

“the desert shall rejoice and blossom”
Reading from the Old Testament: Isaiah 35:1-10
Reading from the New Testament: Revelation 22:1-2

“A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way ... it shall be for God’s people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.” In the mid-19th Century “Freight trains on street-level tracks, run by New York Central Railroad, delivered food to lower Manhattan, but created dangerous conditions for pedestrians.” 10th Avenue on Manhattan’s west side began to be referred to as *Death Avenue*. The railroad eventually hired horsemen, called the West Side Cowboys, to ride around waving red flags to warn pedestrians of oncoming train traffic. That was later replaced by elevated train lines transporting millions of tons of meat, dairy, and produce annually. However, that too, would give way to trucking, thus leaving to deterioration the infrastructure of the elevated trains, increasingly an unintentional monument to urban decay.

However, a motivated, industrious, and committed collection of neighbors were not going to allow that to be the end of the story. So, today, rather than teeming with weeds and rust, it is a scene of walkers, joggers, runners, amblers, and tourists making their way along an elevated greenway lined with over 500 species of plants and trees.^{(thehighline.org)} The

transformation of an urban desert into a refuge of life and beauty and hope. “The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing.”

Is there hope of restoration or revivification when signs of life go missing? I have not spent any time in the kind of desert where the Saguaro rises, the diamond back rattles, and the dry air can make the daytime bake and the nighttime shiver; where hardy is far too understated an adjective for what life requires. Parched and barren, cracked earth, rocky landscape, a preponderance of beige, and a dearth of shade, unless discovered under an outcropping of rock. Death Valley surely doesn't sound like a place fertile for development, or even life. There is beauty to be found there, but it takes a particular set of eyes to perceive it. It's hard to appreciate the stunning colors of the sunset if you're too dehydrated, sunburned, and spent to care.

It has always struck me as a bit ironic that retiring Americans flocked to the desert for the warmth and lifestyle, but were determined to bring their green lawns with them. Someone told me this week that the heat can be particularly brutal on the lush green fairways of an Arizona golf course,

because all the watering required to keep them green creates about a ten-foot tall blanket of humidity. He flew to Arizona only to feel stuck in Mississippi. So, if you go, you may leave your American Express card behind, but don't even think about forgetting your water bottle and SPF 1000.

“The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly...” Could that even be possible? Apparently, it is. This week I saw a comparison of two photos taken in the same location at the same time of year near Baja, California. The difference in the photos, taken a few years apart, was stunning. In the first photo, it looked like your typical image of an arid and barren desert landscape, the Saguaros having monopolized the market on any shade of green. However, the second photo displayed a carpet of stunning and colorful wildflowers.

What caused the disparity between the photos? A few inches of annual rainfall. As often as you see desert wildflowers in travel magazines, you'd think they were common. However, in truth, they are relatively ephemeral and rare. The Arizona Sonora Desert Museum reports that,

“Professional photographers know that they must rush out to catch a bloom whenever it occurs, because they may not get another opportunity for ten or 20 years.”^(desertmuseum.org) Yet, it is stunning to know what a transformation just a little nourishment can foster.

“The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom.” Isaiah pictures a highway through the desert lined with life and water and blooms. It is an image of life-giving water and verdant produce also captured in the book of Revelation: “On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.”

Both Isaiah and John perceive the possibility of restoration and re-creation through the presence of God and the faithfulness of God’s people in places far too familiar with barrenness.

One need not travel to Arizona, Syria, Egypt, or Baja to know the experience of the desert. West Siders in New York were seeing the creeping growth of desertified decay amidst the blight of crumbling infrastructure, rusting in the shade of gleaming skyscrapers. Similarly whole populations of people suffer in the food deserts pocketed within thriving cities like

Charlotte. It is estimated that 15% of Mecklenburg residents reside in what would be classified as a food desert, “a low-income neighborhood without access to a full-service grocery store or supermarket.” (*Charlotte Observer*)

Neighborhoods that are the most food insecure tend to have the least access to nutritional options even if they qualify for federal food programs. Very often the only accessible options are quick marts and dollar stores where fresh food is not available. Access to full service groceries via public transportation is limited, so if you don't own a car, there is no quick trip to the grocery store as it involves an odyssey of bus transfers, waiting, walking, and the risk of crossing several dangerously busy thoroughfares. And just imagine trying to make the return journey with three kids and four bags of groceries in tow.

It is a desert no less than the image Isaiah relates in just the previous chapter: “And the streams of Edom shall be turned into pitch, and her soil into sulfur; her land shall become burning pitch. Night and day it shall not be quenched; its smoke shall go up forever. From generation to generation it shall lie waste.” And yet, there are faithful individuals and collective ministries working tirelessly and creatively to seek to bring fruit and

vegetables to the desert — community gardens, community activists, engaged citizens, food ministries dedicated to the notion of transformation in the desert.

One need not hike into Death Valley to know the danger and distress that lie in wait there. One can know the desolation of a different desert amidst the green hills and valleys of the Appalachians, across the landscapes of the rural midwest, and from the Sandhills to the Carolina coast; towns decimated by economic dystrophy and subsequently overrun by the opioid epidemic. Rural communities becoming a desert where signs of life are difficult to spot. The communities in which I grew up, long ago endured the exodus of manufacturing, business, and the leadership capital that went with them. The high schools of both towns have seen enrollment drop by 50%. Such communities, found all across the country become vulnerable to the stop-the-world-I-want-to-get-off allure of opioids.

In Barbara Kingsolver's compelling new novel, *Demon Copperhead*, we journey alongside a survivor who, though tortured by unrelenting circumstances and addiction, can't quite give up on the notion of life. Set in an economically depressed region of southwestern Virginia, *Demon*

describes the imbedded horror of addiction. “If you’ve not known the dragon we were chasing, words may not help. People talk of getting high, this blast you get, not so much what you feel as what you don’t: the sadness and dread in your gut, all the people that have judged you useless ... [Once having that experience of escape] You start out trying to get back there, and pretty soon you’re just trying to get out of bed. It becomes your job, staving off the dopesickness for another day. Then it becomes your God.

“Nobody ever wanted to join that church ... Someone has beat the tar out of you, it seems, and crushed some bones. Possibly a person, this comes with the lifestyle, but more likely it was the junk putting its fists through all your personal drywall on its way out of the building.” (Barbara Kingsolver, *Demon Copperhead*) Life is reduced to a hellish desert existence. Yet again, even in these neglected places, seemingly barren of hope, there are faithful people and collective ministries, fighting addiction and planting opportunity, refusing to give up on areas too long forgotten, dedicated to the notion of transformation in the desert.

Consider the desert defined by prison bars, locking in one wrongfully accused ... or, perhaps, the desert marked by the desolating loneliness of

one who's outlived their friends, and even the tether of family has been pulled apart ... or the scorching oppression where one robbed of hope by emotional or physical abuse, despairs of life itself. The desert lurks in surprising places, too close for comfort. Yet, there too, led by the Spirit of God, faithful people bring water to the desert.

Is Isaiah's vision even a possibility, or is it just a cruel dream that tempts you with all that you'll never grasp? "A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way ... it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray." "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly..."

Just a little rain creates a carpet of wildflowers blooming in the desert. A combination of persistence and vision transforms the blight of urban decay into a refreshing greenway teeming with life and beauty. Fresh produce in a community garden. A simple visit made because no one should feel totally alone. Is it actually possible for the crocus to bloom in the desert? In your desert?

“A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way ... no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray?” Is our God able to create a verdant way through your wilderness?

Bryan Stevenson has dedicated his career to plant seeds of hope in the desert of injustice. The organization he founded, Equal Justice Initiative, is committed to protecting basic human rights for the most vulnerable among us. His organization has been instrumental in reversals, relief, or release of over 130 wrongly condemned prisoners on death row. It had not been his intention originally to pursue law, but his calling to this work was crystallized during a month-long internship with the Southern Prisoners Defense Committee. He started doing basic clerical work but one day was asked to go see a prisoner on death row who had been there for two years without representation. Bryan’s job was to at least convey the simple message to the prisoner that he would not be killed in the next year.

Though Bryan had rehearsed a formal way to introduce himself, it was the prisoner who spoke first. “I’m Henry.” Bryan’s nerves had erased all preparation. He just found himself apologizing over and over. “I’m sorry ... Uh, I really don’t know ... I’m just a law student ... I’m not a real lawyer...”

Henry asked, “Is everything all right with my case?” Stevenson found himself babbling, “Oh yes, I was sent down to tell you they don’t have a lawyer, a real lawyer for you yet, but you’re not at risk of execution anytime in the next year.” And the babbling continued until Henry interrupted, grabbing Bryan’s hands, “I’m not going to have an execution anytime in the next year?” Though those words didn’t sound all that hopeful to Bryan, they meant the world to Henry, offering intense relief. “You are the first person I’ve met in over two years after coming to death row that isn’t another death row prisoner or a death row guard ... I’ve been talking to my wife on the phone, but I haven’t wanted her to come visit me or bring the kids because I was afraid they’d show up and I’d have an execution date. I don’t want them here like that. Now I’m going to tell them they can come and visit. Thank YOU.” (Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy*)

With that, they both relaxed and talked at length about each other, music, life in prison, etc, not realizing Stevenson had stayed much longer than the allotted time. When the guard returned, he took it out on the prisoner shackling his hands and ankles roughly, the cuffs far too tight. Bryan could see Henry grimacing with pain. But, even so, Henry consoled Bryan saying, “Don’t worry about this. Just come back.” And, as guard

pushed him to the door, Henry, smiling, planted his feet to resist the officer's shoving.

He began to sing, startling both the officer and Bryan. *I'm pressing on, the upward way - New heights I'm gaining, every day - Still praying as, I'm onward bound - Lord, plant my feet on Higher Ground.*

I'm pressing on. Plant my feet on Higher Ground. "A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way ... no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray." If a spirit can bloom on death row, don't you think the Lord can open your eyes to signs of life and hope even in the desert. Don't ever underestimate the power of your effort to bring water to someone in a desert. How can we not dedicate ourselves to planting seeds of hope? For where the world sees a desert, God sees a vineyard, a verdant holy highway on higher ground. Amen.