

Isaiah 35:1-10

“The Strange Desert”

During the summer between my freshman and sophomore years of college, I took a road trip with some of my college buddies. The main objective of the trip was to pick up a car that my friend wanted to work on for a class project since he was an automotive restoration major at the college. He was studying how to take classic cars and restore them to the original condition.

The car that he wanted to work on was at his parents place in the city of Mesa, Arizona. I had never been there before, so I thought it would be fun to take the trip with my friends to Arizona.

On this trip, we were going to be going to places that I had never been to before. I had never really been through the southwest part of the country, in addition to parts of southwestern parts of Kansas, the panhandle of Oklahoma and Texas. Going through New Mexico and Arizona were also a new part to the adventure as well. Unfortunately we did a significant amount of the driving at night, so it was difficult to get a feel for the places that we passed through. Yet it was interesting to see all of the different place names and imagine what they would look like during the day.

After driving all night on the way to Arizona, we stopped to pick up gas in the city of Socorro, New Mexico. The sun was starting to rise up and I was able to begin to see what it looked like in the part of New Mexico that we were in. It was like nothing I had ever seen before. It was the start of our trip through a true desert, which was a terrain that I had never experienced before.

We started to head west on Socorro on a two-lane highway through some sparsely populated territory. The terrain was beautiful as the sun was rising. It was red with hints of a light blue and green. There were very, very few trees and lots of small plants in the fields in the

area that we drove past them on the highway. There were a few abandoned railroad beds outside of our windows. One of the more peculiar things we saw was the VLA or Very Large Array. It's a radio astronomy observatory that was featured in the movie Contact from a few years ago. All in all, it was a different territory.

Continuing our way on to Mesa, we then reached a place that looked nothing like what we were driving through before. We had reached a forest in eastern Arizona. The elevation was significantly higher than when we were in New Mexico. The reason this stands out so much is that when you think of Arizona, you think desert. It was pleasing to learn that the terrain of Arizona was varied and not all one type of climate zone. However, we would eventually make it to the real desert where Mesa was located.

I had never seen anything like the terrain that Mesa and Phoenix were in. It was hot. It was dry. There was lots of sun. There were lots of cactus or cacti around us. There were no lawns, just organized rocks. On top of all of that there were tons of people. I was beginning to think that I had somewhat landed on the moon because everything just seemed so different from what I grew up in. Not that I did not like what I was seeing, it was just odd all-around.

On this same trip, we went up to the Grand Canyon, which was simply more and more desert when we got there. The Grand Canyon just seemed surreal, more like we were looking at a painting than actual land. We even saw another strange object, an extinct volcano. Again, everything just seemed strange to me.

Now I did have a good time on this trip and I am glad that I got to go with my friends. It was indeed an educational experience. It was indeed a trip to a place that I had never been to before. Someday I hope to return more to the rural parts of Arizona and New Mexico so I can continue to experience that those states.

So where have you gone that was a strange place? Where have you gone to a place and experienced something nearly out of this world? I know that through life we take trips to places unknown. It helps us to understand the greater world that we live in and we can even appreciate the places that we call home all the better because we can understand the uniqueness of where we live.

Going to a strange place is nothing new in the history of the world. In our spiritual ancestor's time people travelled and moved to places that they had never been to before. Sometimes the strange places that we go are not necessarily travelling to a different land, but strange places in our hearts and lives. In our spiritual lives we go to places that are unique and new as well. Jesus Christ came into the world to take us to new places in our lives and salvation, so that we would have a free and complete life in God and the Spirit.

In thinking about our texts that we read today, in particular the Isaiah reading, we start to hear some strange things and things that were definitely strange to the people that they texts were first read for. Things were described to the people that seemed out of this world. Yet it was the prophets speaking that had a real message for the people of their time.

The Isaiah passage was meant for a community that had been displaced and sent far away to the city and country of Babylon. This is after the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians and the beginning of what is known as the exile. These were people that had been forced away from their homes and livelihoods in the land of Judah and Jerusalem. They were to move to Babylon and serve the government and people of their conquerors. It would have been a very deflating time for the people as they were now pulled away from the place they knew. They were indeed in a strange land completely different than where they were before.

While I had the choice and made the decision to go to Arizona, the people of Jerusalem did not have this choice. Many times in our lives we are forced to go places that we do not want to go, especially in our personal and spiritual lives. We often are pushed in ways that pull us away from what we consider to be a normal life. We face medical hardships, spiritual setbacks, and sometimes we even face natural disasters that uproot us from our homes. Considering all of this, then we can start to understand the situation of the Judahites in their time and place.

What stands out in this passage of Isaiah is how strange Isaiah was telling the people what they were going to eventually experience in their lives. While Isaiah and also Jeremiah prophesied that the conquest of Jerusalem was called for by their sinful ways, the prophets are quite hopeful about what will happen in the future. They will be a redeemed people.

Now the territory between Jerusalem and Babylon was quite the dry desert. It was unheard of going directly between the two cities because people would run out of water on their journey and there was no water to be found on such a path. Imagine the dusty scene that we see of Iraq today and that is basically what the people of Jerusalem and Judah would see. People travelled either to the north to get to Babylon and follow rivers down or they would come up from the south and follow rivers to Babylon.

Isaiah gives us the image that when the people are redeemed that this dusty barren land will spring out in full bloom. The desert will not be a desert any longer but a great garden extending all the way to Jerusalem. There will even be an unthinkable highway between Babylon and Jerusalem across this desert so that travel times will be short and that the return to Jerusalem will be a short and quick trip that will be undertaken easily by the people who have been redeemed in time.

Now I have been across the desert of the American Southwest and let me tell you and those of you who have travelled through there will tell you how unlikely it would be for a great garden to spring out of the desert. It's hot, dry, and simply not much between places. Imagine how unlikely it would be for there to be an easy, water abundant highway across the desert. I can tell you that the desert would look totally different if there was water. It would no longer be a desert but more like the high altitude forests of eastern Arizona where life can spring forth from the rains that fall at the high altitudes.

Yet in all of this craziness, there is a call by our spiritual ancestors to trust in the processes of God. In James we are called to be a patient people and allow the process of God to come forth. We are called to be a people that waits with eager yet patient anticipation of the Lord that is coming for us in this life. We are called to be a people that we are to trust in our prophets and hope for the day when God will come forth and deliver us from the troubles of this world.

Would the people exiled to Babylon trust in the message that James bring us? Can we imagine the people having patience in waiting for them to be redeemed by the God of All? I know that if I was exiled far from home I would have difficulty in waiting for the strange ways of the Lord to work their way out. I would feel hopeless in this situation. I would be stuck in the strange desert of life and not know where to go or where even to begin the new life that can come from having faith and trust in our Lord.

In our current season of the church, we are a people that are waiting with anticipation in the coming of the Christ child. We are in a season where impossible things are happening in the lives of those who have gone before us. We are living into a season of hope and joy and all the good that can come forth from a life in Christ.

In my study of the scriptures, I find that the prophesy of Isaiah in all of its strangeness reflects the strangeness that comes forth in the coming of Christ. Isaiah foretold that there would be hope coming forth in a person that would deliver us from the troubles of this world. In all of our troubles of life and the strange places that we go we have Christ there with us in those times of strangeness. When we don't know what to do or where to go we have Christ coming to us and blossoming forth the grace that comes from a relationship in Christ.

I believe that Jesus Christ came into the world to fulfill the prophecies of old. The patience of James is key in our understanding of the coming and eventual return of Christ in this world. Even though we are part of a society that demands instant results in whatever we do, we know that Christ will come to us in time. We will be delivered from the hardships of this life in the future because of the grace that comes forth from our coming Savior. It is our task in the meantime to pray, study the bible, and work towards a more just world wherever we might be.

In this season of preparation, I pray that God comes to you in whatever form it may be, be it through worship and study or through the interaction between friends and family. The hardships and strangeness of our lives will be relieved in the coming of Christ. May we reflect the grace and hope that has been given to us in this season and for the rest of our time together as a community of believers. Amen.