

STREAMS IN THE DESERT
August 4, 2013 –Communion – Isaiah 35: 1-10
The Church of the Covenant

“Streams in the Desert” is the name of a delightful little devotional book by Mrs. Charles Cowman. I happened to pick it up in a used book sale and the 25 cents I paid for it in no way was equal to its invaluable help in getting me through an extraordinarily dry time for me spiritually in my own life. Yes, preachers have dry spiritual times in their lives just like every Christian does. So the question is not – how to avoid desert times in our lives?—the question is how to deal with desert times in our lives when they come?

These desert times come about in myriad of ways; perhaps we are going through a debilitating illness and it has got us down; perhaps some terrible tragedy has occurred, we have lost a loved one, and there is some inherent unfairness to it; perhaps life just overwhelms us; perhaps we are depressed and the depression bleeds over into our spiritual life; perhaps we just wake up one morning and we feel dead where previously was a very much alive Spirit and there’s no good reason for the way we feel. We don’t feel like going to church; we don’t feel like reading our Bible; we don’t feel like praying; we don’t feel like God is near and if HE were near we don’t feel like He would care about us very much anyway. As Christians, we have all either HAVE BEEN there, or ARE THERE, or are GOING TO BE THERE. There is no way to escape the spiritual dryness of the desert. So what are some observations about having been in the desert?

First, it is OK to be in the desert; it is OK to be there but we don’t want to stay there. The whole of salvation history begins as God sends His people Israel out into the wilderness for 40 years; they go out into a dry and barren land in order to learn how to walk with the Lord day-by-day; in order to discover how He will supply their need with heavenly manna; in order to prepare their heart to truly appreciate the Promised Land, the time of non-desert, when it finally comes. You can really appreciate a glass of water when you can’t have one. Now I want to be clear, I don’t think God causes His people to go into the dry times spiritually, but I think that God delights in using those times to bring us ever closer in our walk with Him. If it was OK for Israel to be in the desert then its OK for us to be in the desert, too.

First, it is OK to be in the desert and then, *second*, if we open our eyes and our hearts in the desert we might actually learn something while there. I think most people try with all their might to avoid the desert and when they find themselves in the desert, they try with all their might to get out of the desert. You know, its almost like “when I became a Christian I received this inoculation and that means that I will never have to go out into the desert and into a spiritual dry and dusty time in my life.” No, that’s got it backwards –actually when we became a Christian we opened ourselves up to going out into the desert to discover who we really are, who God really is, and what God really wants us to do with our lives. It is no mere coincidence that Jesus goes out into the desert for 40 days and 40 nights, is confronted by the devil, and discovers while there who HE is –the Son of God –and what His mission is – to go to the cross and to die for us. If Jesus had tried to avoid the desert none of us would be here today; if Jesus had not opened His spiritual eyes and ears and His heart to His Father out in the desert He would not have known the purpose of God’s redeeming love for the world. If it was OK for Jesus to be out in the desert then might God be able to speak into our heart and life today if you happen to be walking through the desert and feel particularly spiritually parched?

First, it is OK to be in the desert and, second, how often in scripture God speaks to people precisely in their desert times, and *third*, then it is OK to embrace our time in the desert rather than to try to flee

from it. Maybe it is in the desert we will be refined as precious gold and made as fit vessels to carry the Spirit of the Living God to our world? Maybe it is in the desert where we finally realize that God may love us MORE, not less, in our times of trial and tribulation? Maybe it is in the desert where nothing seems to be going right where God teaches us to pray and to rely completely upon HIM? Maybe God can do something when He has our full attention out in the desert when nothing is going right versus when we are in the Promised Land and everything is going right? Maybe, even as painful as the desert is, that the LOVE of GOD can by grace and mercy turn deserts into oases of new life and new hope and new faith? Maybe we just need to accept and embrace our desert times and to see them just as a prelude for God to be doing something greater in our lives?

The great English Baptist pulpiteer, Charles Spurgeon, asked: "What is thy season this morning? Is it a season of drought? Then that is the season for showers. It is a season for great heaviness and black clouds? Then that is the season for showers..." Ezekial 34: 26 says –*"I will cause the shower to come down in its season; there shall be showers of blessing."* God wants to water the wilderness with His blessing and His love and His Holy Spirit.

Isaiah 35 speaks of *"streams in the desert"*. It speaks of the wilderness and the dry land *"being glad"* (Isaiah 35:1); of the desert rejoicing and blossoming. Those in the desert shall see the *"glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God"* *"Waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert."* (Isaiah 35: 6) It is God's promise to all of us today; that there is no desert so dry that the Living waters of His Holy Spirit cannot come and turn it into a rolling river of life. The ransomed of the Lord shall return and *"everlasting joy shall be upon their heads"*. *"They shall obtain joy and gladness"*. *"Sorrow and sighing shall flee away."* It is God's promise to us. If you study the passage more carefully you see clear references to Jesus –the eyes of the blind shall be opened, the lame man shall leap like a hart, the tongue of the dumb shall sing for joy. This is not just spiritual release; this is physical release; this is the wiping away of every tear and sadness; a time when death and dying shall be no more; a time when HE will wipe every tear from our eye. *"Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees"* saith the Lord. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, *"Be Strong, fear not!"* (v. 3-4) This is God's promise to us –**Oh my beloved, you may find yourself in the wilderness, but I shall come to you, and I will pour out the Living Waters of my Holy Spirit and turn your wilderness to the Promised Land.** You may find yourself in a spiritual desert, but I shall not leave you there, promises the Lord. Meet the Lord in whatever desert you find yourself in and HE will send showers of blessing and the parched inner recesses of our soul that seem so dead will come alive again.

Did you know that there is a giant aquifer under the city of Pittsburgh? Under the three rivers there is an even larger river, larger than the Allegheny, Monongahela and Ohio Rivers combined, filled with even more water than we could fathom. There is this giant store of living water in a deep well under the people of God here in Western Pennsylvania. Oh, the churches may be smaller but the water still runs deep. Oh, sometimes it feels as if the wrong prevails more and more and what is right flees. But the waters of the river of life are still waiting to be released from under the city of Pittsburgh. Some days it even feels as if we are in a moral wilderness, far away from the God of our Fathers and grandmothers and ancestors. O Lord, why are we in the wilderness? Why are the churches so spiritually dry and lifeless? It is like this giant store of spiritual blessing waiting to be asked to spring forth, waiting to water a spiritually dry and dusty land, waiting for God's people to walk, as Isaiah suggests, the highway of holiness, the *"HOLY WAY"*, the way of everlasting life. The desert, the spiritually dry times in our life, invite us to have an encounter with the source of life, the wellspring of creation, the One who holds all the waters of the earth in His Almighty hand. Thou, O Lord, can transform my thorn into a flower. Thou, sweet Jesus Christ, can take my pain and use it to take away another's pain. If THY Cross can bring THY

resurrection, THY death can bring new LIFE, and the desert brings the Promised Land, surely, surely, surely, Lord, You can take my hand in this hour and lead me to the wellsprings of new life in YOU!

You who have walked through sadness, loss, grief and pain for too long, you who have thought that the wilderness was your only portion in life, you who have been in the desert for far, far too long, YOU, can enter into His presence through this sacrament, you can drink the cup and share the bread, and the waters of the Holy Spirit can well up within you unto new life and restoration today. In the midst of the desert find the Lord of life. HE is always there. That's the most important thing I learned in the desert—HE IS ALWAYS THERE.

God didn't place you in the wilderness, but God can take your desert time, and bring it to new life in HIM today. There are showers of blessings. And today, through Jesus Christ there are *Streams in the Desert* just for you. And Amen.

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IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!*