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Live Defiantly

Isaiah 35:1-10 The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus 2it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God. 3Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. 4Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you." 5Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; 6then 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; 7the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. 8A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. 9No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. 10And 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.

Anyone who has lived with or help to raise a three-year-old knows all too well about defiance. "**I do it!!!**" "**No!!**" "**Mine!!**" Such acts of defiance on the part of the otherwise charming little person are often precipitated by occasions of urgent importance such as: when mom or dad wants the little one to wear pants, or the child insists with increasingly urgency and defiance that yes it is correct to have one foot *with* a sock and one foot *without* a sock, or the hunger strike that unexpectedly happens in the high chair when the food that your precious toddler has adored and would eat at every meal all of a sudden is anathema and you are clearly trying to poison him or her when you innocently serve it once again expecting to be thanked but instead receive

howls of defiant rage at your gall in feeding him or her something that until minutes ago was a favorite food.

Of course, let's not let parents off the hook here too easily. I recall once, when I was younger and stupider, defiantly insisting to our daughter that yes she would eat at least a few bites of that pork chop and making her stay at the table for two hours to many tears and giving her a memory that now chagrins and shames me. My mother, before she died, once said she didn't have many regrets but one of them was that she too often made too big a deal over things with her children that really weren't very important when all was said and done. She said that not of the toddler years, but of the teenage years, when escalating mutual angry defiance marked too many occasions that in retrospect were just not that crucial. It's one of God's good gifts that child-rearing is generally for the young, but one of God's ironies that sometimes wisdom about parenting comes long after those times when you really could have used it. But I guess that's why God also made grandparents.

Defiance. **Defiance**. This third in our Advent sermon series on the words and visions of the prophet Isaiah asks us to think about the things that are important to our faith, and one of those things, I maintain, is indeed defiance. You won't usually find it in list of Christian virtues because too often we tend to think of being Christian as the equivalent of always being nice and affable and jolly – particularly, perhaps, at this time of year. But my friends, defiance can indeed be a key Christian virtue and one that you and I should cultivate and emulate. Consider our scripture today from Isaiah: last week, I said that Isaiah was writing at a time when the southern kingdom of Israel was menaced by Assyria. Assyria had already conquered the northern kingdom of Israel

and Isaiah called on the kings of the southern kingdom, Judah, to stop hurting the poor, to stop turning a blind eye to the danger headed their way, to care for the poor and the immigrant instead of lining their own pockets and those of their friends. But those calls weren't heeded and just before today's scripture, Isaiah delivers his most dire warnings about what will happen to a nation whose rulers no longer rule righteously. And you would think that he would follow that with a call for both rulers and people to be afraid, to be fearful of what was about to happen. But he doesn't. No, in a remarkable act of defiance, he talks instead about what God can and will yet do in a vision where deserts will unaccountably bloom and the feeble will be strengthened and danger will be replaced with delight.

It is a vision that is indeed a defiant one because it refuses to give into to fearfulness. A pastor by the name of Terri Ott says this about such defiant fearlessness:

"Fear is [the] enemy of life. It's hard to love when you are afraid. It's hard to care passionately when you're afraid. It's impossible to be joyful about anything when you are afraid. Fear limits life, constrains life, pollutes life. Fear can be a good thing when it alerts us to danger. But...when fear becomes overwhelming....it takes over." Living in fear is not really living. Fear is not life-giving. So the bible tells us over and over again, "Do not fear."¹

"Fear is the enemy of life." It's true, isn't it? And yet what Isaiah is telling us, what the coming Christ promises us, is that there is an alternative, a defiant alternative to such

¹Terri Ott, quoting John Buchanan <https://aflyonourwall.wordpress.com/2010/12/20/do-not-fear-isaiah-35-1-10/>

fear. We are reminded that, in the words of another pastor, that “no wilderness is too wild for God to restore it. No person or situation is so dead that God cannot find life in it.”² Good words, yes; nice words, yes. But we ask how, don’t we? For we, too, live in fearful times, we too sometimes find ourselves downright scared about our lives, we too sometimes fear the future, we too are afraid in the face of too many months that have more month than money. How will God make our deserts bloom? How can God make those dry and fearful places defiantly and wondrously bountiful? And maybe even more important, how can you and I emulate Isaiah’s call for defiance in the face of fearfulness?

Well, listen to these words again from Rev. Ott; she offers a powerful reminder about what will cause fearfulness to flee:

...the only way to get rid of fear is to be loved out of it. Think about it... you can't argue anyone out of their fear.... The only way to get rid of fear is to be **loved out of it.** When your little child wakes up in the middle of the night terrified and screaming because there is a monster in [the] room, you don't get up and go to [the] door and say, “Now..., we've talked about this...there's no such thing as monsters and they certainly don't live under your bed.” No!.... You rush into the room and pull [your child] into your arms and you love him [or her] until [it's not monsters that are being thought about but instead your] ...loving arms that are embracing [him or her.]³

²http://www.pilgrimchurchucc.org/files/sermons/dec15_isaiah_35.pdf

³Ibid. She is here quoting Dr. Craig Barnes. Emphasis mine.

That's the sort of defiant love that can indeed evict fear.

I've seen such love and so have you in the most unlikely of places:

- I've seen it in the Muslims passengers on a bus in Kenya who, when their bus was attacked by Al-Qaeda terrorists demanding that the Muslims identify any Christians so they could be murdered, refused to do so. Instead the Muslim women gave out head scarves to the Christian women and one Muslim passenger said to the terrorists "either kill us all or leave all of us alone."⁴ Defiant love indeed.
- I've seen it in the grizzled, bearded, cowboy-hat-wearing Dallas man by the name of Justin Normand who stood outside of a mosque in Irving, Texas, with a sign that proclaimed "You belong. Stay strong. Be blessed. We are one America"⁵ in reaction to the fact that by the time he offered his simple witness mosques all over America had received hundreds of death threats and calls for exterminating all Muslims and praising Hitler's treatment of Jews as the way Muslim Americans should be treated.⁶ Mr. Norman said this of his action: "I remain Presbyterian, not Muslim.... It wasn't about demonstrating my outrage.... This was about binding up the wounded. About showing compassion and empathy for the hurting and fearful among us.... This was about my religion, not theirs." Defiant love indeed.

⁴<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-35937314>

⁵<http://www.dallasnews.com/news/irving/2016/11/29/man-holding-belong-sign-front-irving-mosque-lauded-photos-go-viral-facebook>

⁶<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/11/27/trump-will-do-to-you-muslims-what-hitler-did-to-the-jews-mosques-get-threatening-letters/>

- I have seen it in the white police officer, Tim McMillan, who stopped a black teenager for texting and then wrote of his encounter in these words:

When I went to talk to the driver, I found a young black male, who was looking at me like he was absolutely terrified with his hands up. He said, "What do you want me to do, officer?" His voice was quivering. He was genuinely scared. I just looked at him for a moment, because what I was seeing made me sad. I said, "I just don't want you to get hurt I want your mom to always have her baby boy. I want you to grow up and be somebody. I don't even want to write you a ticket. Just please pay attention, and put the phone down...." I truly don't even care who's fault it is that young man was so scared to have a police officer at his window.... I just wish somebody would fix it.⁷ Defiant love indeed.

And Officer McMillan's defiant love shows us all the way to begin to fix the fear, to overcome the hate, to make it just a little more possible for the deserts to bloom and the dry places become fertile.

What about you? What acts of defiant love can you perform this Advent season, in the coming weeks, in the coming year? Most of us will not have the opportunity to do acts that make the news or go viral on Facebook or YouTube or blow up the Twitter-sphere. But there is no question whatsoever that you and I can testify through our words and our actions to the "the life-giving power of God even in the driest of places."⁸ One pastor says this of that opportunity:

If you choose to be a cynical intellectual, you can stack up plenty of evidence for

⁷<http://distractify.com/trending/2016/10/07/police-response-terrified-black-teenager>

⁸http://www.pilgrimchurchucc.org/files/sermons/dec15_isaiah_35.pdf

despairing about the future.... [But] We are free to make choices that lead us closer to God's dream or further away from it. God calls, urges, challenges us to lean into a new future whose foundations are compassion, beauty, justice and peace. God whispers in our depths of new possibilities for transforming our lives and transforming our world.⁹

Did you notice what the stories of those Muslim bus passengers, and that man in Texas, and that police officer had in common? They were all, indeed, about defying what was expected, they were all indeed about loving the monsters out of the room, they were all acts that the cynical and jaded would say have no point, can't possibly make a difference. But they are wrong, they are wrong. Love that defies what is expected, love that stands up for the neighbor whatever their race or religion, their orientation or their immigration status or their gender, springs up one more blossoming crocus, in Isaiah's image, amidst what looked to be only dryness and dreariness and desiccation.

Marian Wright Edelman, President of the Children's Defense Fund, tells the story of

...Sojourner Truth... a brilliant and indomitable slave woman who could neither read nor write but who was passionate about ending unjust slavery and second-class treatment of women. At the end of one of her anti-slavery talks in Ohio, a man came up to her and said, "Old woman, do you think that your talk about slavery does any good? Do you suppose people care what you say? Why,

⁹<http://www.wpc.org/uploads/sermons/pdf/December15Jones2013.pdf>

I don't care any more for your talk than I do for the bite of a flea." "Perhaps not," she answered, "but, the Lord willing, I'll keep you scratching."¹⁰

May God keep you and me scratching at the sometimes dry earth with our words and acts of defiant love, confident and trusting that God can and will blossom new life, new hope, new joy. And let us anticipate that day, spoken by Isaiah and embodied in the coming Christ when, indeed, we too shall "come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon our heads; we shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away." May it be so. Amen.

¹⁰http://www.pilgrimchurchucc.org/files/sermons/dec15_isaiah_35.pdf