

With a Vengeance

Isaiah 35:1-10

December 14, 2025, Home Moravian Church

In 2022, colorful blooms exploded across the Atacama Desert. Pink, purple, yellow flowers ran every which way, more than 200 species of plants all told, carpeting the loftiest peaks of the Andes Mountains, in the driest non-polar desert on earth.

Spectacular desert blooms are infrequent and difficult to predict. They happen through a combination of variables that are not precisely known. When deserts bloom, people talk. They publish articles, which is how I learned about the 2022 event. They sing about it: Australian cowboy singer Slim Dusty had a hit, presumably in Australia, called “Where the Desert Flowers Bloom.” They make movies, like Walt Disney’s 1953 film *The Living Desert*, once standard fare at Laurel Ridge summer camp: Anyone else remember the time-lapse sequence showing flowers bursting into color all across the sand?

Coming to us as it does from the desert, the Bible talks about desert bloom, too. In a voice of wonder, Isaiah prophesies that the desert “shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and shouting.” In stunning bloom, the desert will reflect the luxuriant growth of Lebanon, Carmel, Sharon: three famous images of beauty that all show up in the Bible’s great love poem, the Song of Solomon. Isaiah is *in love* with this great vision of a desert in bloom.

Imagine yourself as an ancient dweller of the desert. That’s a hard life, for sure. In the daytime, the heat might dehydrate and even kill you. At night, with no protective humidity, temperatures can fall to the 40s; that won’t kill you, but you’d better have blankets. Also, while you’re wrapped up in those blankets, shivering in the cleft of a rock, you might be pondering the

awful irony that a place so inhospitable to life is somehow quite alive with wild animals who do not have your best interests at heart.

The day-in, day-out of life in the desert is bad enough. Just carrying a pack in that heat, day after day, could make your hands weak. Stumbling over sand and rock could make your knees feeble. The possibility of dangerous wildlife could fill your heart with fear. That's all normal stuff, in the desert.

And still it could be worse; as harsh as the natural world can be, human society can be harsher. A sandstorm or flash flood does not set out to get you, specifically; but a human... well, as Isaiah says in chapter 24, "The treacherous deal very treacherously" (24:16). Dangerous people may dwell in the desert. If the treacherous should deal treacherously with you, what would you want God to do about it?

You'd want God to save you, of course; but not just that. You might want God to save you "with terrible recompense." You might want to see the treacherous hurt the way they have hurt you. You'd want God to settle accounts, eye for eye and tooth for tooth.

This is a normal way for a human to feel. Unjust injury makes our world seem out of joint. The dream of revenge is a dream of squaring accounts, putting everything back in its proper place. When we ask God for "terrible recompense" against those who have hurt us, it's a dream that God will put things back in order.

If the Bible talks a lot about vengeance, it's because the people of the Bible have been deeply hurt, over and over again. Voices of grief come to us through the history of a suffering people: living in brutal conditions, brutalized by large and powerful nations, with no power of their own to impose equal suffering on their enemies. So they place vengeance in the hands of God, looking forward to God's working it out in history.

Well, history is a mess, isn't it? And when it comes to anguish and the thirst for vengeance, human beings are still pretty much the same. So, even today, when a prophet says that God "will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense," we're secretly or even not so secretly pleased. We can all think of someone we'd like to see punished.

Sometimes we take vengeance as our own task, getting even, maybe launching a war. On our better days, we remember that the Bible says vengeance belongs to God. We might then tell ourselves that God will take care of things, and go about our lives—but always keeping an eye out for the terrible recompense that will put the world back in order.

But what are we looking for, when we look for the vengeance of God? Volcanoes? Earthquakes? In our imaginations, nothing says "God's vengeance" like natural disaster.

And yet: when volcanoes erupt and earthquakes split the ground, have you ever even *thought* about blaming some nation's behavior? Do you wag your finger like some biblical prophet and declare that you *told* them so? Or do you fall to your knees, crying: *My God!* body deserves this. No people could be that bad; and God can't be that bad, either.

Now we have a conundrum. If we trust that God is coming with vengeance and terrible recompense, yet we do not accept that pain and tragedy are the manifestation of God's vengeance, then we're going to have to consider that our picture of God's terrible recompense might be all wrong. We need another picture.

How about this one, from Isaiah?

Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be opened; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water.

If we expect God's vengeance to restore order, Isaiah's vision fails the test. God, in this vision, does not restore the natural order. God stands the natural order on its head—much as the waves stood up like walls when Moses and the Israelites passed through the Red Sea.

But why would we think God's putting things right means God returning the world to order? Earth's natural order is a tragic dance of birth and death, blossoming and withering, predator and prey. Whereas, in God's new order—as Isaiah said in last week's text—the lion lies down with the lamb, and toddlers play safely by the nests of adders, and a little child leads the whole world.

But how can a peaceable kingdom be God's "terrible recompense"? *Volcanoes* are "terrible"! *Earthquakes* are "terrible"! They are terrible because they *inspire terror*. What is so terrifying about lame people leaping, and sand turning into water?

Only everything: because if lame people suddenly leap, and sand suddenly turns to water, that confronts us with power beyond our understanding. Sand into water—that's not how the world works. Health, joy, relief, the quenching of thirst when we asked for vengeance—that's not how the world works, either. That was *not* what we were asking God for, when we cried out for vengeance against those who have dealt with us treacherously. We ask God to explode a city, and instead, God makes the desert explode with flowers.

But perhaps this world of blossoms will not be open to those who have hurt us. Perhaps that's how God will put things back in order. The good people will cross that carpet of flowers on what Isaiah calls the Holy Way—a way so perfect that not even fools can get lost on it, which I'm sure is good news for us all. And look here! Isaiah says, "the unclean shall not travel on it." Maybe *this* is God's vengeance: God kicking bad people off the path.

Then again, maybe the reason the unclean shall not travel on the path is that God will have made *everyone* clean.

What a spectacular overthrowing of our expectations: that God seeks not to exclude, but with great and life-giving power cleanses and redeems, opening the holy way to all. What a reversal of the natural order of our hearts. No wonder Isaiah is in love with this vision. It's a vision of God giving beyond measure, God loving beyond all our power to imagine, God filling the universe with excessive and extravagant beauty—God being God, we might say, *with a vengeance*.

It is a stunning vision; but it is long in coming. What are we to do while we wait?

We are to follow the example of Jesus, who continually upended the natural order of everything from fig trees to the Sea of Galilee, not to mention the ordered hierarchies of religion and society. Jesus urged his disciples to live in unnatural ways: turning the other cheek, loving enemies, forswearing seats of honor, forgiving seventy times seven, poking their heads through the hard soil of hearts like crocuses breaking through the desert.

A desert bloom probably always seems like a miracle; but the potential for bloom is always there, below the rocks and sand, plants lying dormant until conditions call them to blossom. Here on earth, awaiting the fulfillment of God's vision, our lives should fill the soil with potential, ready when God calls for the desert to bloom.

Think of a traveler, weary in the desert. Weary of the journey, weary of the sand; weary of being hurt, even weary of hurting others. Traveling on with weak hands, feeble knees, fearful heart.

What if the traveler met you in the desert? Would your encounter leave that traveler with a hint that the dry ground holds the potential for blossoms? Would that potential help the traveler

go forward? Would it help them be strong? What courage might it give to a fearful heart, to see you as a sign that the desert is poised for bloom?

And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness; and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

And the desert shall bloom, *with a vengeance*. Amen.