

“A desert in bloom”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Two times in my life I have looked up at Michelangelo’s painting of creation on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome, where God reaches out from a swirl of angels to give life to Adam, their hands nearly touching, with just the slightest gap.

Each time, something has bothered me.

On the one side, you have God striving, stretching, to reach Adam. But on the other side, you have Adam, and frankly, he’s not even trying! He’s lazily reclining on the ground, his arm resting on his knee, his hand limp. He isn’t stretching at all! Now, I get it: God is preparing to impart the spark of life, so it makes sense that Adam, pre-spark, is so passive. But sometimes art conveys a meaning different from the one intended. And as I looked up at that painting, I saw a portrait of our relationship with God.

In a couple weeks, we will celebrate just how far God is willing to stretch to save us: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16). But so often, like Adam, we do not reach back.

Maybe we’re lazy. Maybe we don’t know how. Maybe we figure God will eventually work it out; it is God after all. Or maybe we’re just tired; we have been so worn down by all the struggle that we don’t have the strength, or will, to stretch any farther.

Perhaps, for some of us, it’s that our society has become so driven by instant gratification that we’ve come to want our faith like we want our food: fast and cheap. In this milieu, faith becomes another commodity to be consumed. We start using the passive voice to describe what we want out of a spiritual life, out of church. We say we want to *be fed*, to *be entertained*, to *be transformed*, to *be valued*.

Of course, we’re not wrong to want those things. And as a good Presbyterian, I’ll tell you that we could strive and stretch all we want, and it wouldn’t matter, if God wasn’t coming to us. Grace begins and ends with God. God has to reach out first. Hence, Christ. Hence, the Alpha and the Omega. But that grace isn’t going to make a lick of a difference in our lives right now if we don’t take the hand that’s reaching out. I’m not talking about salvation. I’m talking about what we crave right now: a better life, a deeper connection, joy and peace.

The prophet Isaiah describes this life. God, Isaiah says, will make deserts bloom and wildernesses flow with water. And there, in that blossoming desert, we will no longer have to be afraid. Voices, once silent, will sing aloud with joy. Because God is coming to save us.

This is no pipe dream. Deserts literally do bloom. Take, for example, the Atacama Desert in Chile. It's the last place you'd ever expect to blossom. It receives on average only half an inch of rain per year, making it the driest non-polar region in the world. The center sometimes goes four years without any rainfall. And it's been that way for at least 3 million years. Yet more than 500 species of flora call the Atacama Desert home. In fact, between the months of September and November, this arid desert flowers, creating a sea of bright purple and yellow.

Deserts, it turns out, bloom all the time.

This Advent, we wait for another blossom. We wait for God to come into our lives and transform them, to renew the parched and dry places in our souls.

But Advent isn't only about God's movement toward us; Advent is also about our movement toward God. Even as we wait for the Christ child, we are far from passive. We are supposed to be preparing ourselves, our church, our world, to live differently. We're supposed to be reaching out too.

According to Isaiah, there is a highway that runs through this blossoming desert, and we are invited to walk it. Patricia Tull writes, "Underlying Isaiah 35's dramatic imagery of divine action, hope proceeds not simply from God's unexpected reversals, but from those the prophet seeks to inspire, from a small band of Judeans who re-cultivate the burned land and push back the chaos, and thus strengthen their own weak hands, feeble knees, and fearful hearts."

Mary walks that highway when she becomes part of the Advent story.

In an article titled "No More Lying about Mary," Nancy Rockwell invites us to dispel our notions of Mary as passive and immature. Rockwell writes, "She gives birth in a barn, lies down [with] animals, and welcomes weathered shepherds in the middle of the night. She is determined, not domestic; free, not foolish; holy, not helpless; strong, not submissive. She beckons women everywhere to speak out for God's justice, which is waiting to be born into this world."

In her famous song, the Magnificat, which we heard this morning, Mary magnifies the Lord, rejoicing and casting a vision for a different kind of world. She and God team up for a "bold agenda"—to bring the powerful down from their thrones and to lift up the lowly and feed the hungry. In her prophetic imagination, she, there in the house of an official temple priest, announces the desert that shall blossom through Christ.

Mary has been visited by the angel Gabriel, who has told her, just as Isaiah prophesied, not to be afraid. God has reached out, just like in that beautiful painting in the Sistine Chapel. And like Abraham, like Moses, like Isaiah, like so many prophets before her, Mary answers, “Here I am, the servant of the Lord.” Unlike Adam, Mary reaches back.

We must become part of that Advent story too. The German mystic Meister Eckhart writes, “We are all called to be mothers of God—for God is always waiting to be born.”

What songs will we sing? What love and justice will we share? What will we do to reach back? How will we make room for God to enter our lives, on Christmas Day, and transform our worlds? I want you to think of one specific thing you can do, regularly, to reach back: it may be prayer, community service, witness, spending time with your family, journaling, singing, hiking, protesting an injustice, reaching out to someone who’s lonely—whatever you do, reflect on how it brings you closer to God.

An empty desert cannot blossom; neither can a voyeuristic spirituality. To bloom, faith needs participation.

Isaiah and Mary ask us to do more than behold this blossoming desert. They ask us to be its traveler, its surveyor—to walk and map it, to proclaim it to the world in our own Magnificat.

Faith is not a monologue; it is a dialogue. We, like Mary, must speak back.

And if you doubt that you can do this, if you think you’re too busy or too weak, look at the people who travel Isaiah’s highway, listen to the people Mary sings about: they’re the ones with weak hands and feeble knees, the scared and the blind and the lame and the mute and the hungry—all the people the world long ago discounted as powerless. These are the people who rise up, as agents of a blossoming desert.

I remember this worship service led by Sue Montgomery, a pastor in Pennsylvania. It was at a national retreat for people with disabilities. Sue wanted to invite the retreat participants to help lead worship, but the planners, who were able-bodied, responded by saying, “Absolutely not. You wouldn’t be able to understand their words. You wouldn’t be able to hear them speak. What if one of them dropped the bread or the Communion glasses?” These well-intentioned Christians sincerely believed that people with disabilities could not lead worship; it had to be done *for* them. Yet, when Sue asked if any of the participants would like to be part of worship, nearly everyone volunteered.

A young woman with developmental disabilities spent the whole retreat practicing reading the 23rd Psalm. A woman who couldn’t read because of a traumatic brain injury memorized the prayer concerns of her peers so that she could recite them during worship. Two little people, who

were ruling elders in their home churches, volunteered to serve Communion. A young man with cerebral palsy read the New Testament passage.

Sue writes, “Everyone who spoke that day was heard and understood. No one dropped the Communion elements (and it would have been OK if they had)... It was one of those moments when everyone in the room knew God was speaking.”

God spoke through the people at that worship service, just as God spoke through Mary. And God can speak through us too. We just have to be willing to step onto that highway. You may be surprised where it takes you. **Amen.**