reads, "The glowing sand shall become a pool." But I think the translation that makes the most sense is found in the margin of the Revised Version where you find, "And the mirage shall become a pool"

I. Think of the desert! Maybe you've seen the National Geographic Specials or been through the great desert in our Southwest or just looked at pictures of deserts in books. You have something of the idea of what the desert is like. The desert can be *manatonaus*. Look in every direction and all you see is sand. No highways. The tracks of a traveller are quickly covered by the shifting sand. For the unexperienced desert traveller, without a guide, you easily lose all sense of direction and get lost. And it's suffocatingly *dry*. There's very little water to drink, very little water for green things to grow. Only the hardiest plants and animals can survive the the blazing sun and the burning sand. And in the desert are *wild creatures*; Isaiah spoke of jackels, lions, and ravenous beasts. The King James Version even speaks of the desert as the "habitation of dragons". It's a terrible place, a frightening place. But one of the most unique and cruel characteristics of the desert is the *mirage*. You're crawling through the desert on your hands and knees. You're tired and thirsty. You feel like you can't go further. You're ready to give up. But you look in the distance and you see what appears to be a pool of water, an oasis. Your spirits lift. You gather your remaining strength. You push on in hope. You get up and walk and even manage to run but the oasis seems to

fade away. And then you realize it's only a cruel mirage.

II. One of the most common experiences of life is the desert experience. John Bunyan wrote of the *wilderness of this world*. We lose our sense of direction and don't know which way to go. We feel lost. Everything in life seems monotonous, like the desert. Our life is dry. We stop growing intellectually. We lose interest in life. Spiritually, we wither and die. The wild ravenous beasts within us, our untamed emotions and compulsions, frighten us. We look for something to give us security, peace, satisfaction, security, status. And then, maybe, we see an oasis in the distance.

Sometimes our hoped for oasis is *our family*. Here is a family living to itself and for itself, with never a thought about others or God and the ~~soul and eternity. It seems idyllically happy. They've found happiness.~~ They've found satisfaction in themselves, in their little family. But I suddenly see the mother of that family being stricken by illness. I see her undergoing an operation. I hear of her sudden death. And everything on which their happiness had been built has gone- it was a mirage.

Sometimes our hoped for oasis is *possessions*. We think if we just had more money or possessions we'd really be happy or we'd be able to buy happiness and pleasure. Then we discover that money and possessions don't provide protection from aging, from illness, from accident. We buy that longed for treasure only to experience a let down. Our money and possessions turn to dust.

Sometimes you see that oasis in loftier places, *in learning, intellectual pursuits*- art, music, philosophy, debating and discussing politics. We give ourselves unreservedly to these intellectual and aesthetic pursuits only to find that the emotional side of us has become withered

and dried and stunted; we fear intimacy and feel desperately lonely.

Sometimes we look and see the oasis of *escape*. If we could only escape our marriage, escape family responsibilities, get away from home. Then we could begin life all over. We could fulfil those fantasies. But so often those fantasies turn into nightmares and we end up cut off from all we once loved, valued and held dear.

Sometimes the oasis is *religion*. *Think of Israel in the days of Isaiah*. God promised to make them a great nation but Babylon destroyed them, their beautiful temple turned to rubble, their leading citizens carried away into exile. The promise turned to dust. *Or think of the disciples of Jesus*. They'd seen Jesus open blind eyes and ears. He turned water to wine, stilled the storm, healed the sick, even raised the ~~dead. Surely he was the one they'd been waiting for, the messiah.~~ But the crowds began to dwindle. Friends betrayed and denied him. And then came one dark Friday when Jesus was nailed to a cross. The hopes and dreams of all the years died that day. He promised to give streams of living water, but now he lay buried in the dust. The oasis had become a mirage.

III. It can be a terrible hour when we discover our oasis is nothing more than a mirage. One of my heroes was Robert F. Scott. His goal, his oasis, his dream was to be the first person to reach the South Pole. But when he got there he found Amundsen had beaten him. His oasis had become a mirage. Depressed and disappointed he finally died in the wintry wilderness. And in his diary he had written, "Good-bye to our day-dreams!" Have you ever felt that? "Good bye to all my dreams." Maybe you remember that old Everly Brothers classic,

Bye, bye love;
Bye, bye happiness;

Hello, emptiness,
And I think that I'm a going to die.

Few people go through life without having some dreams turn to dust.

And sometimes when we Christians are going through the desert the terrible doubt assualts us that our faith in Christ is only a mirage. "Maybe I'm following a mirage; this faith in Christ; this hope of heaven; this discipleship and self-denial." Jesus said, "Whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely". But maybe it's just a mirage and there's no reality to it; no God who loves me, no Christ who died for me, no Holy Spirit that works within me; maybe there's no right and wrong, no forgiveness, no heaven, no communion of the saints. Maybe you prayed for a loved one to be healed. You cried out to God. You made God all sorts of promises, but your loved one died and your dreams turn to dust.

~~G.A. Studdert-Kennedy, one of my favorite Christian poets, raises the~~
question in a poem,

Suppose it is not true,
And Jesus never lived,
But only grew,
Like Aphrodite, from the foam
Of fancy—
From the sea
Of pure imagining, that frets
Within the soul eternally.
Suppose the Word was not made flesh,
But just another dream,
Which dwelt amongst us...

IV. It's here that Isaiah breaks in so dramatically. He takes that nightmare view of life and the cynical judgment of the unbelieving world that says that everything is a mirage, and nothing is real. He takes it and reverses it. "No!" cries Isaiah. "Be strong, fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. Your God will come and save you." It's not a mirage. It's real.

What does he mean? He means this. He's saying something like this: "I

know that life is full of disappointments, wrecks of beautiful dreams and broken hopes. I know that side of life. But I also know this, from history and my own experience, that God is not mocked! In every situation, even when you're feeling disappointment and desperate, that out of it all will come streams of water to the one who keeps on trusting in God's promises. God's offer to our thirsty souls is not an illusion.

In fact, it's the person who thinks they can find happiness in this world without God who's bound to discover that, without God, life itself is a mirage. The one thing certain about all our dreams that try to get around or avoid God is that they won't come true. They can't come true. One day the bubble will burst. And St. Augustine explained why so well when he said of God: "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless ~~until they find their rest in you."~~

Many of you have experienced the desert at some point in your life and there's still dryness in your souls. Some of you are in the desert right now. You're going through a wilderness experience of your own. Your dreams have turned to dust. You're afraid. Streams of water have evaporated into desert sands. You wonder if there could ever be streams in the desert of your life again.

If this is true of you, won't you, this morning, recommit your life to Christ, with all your particular problems; your hurts, frustrations, bewilderments, disappointments and broken dreams. Trust that Christ's promise isn't a delusion and that he didn't make a mistake when he set his name on you in baptism and called you to his service. His offer to you, today, of happiness and peace and a satisfying life is not a delusion. It's not a mirage. It's the only real thing in the world. The vision He has put before your eyes this morning in Isaiah will never lead you astray.

James "Be patient - for the coming of the Lord is at hand."

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When I was in college I came across an article in the Sunday paper about how some people in Germany, years after WWII, found on the walls of a bombed out basement these words.

I believe in the sun, even when it is not shining.

I believe in love, even when I feel it not.

I believe in God, even when he is silent.

In our best moments, we all know that, don't we? If only we could always trust it. Some days are cloudy, but we never doubt that the sun is still shining above the clouds. Sometimes love's labor seems lost, but we also know that, in the end, the only things that will endure are faith, hope, and love; these three; and the greatest of these is love. And there are days when the mists come down and the face of God is hidden and we can't hear him. ^{But you know he's there. You can remember.} He's silent. But we know he's still there. And we hope that the day is coming soon when our blind eyes will be opened once more, and our deaf ears unstopped once more, and our lame and crippled souls will leap like a hart, and our dumb tongues sing for joy. "For waters will break forth in the wilderness, and the mirage shall become a pool."

Let us pray: Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to hwoj, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen.