

The Scriptures Behind the Carols, Pt. 1
A Rose In the Desert
Isaiah 35: 1-6, 10

**First Presbyterian Church
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Here's a part of J.R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* we haven't talked about before. I know, I know, you're pretty sure that over 11 years I must have read the whole book to you. But truly I haven't preached on this passage from Isaiah before nor have I described this episode from near the end of Tolkien's masterwork. One of the major plotlines in Tolkien's epic is the revealing of the one true king of Middle Earth. Many have believed that the race of kings died out centuries earlier. After all, the White Tree in the Garden of the capitol had long since withered and died. That tree had been the symbol of the strength and vitality of the kings, and it was barren. So many have believed that even if there were an heir to the great kings of old, he could never prove as wise or strong as his ancestors. Many despair that the world will ever flourish as in its glorious past. But at the conclusion of the Great War over the one ring of power, the true King is revealed to be the rugged, enigmatic warrior named Aragorn. He fills, after centuries, the empty throne and begins a reign of peace. A new age is dawning in the earth.

But though he has come through decades of deprivation and conflict, through bloody battles and even a sojourn through the paths of the dead, the newly crowned king worried for the future. For Aragorn had not yet wed his true love. He knew all too well that he was mortal, and wondered if his elven fiancé Arwen would come to him, or sail away with her people to the ends of the earth. One day Aragorn and the wizard Gandalf hiked an ancient trail high up into the mountains, to just beneath the snow line of the great peaks. They looked out on the fair city and the green lands below. But instead of rejoicing over his realm, Aragorn felt sorrow. He longed for a sign about his future.

Gandalf the wizard spoke to him, "Turn your face from the green world, and look where all seems barren and cold." Aragorn thus turned away from the view of the city and fields below and looked higher up in the mountains. He became "aware that alone there in the waste a growing thing stood. And he climbed to it, and saw that out of the very edge of the snow there sprang a sapling tree no more than three feet high. Already it had put forth young leaves..."¹

“Then Aragorn cried, “. . .I have found it! Lo! Here is an [offspring] of the Eldest of Trees!” Beneath the snow of a rocky, harsh mountain slope, a seed of the great White Tree had found enough earth to sprout and grow. The White Tree was a descendant of the very first tree, and so the symbol of the hope of the rule of good and just kings. Aragorn brought the sapling to replace the dead White Tree in the garden. And he was filled with hope. Soon his love came to him, and they were wed on midsummer’s day. And from that moment the realm flourished under his rule, growing in commerce and beauty, trade and art, children and gardens.

A sapling tree brought forth leaf out of season, cracking through stone and snow to rise in life. In the place where all seemed barren and cold, the sign emerged of the world’s rebirth under a good king.

Tolkien, of course, was steeped in Scripture. He knew the prophecy of Isaiah which we read earlier. In the King James Version, which he would have known, the verse says,

The desert and the solitary place shall be glad for them;
And the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the *rose*.

We have to forgive the English for their affection for beautiful roses. The flower mentioned in the Hebrew would have been more like a desert rose, or crocus, which is the word our ESV Bible uses. Crocuses are great, and in the northern climates, they are the first sign of spring, often cracking through the snow to promise the color of spring to come. But roses seem particularly special to us. Their sweet scent pleases us. We give roses as a sign of love. They symbolize beauty and sweetness. A rose blooming in the desert is a picture of something surprising and wonderful.

Look away from the green world and turn instead to the place that is barren to see a sign of hope. There the surprising life in a dead place will assure that all will be well. So Isaiah 35 goes on to speak of burning sand becoming a cool pool of water. The relentlessly dry desert will break forth with streams. To wander in the trackless wilderness is to be hopelessly lost, perhaps going round and round in circles til you die. Only expert guides can get you through. But in Isaiah 35 a wide, clear highway will appear in the wasteland. It shall be so clearly marked that even fools can’t miss it. Exiles will return home at last, and those who have sorrowed for years over loss of land and life will come back singing. Sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

The prophecy of Isaiah 35 answers the questions that burn in our hearts. Will it ever get better? Will the good, true King ever rule over the world so that it can flourish again in peace? Will the madness ever stop? Will I ever feel better? Will all this sorrow ever give way to joy? Will things be all right at last?

As the season of Advent begins, we approach the story of God's arrival in Jesus Christ a bit differently. For 16 weeks, we let Jesus burst onto the scene in the glory of his completed work as our savior and great high priest. Now we drop back, and imagine that we are awaiting his arrival all over again. This yearly journey of re-entering the story actually fits the way we experience life in the world. Yes, Jesus Christ has come once and for all to save us. Yet, he took all our sins on the cross and no more atonement needs to be made. Yes, he rose from the dead, never to die again and death has no more hold on him. He is Lord of lords and King of kings. He has been crowned.

But here on earth we do not yet see the full extent of his reign flourishing. The just ordering of the world has not yet been completed. There is still sighing and sorrow. We are still hurting each other. Marriages are still breaking, crops are still failing, people are still taking up arms against each other, and all this dying just continues. Dick Gates said last week, "It's an avalanche." We've had so many hospitalizations, deaths and funerals that it feels to the pastors like a landslide. Happy holidays!

Maybe you've felt that way too. The world scene dismays us. We will all know what it is to be so angry you want to hurt someone, but we're still shocked that people would do such terrible things to people they don't even know. We can't believe how disagreements escalate to catastrophic violence. We don't really feel like our leaders have this under control. We're on edge, we're sorrowful, we're anxious.

So while we know the forgiveness of Christ and the peace of his presence, we are still yearning. Lord, come and set things right. Lord come and work it out. Your kingdom come, your will be done. The Lord's Prayer is as urgent now as it ever has been.

Into this ache, the prophet speaks a strange and wondrous hope. Look where you do not expect to see life. Look where a rose blooms in the desert. Look in the place that is barren and cold to see God bringing new life. The sapling of the great tree has sunk roots through the rock and pushed leaves through the snow. God brings water in the desert, paths in the wilderness, and even life amidst death as

sure signs that he is not done yet. He is not done with working in your life. Nor is he done working in the world.

All these thoughts under lie the beautiful Christmas carol, “Lo how a rose e’er blooming.” Listen to its words.

Lo, how a Rose e'er blooming from tender stem hath sprung!
Of Jesse's lineage coming, as men of old have sung.
It came, a floweret bright, amid the cold of winter,
When half spent was the night.

Isaiah 'twas foretold it, the Rose I have in mind;
With Mary we behold it. The Virgin Mother kind,
To show God's love aright, she bore to us a Savior,
When half spent was the night.

The unknown German author, some five hundred years ago, wove together two prophecies from Isaiah. The one we read from Isaiah 35, that a rose would bloom in the desert. The second is from Isaiah 11, where the prophet predicts “There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse.” Jesse was the father of eight sons. He was a land owner and had much livestock. His youngest son kept the sheep, and was often overlooked by his stronger, faster brothers. But David the youngest son of Jesse became Israel’s second and greatest King. He was the man after God’s own heart, the composer of many psalms and the visionary behind the temple in Jerusalem. The LORD promised to David, Jesse’s son, that he would have an everlasting kingdom. But as the centuries passed, it looked as if God’s promise had been broken. For Israel’s kings were often wicked and apostate, plunging the kingdom into idolatry and oppression. In 587 BC the entire nation would be overrun by the Babylonians and the people carried away. But the prophecy for these dark times was that from the root of Jesse, seemingly cut down to nothing, a tender shoot would emerge. A branch from the stump would bear fruit. That is, a redeemer would come to save the people. The nation of God’s people would be restored.

So far so good. But very mysteriously, at the end of Isaiah 11, the prophet calls this redeemer not just the offshoot of the stump of Jesse. He calls this redeemer the *root* of Jesse. He is not only a descendant of Jesse, he is the source of Jesse. He’s an ancestor and an offspring? How can that possibly be? Surely for centuries they pondered over this mystery at the heart of God’s promises. But with the coming of Jesus it all made sense. Jesus was a man, and thus a descendent of

Jesse and David. But Jesus was also God himself, and thus the creator and originator of Jesse, David and all people. In Revelation 22, we hear Jesus claim this dual title for himself, “I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star” (Rev. 22: 16). Only God himself could be both the source and the goal, the start and finish of man, the ancestor and the son.

The carol goes on to sing,

This Flower, whose fragrance tender with sweetness fills the air,
Dispels with glorious splendor the darkness everywhere;
True man, yet very God, from sin and death He saves us,
And lightens every load.

True man, yet very God, from sin and death he saves us. This is the Rose in the desert. He is Mary’s baby. We longed for him, and he came to us. We long for him to come again. We yearn for him to finish what he started and put all things right.

For we know the sweet power of his presence. His fragrance with sweetness fills the air. This aroma of a savior clears the room of gloom. He dispels with glorious splendor that darkness everywhere.

Now we know it in a taste, a scent that we catch on the wind. We know it in our personal lives when we realize how he gave us hope when we were in despair. He gave us cleansing forgiveness when we seemed forever stained with guilt. He gave us direction when we were wandering. He brought us home when we were lost. He sent love to us again when we thought we were only despicable. He still does it. And these roses blooming in the desert are signs of what is to come.

In these difficult days, with advent yearning, we hold hard to the hope. Streams will flow in the desert. Paths to life will arise in the wilderness. In the rocky barren places life will grow. Jesus Christ has come to us, a rose ever blooming. And he will come again.

So we take up the prophet’s word this first week of advent, with full conviction, “They shall see the glory of God, they shall see the majesty of our God.” Say to those who have an anxious heart, “Be strong; fear not! Behold your God will come with vengeance on evil, with the recompense for all who have been wronged. He will come and save you. So strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Be strong. Fear not. Hang on, in fact, live strong. For he

comes. The desert rose shall bloom and the earth be renewed. The King reigns and he shall reign forevermore.

¹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, Bk. 6, chp 5.