

Isaiah 35 & 55 Stewardship sermon
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Scripture Reading Isaiah 35:1-3,5-7a; Isaiah 55:1, 12-13

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus ²it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.

The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.
They shall see the glory of the LORD,
the majesty of our God.

³ Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.

⁵ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

⁶ then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;

⁷ the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;

Isaiah 55:1, 12-13

Ho, everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and you that have no money,
come, buy and eat!

Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.

¹² For you shall go out in joy,
and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

¹³ Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;
and it shall be to the LORD for a memorial,
for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

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I had a daydream recently, of an intentional community. A little village on a sunny hillside, surrounded by forest. A village powered totally by solar, where community gardens provide most of the food and there are only a few, shared cars. In the center of the village, a beautiful green space used by everyone. And there's a beautiful room for shared meals, music, parties, good conversation, exercise. Not too expensive and multigenerational, so people of all ages have a caring community, no matter their family relationships or income or anything else. With a school and a library, a health clinic and a fixit shop and a field for ultimate frisbee and a universally accessible trail through the woods and grownups who look out for toddlers and teenagers who look out for elders. A multi-faith sanctuary space, and a place set aside for conversation, learning, respectfulness, compassion. You know, a utopia. A place really different from so much of the world.

I had this dream after visiting a place out in central Mass that has acres and acres and acres of empty land just screaming to be used for something good. I drew it on a piece of scrap paper and I talked with a friend about it. And when I get a little stressed out about the world, I close my eyes and imagine walking through this village.

Now, until I come into some serious resources I'm not going to build this community....but it's good to imagine. However, it's not totally outside the realm

of imagination. There are parts of that dreamed up village that overlap with what we do in church. What we do in Pilgrim Church.

I know it's a little on brand for a pastor to claim this, but houses of worship get closer to this kind of dream than a lot of other places. Think of this community. Pilgrim is multigenerational, straight and queer, folks of all classes - just to start. We take care of each other and we offer sanctuary to the hurting. Folks' backgrounds and interests are different but we have a shared vision. And...we've gone solar. :) And speaking of beautiful places, this sacred sanctuary is such an inspiring space.

This is a place set aside for conversation, learning, respectfulness, compassion. We teach our kids to love their neighbors and to work together for good; we don't just teach our children - we're committed to that way of being as a whole congregation.

When I close my eyes and think...what if the world were a little kinder, a little more respectful, a little more peaceful, a little more welcoming...I don't just imagine that fantasy village on the hill. I also think about this congregation.

I had the chance to talk to someone in Lexington this week, about our church. He said, I can see you've got a good thing going there. It's a caring group of people. Folks in town know that.

The late Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote a children's book called God's Dream in which he imagined what God wanted for the world:

"God dreams of people sharing. God dreams of people caring. Each of us carries a piece of God's heart in us and when we love one another, the pieces of God's heart are made whole. God dreams that every one of us will see that we are all [siblings]. Do you know how to make God's dream come true? It is really quite easy. As easy as sharing, loving, caring. Will you help God's dream come true? God smiles like a rainbow when you do."

Isaiah, in these verses of Chapter 35 and 55, is telling the people about God's dream. They lived in troubling times, but God could envision restoration, and

Isaiah could paint the picture for the people. The context of Isaiah is the Babylonian exile. The threat of it, the time when the people were actually exiled from Judah, and the promise of restoration. In what we call Second Isaiah, a vision is given to a prophet, to share with a devastated people, God's dream of a people and the earth thriving, flourishing, blossoming, *parach in the Hebrew*. Patricia K Tull writes, "As Isaiah 34 and 35 set back to back vividly show, reversal of fortune is not guaranteed. But it is possible. Ancient Judah's success story sets a precedent for hope, showing that happy endings have occurred and can occur, though they require courage and persistence to bring to life, and their story of struggle never abates."¹

The people Isaiah preached to needed to imagine together, a community and a world repaired. So Isaiah painted them the picture:

*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;*

...

*You shall go out in joy,
and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.*

But Isaiah knew that the people couldn't just daydream - they had to work for this renewal.

That's true for us, too.

"In faith, we can take a stance not of presuming either good outcomes or bad, but rather of openness to the future, expectancy for the nearly unimaginable good that God can and sometimes does accomplish at any point, often through people like us."²

¹ UCC Stewardship Materials "Imagine Together" 2024

² *ibid.*

Several hundred years after Isaiah, Jesus offered his followers a vision. Here's the dream God has for us, Jesus preached over and over. The kingdom of God as Jesus described it is a state of beauty and compassion, a great banquet where everyone will be fed, a community where no one will be lost, a garden blooming magnificently. Jesus did more than describe the kingdom of God - he began to model it with his followers. They imagined together, and moved toward it.

What is the church if not this? Filled with those who can *imagine together* a better, more beautiful, kinder, more welcoming community, a peaceful, more bounteous world - those who can imagine the Kingdom of God - and say, together, right here, right now, we're going to be about building it.

If we are stuck in our own individual interests, anger, frustration - we cannot imagine together a future based on mutual flourishing. We can't see the Kingdom. But when we imagine together, we can help God's dream come true. We can be about building the kingdom of God right here, in this moment and in this place.

The point of church is that we are in it together. We are not on our own to build the kingdom. We are not on our own to deal with hardship. We are not on our own to teach our kids compassion and respect. We bring our time, talent and treasure together.

This, at its most basic, is why we pledge to Pilgrim Church, why we take shifts in the Patch, why we teach Sunday School, why we serve on committees. It might not be at the top of our minds every time we scrub the kitchen, hand out bulletins, sing in the choir. And maybe it's not your only reason for pledging to this church. But I really believe one reason to pledge our time, talent and treasure is because we are all imagining together what an abundant and beautiful future looks like - in this community and because of what Pilgrim does for our world. Amen.