



## The Way of the Desert: Rejoice and Blossom

Isaiah 35

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Last week we heard quite a bit from and about John the Baptist. And as you have already heard in our first reading today, he is still very much present with us on this third Sunday of Advent. Now I hope this came through clearly enough last week — John is an extraordinary prophet. You've heard me say before, that sometimes we make the mistake of thinking that prophets can see into the future. That's not quite right. Prophets have keen eyesight, but it is the present moment that they are able to see better than anyone else. John knows what the people most need to hear — words of lament that ring out with heartbreaking honesty: "Are you the one who was to come? Are you the one we've been waiting for? Or are we to wait longer still, for someone else?"

Jesus always knows just the right way to respond. To the mighty prophet, he responds by borrowing the words of another mighty prophet, Isaiah. Isaiah is the quintessential Advent prophet, for he is the great Interrupter.

That's how I've come to think of him. The Great Interrupter. Because if you read the book of Isaiah straight through, I have to tell you — it's rough going. For the vast majority of it, it is bleak. Over and over again he laments the

present day, and warns of what is to come, if nothing changes. But just when Isaiah himself and all who read his words reach the breaking point, he interrupts himself, telling us of good things that are coming. He interrupts the gloom and doom he sees in the present moment, to tell us how God will interrupt. Because that's another way of thinking about Advent, and the incarnation as a whole, I think — It's the great Interruption.

It's the interruption of the status quo. The interruption of fear. The interruption of darkness and dismay and distress. The interruption of loneliness and longing. And it interrupts with light and salvation and restoration and healing on its wings. Isaiah talks of the desert being interrupted by blossoms. In scripture, the desert is always invoked as a dry, desolate place. A part of the earth you travel through, with caution and preparation and provisions. A place you don't wish to remain, but simply endure on the way to better things. But sometimes, seemingly out of nowhere, interrupting the infinite grains of sand, blossoms appear and water bursts forth.

It is an interruption of the holiest kind, because it's life, interrupting the place where

there had been no life. It is God making a way where there had been no way.

That's why Jesus reaches for these words from the prophet Isaiah to comfort the prophet John. Because John is in prison. Things have not gone as he wished. Good news seems far away, if not altogether impossible. It seems there is no way forward, and he is afraid that he has been wrong, about everything.

I wonder if you have ever felt that way.

And so Jesus chooses to send John words of holy interruption, words originally penned to others who were "of a fearful heart." Do not be afraid, Isaiah tells us. For here is your God, who is coming to you. The key to the what Isaiah prophecies is that restoration is coming. Restoration is interrupting all of the gloom and doom. Isaiah talks in the future tense. He offers us words of promise. Jesus talks in present tense. He offers us words of fulfillment. "The blind? They are seeing again. The lame? They are walking again. The lepers? Their skin is clean again. And the dead? They are being raised up again."

By the grace of God, working through the person of Jesus Christ, everything broken, everything battered, everything left wanting, is interrupted. That is what happens when Jesus comes into this world. He interrupts ... everything. And a small detail: when Jesus sends his messengers to John, he says to them, "Tell John what you are seeing." In other words, "Tell him what you are witnessing yourself, don't just repeat what I have said. Tell him what you see happening."

It was a number of years ago now, that I heard a lecture by a theoretical physicist. And there is a part of what she said that I will never

forget — and not just because it was the only part I understood.

She said that they have proven, that science has proven, over and over again, just how bad we are at noticing something if we aren't actively looking for it. She said, even in labs, even among scientists with decades of training, we are much less likely to notice something unexpected. Researchers are trained to look for certain markers, or certain reactions. She said, in order to discover the unexpected, those same researchers actually have to go in with the mindset of, "I'm going to find something that surprises me." Otherwise, the chances of them finding something — a new insight, a cure — whatever it might be — the chances of them finding it, even if its there, drop noticeably.

These were her exact words: "We almost never find what we aren't looking for."

So I wonder — what are you looking for, this holy season of Advent?

I read a column by Arthur Brooks in the *Washington Post* a couple of weeks ago.<sup>1</sup> I'm still mulling it over. He cites a 1998 article in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* that says negative information weighs more heavily on the brain. In other words, negative stimuli get our attention much more than positive stimuli. Now on the one hand, this is good — it's the basis of evolution. It's how we survive. But on the other hand, Brooks says, these days, we as Americans, especially, are so fixated on the bad (and he is quick to point out that this is across the political spectrum), we are so fixated on the bad, we allow it to demobilize us or even begin to destroy us. He says, that when we actively search for signs of hope, we

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur C. Brooks, *The World Is Doing Much Better Than the Bad News Makes Us Think*, The Washington Post, December 2, 2019. Accessed online: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-world-is-doing-much-better-than-the-bad-news-makes-us-think/2019/12/02/25086e72-1532-11ea-8406-df3c54b3253e\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-world-is-doing-much-better-than-the-bad-news-makes-us-think/2019/12/02/25086e72-1532-11ea-8406-df3c54b3253e_story.html)

are moved toward action, because seeing hope inspires us to bring about more hope. But when we only allow ourselves to notice the bad, we are moved toward lament, and that becomes the basis of our worldview. In other words, like perpetuates like. Look for signs of life, and you will find them. Or the way Isaiah puts it: look for blossoms in the desert, and you will find them.

Brooks goes on to say, it's not that bad things still aren't happening. They are. But when we allow that to dominate our perception, it takes over. He argues that it begins to change our vision, the way we look at the world and everything and everyone in it. The risk is that we become people who actively assume the worst, even without really realizing it.

We almost always find what we are looking for. So again: what are you looking for this Advent?

Have you heard about Huang Yung-fu?<sup>2</sup> He was born in China. In 1937, he left home as a 15 year old boy to fight in the Second Sino-Japanese War. Later, he fought in World War II. After all of that, he fought for the Nationalist Party against the Communist government. When the Nationalists lost in 1949, he and two million others fled to Taiwan, where they were housed in a makeshift village hastily put together for those incoming members of the military. Huang and others then fought on Taiwan's behalf. After being shot twice and critically wounded in battle, he retired in 1978 with a gold medal for defending Taiwan.

But ten years ago, at the age of 86, Huang Yung-fu found himself in another fight. The Taiwanese government was threatening to tear his home down. The villages were never meant to be permanent. As they fell into further disrepair, the government began an aggressive

campaign to demolish all of the remaining settlements and use the prime urban real estate to build high-rise condominiums. At that time, only 30 of the original 879 settlements remained. Huang's was one of them, but just barely.

"When I came here," he said, "my village had 1200 households and we'd all sit and talk like one big family. But then everyone moved away or passed away and I became lonely." He remained in his village until he was the last resident left.

By 2008, developers had taken possession of all but 11 of his village's 1200 homes. "They wanted to knock it all down," he said. "But even still, I didn't want to move. This is the only home I've ever known in Taiwan." Nevertheless, he received a letter ordering him to vacate his home.

When Huang tells his story, it is at this point that a smile begins to spread across his face. "I didn't want to move," he says. "So I started painting." He painted a single bird on his bedroom wall. The next morning, he painted again, and he has continued ever since.

Every morning, at 4 am, Huang Yung-fu turns on a single light, and carries a handful of paint tins into the streets outside. While the city around him sleeps, he crouches on a stool for hours and quietly decorates the cement walls, pavement, and windows with an explosion of murals in every imaginable color. Tigers leap from the walls, whiskered kittens hide in alleyways, and a cheery parade of wide-eyed pandas, peacocks, and people peek out from doorways. Look closely and you will stumble upon dancing samurais, and floating astronauts.

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<sup>2</sup> I referred to a number of sources in telling this story, drawing from all of them. The first and primarily source, however, is: <http://www.bbc.com/travel/gallery/20181128-the-96-year-old-painter-who-saved-a-village>

In 2010, as the Taiwanese government puzzled over how to respond to this uncooperative resident, a student from a nearby university stumbled upon Huang's village and learned of his solitary battle to hold back the bulldozers, one brushstroke at a time. The student took pictures and began a fundraising campaign to purchase as much paint as possible. This led to a petition protesting the demolition, and in October of 2010, the remaining 11 buildings, streets, and surrounded areas were granted protected status, and preserved as a public park.

Through all of this, Huang Yung-fu just kept painting, as every surface in the settlement was filled with bright, vibrant images and joyful, life-giving color. From the streets to the rooftops, imaginative, bubbly creations have taken over.

The world began calling his home "Rainbow Village." And they called Huang "Grandpa Rainbow." These days, more than one and a quarter million people visit Rainbow Village each year. For quite some time, Grandpa Rainbow would visit with guests each day.

His health has recently taken a turn, however, and he spends a fair amount of time in the hospital. But he found beauty even there. During a bout of pneumonia, he fell in love with one of his nurses. They were married soon after.

Rainbow Village's population literally doubled, and "Grandma Rainbow" now helps contribute to the whimsical world. And for the visitors who wish, they can find Grandpa Rainbow's door by looking for the illustration of a smiling soldier holding a paintbrush. "There are many things I can't do anymore," he says. "But I can still paint. I can still look at something old and broken down, something forgotten and left behind, and see something beautiful."

What are you looking for this Advent?

*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.  
They shall see the glory of the Lord,  
the majesty of our God.  
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness  
and streams in the desert.  
And the ransomed of the Lord  
shall return with singing;  
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;  
they shall obtain joy and gladness,  
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.*