

## WHEREIN IS OUR HOPE

Isaiah 35:1-10

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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Isaiah gives us a wonderful poem of hope to help us celebrate Advent. He describes the world when God will finally make himself known in his power and glory. New life, color, joy and singing will transform the wilderness. Barren hillsides will be covered with majestic cedars and richly carpeted with vineyards and pastures. The weak and afraid will be given new strength and courage. Disabilities will miraculously disappear: the blind will see, the deaf hear and the lame leap for joy. Whenever we see these miracles happening we know the kingdom is at hand.

I want to draw your attention to verse 7 of this poem of hope. The New Revised Standard Version says, "*the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.*" The King James Version says, "*in the habitation of dragons, where each lay, shall be grass with reeds and rushes.*" The Hebrew word *Tannim* can mean either *jackal*, a real animal, or *dragon*, a mythological beast. There's a big difference between jackals and dragons although both are terrifying. A jackal is a wild dog Arabs call 'the howler' because it makes howls at night. A dragon, on the other hand, is a mythological beast existing only in our imagination. Whether Isaiah is talking about jackals or dragons, the implication is that they'll be exterminated. "The haunt of jackals will be become a swamp," Jackals live in the desert. They hate swamps. Or, in the KJV, "the habitation of dragons shall be grass with reeds and rushes." Everybody knows that dragons hate grass, reeds and rushes. Their dens or habitations will be destroyed. A time is coming when we won't fear the jackals outside us or the terrifying dragons that inhabit our imaginations. Personally, I fear dragons more than jackals. You can shoot a

jackal and kill it. But dragons are more frightening, more difficult to kill, and more likely to rob us of hope.

I want to talk about the dragons that inhabit our minds and imagination. I'm talking about dragons who live in our minds and imaginations. I associate our natural impulses and instinctive drives with dragons. We shouldn't denounce our natural impulses or instincts. On the other hand, no intelligent Christian would say that we should give all our impulses free rein and let our instincts control our behavior and thoughts. We all have wild stuff in us. We feel those dragons within us, when we get stuck in traffic and experience *road rage*. Advent, with all the stress, and hustle and bustle, is a time when a lot of us travel through the habitations of dragons. Sometimes we feel waves of depression coming over us? Sometimes uncontrollable anger? We feel or act like a dragon.

If we give our dragon-like impulses and instincts free reign they can do untold damage to ourselves, our families, our community, our Church. For example, if we give free reign to our God given powers of sexuality we'll experience moral and marital infidelity as well as personal irresponsibility and immoral chaos. Or take anger. Anger, when tamed, can be constructive and can help to reform the injustices in society, but unrestrained anger is a fire-breathing dragon lashing out, destroying relationships.

If we yield to any dragon-like instinct or impulse without any inhibition or sublimation, we're going to hurt people and destroy relationships. Then we're probably going to feel terribly guilty and lonely. The famous psychologist Carl Jung warned that the instincts and impulses of primitive humans are still crouching in all of us. All of us have the vestiges of a reptilian brain that drive us to snap out menacingly at times and act ugly. Jung said that Christianity helps to

keep that part of ourselves in check, and if we neglect spiritual disciplines the dragon inhabiting our minds can destroy us.

Now we shouldn't try to suppress all anger. Too many church members never get angry at injustice, at prejudice, at immorality, at divisiveness in a church, or at pious hypocrisy. But God's grace can tame the dragons within us and rechannel their power <sup>in positive ways</sup>. Isaiah prophesies "in the habitation of dragons, where each lay, shall be grass with reeds and rushes."

One of the dragons that attack us this time of the year is *depression*. All of us get depressed at times. But some us have spent months "in the habitation of dragons". Sometimes Christians call it Spiritual Dryness or Spiritual Abandonment or the Dark Night of the Soul or Clinical Depression. John Bunyan called it "the slough of despond" in *Pilgrim's Progress*. Sometimes physical illness causes depression - our body chemistry gets out of whack. Sometimes it's caused by dreadful tragedy and loss such as we experienced in September 11 or when a loved one dies or we go through a divorce. Many of us will find ourselves in the "habitation of dragons" at some point in our lives.

A wiser man than I, David MacLennan, gives this advice as to how to face the dragon of depression. First, remember that no mood is permanent. Moods are like the weather. The weather in England was so changeable people would say, "If you don't like our weather, wait a minute." Some of us wait months before the habitation of dragons shall be transformed into green and pleasant pastures. But eventually the dragon of depression lifts for most people.

Second, tell somebody when you're traveling through the habitation of dragons. Sometimes a professional counselor can help. It's helpful to have a friend accompany you through the habitation of dragons. Sometimes simply talking out loud with a trusted friend is what we need. A spiritual retreat at a monastery or retreat center can work miracles.

Third, strenuous physical exercise can help.

Four, pray to God or meditate on God's goodness and grace revealed in Jesus Christ. I find this helpful. I get up early in the morning and go to my favorite chair and read a portion of scripture. I don't read to get ideas for sermons. I read to listen to God. I meditate upon God's promises.

Five, help somebody else. The habitation of dragons is often turned into wonderfully refreshing green grass when we help somebody else.

All of this adds up to this: Follow Christ. Meditate on Christ. Talk to Christ. Serve Christ. Trust Christ. Obey Christ. Jesus Christ is a dragon slayer. When you're faced with the dragons of temptation or despair and depression commit yourself anew to Christ.

Hear again the promise: "Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are a 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.'" And "*in the habitation of dragons, where each lay, shall be grass with reeds and rushes.*"