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Wilderness: A Gift  
Isaiah 43:18-21

Last October I saw the Grand Canyon for the first time. Now, if you've seen it, nothing I can say will add to your experience, and if you haven't seen it, nothing I can say can begin to approximate the experience. But, I'm told they're paying me by the word, so let's see if I can try.

What you're probably expecting me to tell you about is the scale of the thing, and yes it's enormous, more so than I could have imagined. It's surprising at first, because you emerge not out of the dry desert, at least from the north side, but from a dense forest, and so when the trees open up and you can see it, you're maybe ten or twenty feet from one of the side canyons that leads into the main one. And it is most assuredly the biggest thing I've ever seen.

But the scale is still not the thing I found most surprising. The reputation of the Grand Canyon is, of course, the dry Arizona desert, and I just about expected to hear the theme from the old Western *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly* as we walked by the skulls of cattle, bleached in the perpetual sun.

But that's not what we found. What we found was green, and alive. It makes sense, geologically - canyons are formed by water - and yet somehow it continues to be unimaginable that this dry desert in which temperatures can get into the 120's in the summer at the base, is home to multiple gardens with streams running through them.

The image of life in the desert is arresting, because it upends our expectations. This is now the third week that we've been talking about the wilderness, and so far we've talked about it being a place where you get lost, need rescue, and in general are just sort of miserable and having a bad time, and so if you've made it this far in the wilderness, congratulations! You just stumbled on an oasis.

The prophet Isaiah who we read from was no stranger to wilderness. He wrote to people living in the wilderness, although perhaps at least not as metaphorical as literal. The Israelites had been conquered as a sovereign nation, been taken into Babylon, isolated from their homes and all that they knew. And for those who had managed to make their way home, what they'd find were homes in ruin, and people they hardly knew. Indeed, Isaiah and his people knew something about wilderness.

And so an oasis is what Isaiah gives them. Actually, what he's probably really describing are the seasonal rains that come in winter in Israel/Palestine. After a hot, dry summer, the rains tend to come around November or so, giving relief to the parched lands. And yet, in spite of the regularity of the rains that come to nourish the soil and bring relief, the coming rains are often forgotten.

It seems like this happens to people quite a bit, that we forget things, and begin to think that our present reality is permanent and unchangeable. Most of you know that Katie and I are expecting our first child in a little over a month, and because we have no earthly idea what we're doing, there are books to read. In one of them, the author recounts a time shortly after becoming a mother for the first time, when, almost devoid of meaningful sleep, she found herself at a family gathering with her child, and all of a sudden just broke down crying - in her exhaustion, she was overwhelmed with the feeling that she would never not be tired again.

I think most of us know this feeling, of thinking that whatever it is we feel now is what will be forever. I will never not feel like this, I will never not be experiencing this, and things will never not be this way.

Maybe this feeling even goes beyond just a feeling about our own personal lives. We're all a bit stuck. There are well-worn patterns of being in the world, and some of them are feeling tiresome, or even worse, like they're hurting us. We have the same arguments which come to the same conclusions. We have the same types of relationships with one another that come to the same ends. We try to apply the same solutions to the same problems, or we buy more of the same things in a newer form, and at no point are we satisfied, nor are our hopes realized.

There's a famous TV ad from the 80's that most of you will probably be familiar with. It opens in a grey, dystopian world, people marching in step, one behind the other, into a theater to listen to "big brother" indoctrinate them into something or other. At the same time, a brightly dressed woman runs towards the same theater with a hammer, being chased by some sort of military police. And before they can catch her, she throws the hammer into the air towards the screen, smashing it, and light comes pouring out, breaking the trance. And a voice comes on - this year, 1984 won't be like 1984. Of course, somebody remembers what they were selling, right?

The MacIntosh computer. It was supposed to be a revolution in computing. What was amazing, though, is that at no point in the ad did you see the computer. Ostensibly they were selling a product - an easy to use computer with an intuitive desktop interface - but

they realized that they didn't even need to show a picture of it or describe its features to sell it. In fact, this is what Apple has been doing for years since then. They stopped selling computers, and they started selling us an idea. A possibility. And we bought it.

It's just a computer, and at the end of the day it does the same things that other computers do, but I think Steve Jobs and the advertising agency he hired figured out this longing that we all seem to have to be unstuck from the ways we've been doing things. His world was computing, and so he made it his mission to unstuck us from the "normal" ways of doing computing into something new.

I think that Isaiah wants to unstuck us.

And so Isaiah and Steve Jobs largely do the same thing to unstuck us. They make us use our imaginations. When you go home, watch that old Apple ad on YouTube and try to imagine yourself in January of 1984, and you've got a clunky DOS PC in your home office, and you see this ad. If you can, imagine what you would have imagined a computer could do.

And then imagine that you're in a desert wilderness, hot and thirsty and lost, and you hear Isaiah. "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert."

If you were actually stuck in a literal desert, I'm not sure how this would seem. Maybe cruel. Certainly jarring, imagining the stark contrast between the world you were literally seeing, and the world you were imagining. You might be tempted to ignore the promise of a stream in the desert.

It's tempting to ignore the imaginative voices that envision something different from our current reality. Not Apple products, we like those. I mean the voices that imagine a world beyond our own. Make your list of pie-in-the-sky hopes and dreams, and they're easy to dismiss. Peace in the Middle East. Global denuclearization. An end to chronic poverty and homelessness. They're the things that pageant stars say to pull at our heartstrings, but when reality comes crashing down, we laugh it off.

But what if those are the things we need? Not the naive versions of them, but that we really do need to imagine what a world of peace looks like. What a world in which we lived as a global family would be like. How we would live if we committed to taking care of the earth and one another. How we could love one another.

Better yet, what if we had disciplined imaginations? I have no interest in throw-away hopes and dreams, but I have a great deal of interest in questioning the boundaries that we have set upon ourselves. Societal norms do a good job of delineating between what is possible and what isn't, but I'm not so sure that those boundaries are as non-moveable as we typically treat them.

You might be familiar with Father Greg Boyle, but if you're not, he's a Catholic priest in L.A., and a number of years ago was assigned to a parish in the middle of a neighborhood with routine gang violence. And God gave him a vision.

Not exactly of a stream in the desert, but perhaps of something even more radical and absurd. He imagined rival gang members making peace, working together, and developing the local economy. He imagined a community of reconciliation where there was only violence.

Let me cut to the point. Right now, this very morning, there are rival former gang members who have woken up early to work together to get the bakery ready for the Sunday morning crowd. They're getting catering orders ready, packing food for the grocery store, and setting up a farmer's market stand.

This week, somebody will decide they can't live as part of a gang anymore, and they'll walk in the door of Homeboy Industries - the organization that Father Boyle founded - for the first time, and there's a good chance that the first person who shakes their hand or gives them a hug is a person they may have once pointed a gun at.

The gang life might be utterly foreign to us here, but at least we can understand that there's nothing easy about breaking a gang affiliation or starting a series of small businesses that teach jobs and foster reconciliation between people who have literally been at war.

And it all began with disciplined imagination, believing and envisioning that the present reality was not an inevitability, and asking God "what is it that you mean for us and for the world?"

I've been talking about developing our imaginations to change the world, but I don't doubt for a moment that this begins with God's imagination. The entire life of Jesus is the realization of an imagined reality. He helps us to imagine the Kingdom of God, and then he puts it into practice as he eats with the lonely, heals the broken, and confounds the rulers.

It seems that God gives this gift, the gift of God's own imagination, especially when we're in the wilderness, especially when we are disoriented and can sense our own powerlessness. It seems that at these moments, we are open, even by necessity, to the imaginative possibilities of what could be, and what God is already creating in our midst. If it seems absurd or impossible, it just may be a call.

Listen to that call. Develop your imagination as an act of Christian discipline. Read Scripture without trying to nail down its meaning, but just hear it and love it. Wonder what God is calling you to. Pray that prayer that asks what could be, and how you could be a part of it. Use your imagination and don't be embarrassed.

And in case you ever wonder if streams in the desert are possible, imagine the streets of L.A. and Homeboy Industries. Imagine a garden in a desert. Imagine Jesus talking about a Kingdom of mustard seeds, and then feeding the multitudes. Imagine your own wildernesses and the new life that has come out of those times and places. Imagine the Resurrection.