

“Winter, snow and crocuses”

Isaiah 35:1-10

December 15, 2019

Today is the 15th of December. By this time next week, the season we call fall, will no longer exist. Winter arrives December 21. Next Sunday winter begins for us.

When I say the word winter, what comes to your mind? If you are a fan of old movies from the 30s and 40s you will remember Bing Crosby inviting us to dream of a *White Christmas*. But not everyone dreams of a white Christmas. Some think of grey skies and a very light mist falling, some might call it fog, or a heavy rain like we experienced a couple of times this week. Some may be thinking of clear blue skies, sun shining and a temperature running about 24°C on Maui – like the 20 Global contest winners, holidaying with Mark Madryga. While others may think of clear blue skies with large white fluffy snowflakes drifting to the ground.

When you think of it, the majority of Christians spend Advent in weather that is far from wintery. But that’s not what I experienced in Ontario. We always hoped for a white Christmas but could not depend upon it, some years yes and some years no. But if we got snow, we only wanted a little bit, we were fussy and only wanted about 1 to 2 inches, just enough to make the ground white. Just enough to make the land picturesque.

But that, is not always what we got. One year, in my early teens, we got so much snow we were house bound for a day or two. The snow accumulated the wind howled, causing major drifts to occur. It was extremely cold and difficult to be outside for very long. It wasn’t what we usually experienced. I began to feel frightened because of the cold, the blustery whipping wind and the accumulation of the snow into major drifts and I asked the question - Where were we living, in the wilderness that we call the North or the South Pole?

The writer of chapter 35 of Isaiah, also knows a wilderness. It is a desert wilderness, but the separation and the fear are the same. In the chapter just before our reading, the furious wrath of God blows over the land. God’s people languish in Babylonian captivity, feeling the weight of God’s punishment for their own sins. It is a frightening time when God’s people are trapped and powerless, waiting for help and hope.

There was no more welcome sight and sound, after that ‘blizzard’, than the city grader coming down our street; with its massive tires and angled blade demolishing any and all drifts in its way. I was especially happy that day, that we hadn’t already shovelled our driveway. The snow that the grader deposited, at the end of our driveway, was not any larger than the snow that had fallen and it wasn’t crusty or heavier than normal.

Isaiah 35 tells about a time when in the midst of defeat and destruction, God comes with rescue and restoration. Isaiah 35, with beautiful words about majestic

forests and green pastures, paints the picture of God at work not only restoring the desert and a way home, but also creating a transformed world for God's people. The storm has ended and God is doing some road building through the desert. A way will be cleared and God will save God's people.

God's nature is invitation, rather than exclusion. God's nature is to attract, rather than push away.

Just as we heard the invitation to go up to God's mountain and find ways to transform weapons of war into tools for peace, the first Sunday of Advent (Isaiah 2); and just as we encountered a vision of amazing harmony in the second Sunday of Advent last week (Isaiah 11); so now we hear a proclamation of the earth rejoicing and blossoming in celebration that all people have finally discovered God's Holy Highway. Not even the foolish have missed out this time. And the result? Everlasting joy. You better believe it!

God intervenes in human history, clearly on behalf of the poor, the outcast, and the oppressed, as we see in the exodus and in the life of Jesus Christ. But it is not at the exclusion of everyone else. There are always invitations for everyone to come to the table, to join in the journey.

This is the source of the joy - the real joy of Advent, of Christmas, and beyond. There's room on the highway for everyone. The road to the realm of God may seem a long one sometimes, but it is a wide one.

We also have to hold onto the fact that winter will end. The snow will not last forever and one spring morning hope will burst forth, through the snow, in the form of a little purple flower - that ends the season of winter. And then we know, spring is just around the corner.