

December 15, 2019

The candles on our Advent wreath preach, in a beautiful way, this text from Isaiah. Purple, rose, and white. It's all here in these few verses.

First...purple. The first two Sundays in Advent we light only the purple candles. Purple for repentance. Purple is the color of royalty. Kings wore this color. In Advent we hear the cry, "*Behold, your King is coming!*" "*Prepare the royal highway,*" we sing. "*In the desert make straight paths for Him.*"

Advent means coming. King Jesus is coming. Anyone can prepare for His coming as a tiny baby in a manger. Get the tree decorated, bake the cookies, wrap the presents....and we're ready for Christmas. It's quite another thing, however, to be ready for Jesus' coming on the Last Day, even for His coming to us now in Word and in Sacrament. Only by repenting will we be ready. Only by lamenting our wretchedness and turning away from our sins do our hearts become a desert.

And so Isaiah begins with this purple color. "*The wilderness and the dry land...*" is how our text begins. "*The desert...*" he writes. With these words Isaiah lights the purple candles on our Advent wreath.

And then we hear something different, something new. "*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad!*" says Isaiah; "*The desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus; it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing!*" In the deep darkness of Advent, Isaiah lights, not the third purple candle, but the rose-colored candle on our wreath. "Gladness, joy, and singing" is what this means.

And oh, how we need this. God's people then were in captivity for so long. The Assyrians and the Babylonians had taken them away. They were sorrowful, knowing this is what they deserved because of their sinfulness. But their hope was to be returned, for this God had promised. "How long," was their expectant cry, "must we sit in darkness?"

And isn't this our cry as well? We try to make the best of things. We strive to be positive. But our hearts can become racked with sorrow; our lives a mess. Sometimes we don't know if we're coming or going, everything is in such disarray. Here we sit in the middle of Advent...and it's always Advent...and we wonder when will Jesus come? When will our joy be full; our gladness complete; our sorrows no more?

Friend, God knows where you are in life. He knows your heart. He knows the burdens you carry there; the pain you feel, and the sorrows that can bring you to your knees. And so He tells Isaiah to light the rose candle. And he does by saying, "*the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus!*"

Maybe you've seen pictures, or if you were fortunate enough to see it with your own eyes, it's an amazing thing when a dry desert suddenly blossoms forth, the crocus flower filling every part of it. It's beautiful...breathtaking. It doesn't last forever. But while it lasts, the desert is not sad, but joyful.

Today this joy is for you. In Hebrew the crocus is also translated as the rose. And so the rose color on our wreath is lit today to encourage you to hold on, don't give up. God's promises to you are sure and certain. "*Behold your God,*" says Isaiah, "*He will come and save you!*"

This reassuring word is given so that your heart is uplifted. It's a word of joy and hope. Wherever you are in life at this moment...however may be your sorrows, however much your anxiety, God fills your heart, desert though it is, with the blooming rose, the crocus. Christmas is coming soon to fulfill your expectant waiting in Advent. And even more, Jesus is here now with you. His very words are in your ears. His body and blood is here for you. He who will come, comes now through Word and Sacrament. This is why your heart and life blossom forth. It's why you can hold on and keep waiting with hope.

Yet even while we see Isaiah lighting the rose candle for us, we know that next Sunday we go back to purple. The third purple candle on our wreath is lit. We're still in Advent. We're still in the desert. And by next Sunday the crocus stops blossoming.

It was this way for John the Baptist. In our Gospel reading we see him sending his disciples to Jesus from his prison cell. His Advent was even more dark and foreboding than ours. How long must he wait in his dungeon? When will his joy be full? Will it ever?

We know what happened to John the Baptist. Herod murdered him in his prison cell. He never again saw the light of day. At least it appears that way. But we know that John, today, lives in the glorious light of heaven, for he is there with Christ.

When will that same glorious light come into our Advent? It's here now, but not yet. In this way... Think of the sun's light. The sun burns intensely and thus gives light. But it takes over eight minutes for the light of the sun to reach the earth. But we know it's coming each and every morning. Just so, the Son of God went to the cross, and there He burned intensely in the fire of hell, for Jesus was bearing your sin and mine, and the sin of the whole world. And therefore, the glorious light of heaven is coming.

And we do know that it will come to us. The cross took place, and Jesus died there for you. You are, therefore, forgiven. Each and every one of you is truly forgiven of all your sins. Jesus bore the penalty of your sin. Nothing can keep you out of heaven. Jesus gives it to you as pure gift.

However dark your days may be; even as dark as John's were, the light of Christ – that glorious light of heaven – will reach you. The white candle on our wreath will be lit. Not yet. But it will. It is certain, for God always keeps His promises. And He promises that you who wait for Jesus' coming will not be disappointed.

"*Behold your God!*" cries Isaiah as he sees the match already struck to light the white and glorious Christ-candle, "*He will come and save you!*" Amen.