

Easter Vigil: Home in the Desert

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[0 : 00] We have been joining together, all of us, telling this great story, remembering this story as we are remembered by it.

And we want to stop for a moment and focus in on one of the themes of this story, the theme of this year's vigil, the theme that we see in Isaiah chapter 35 so beautifully delivered a few minutes ago. So, in one sense, Isaiah 35 is a beautiful poem about an ancient people. It's a story of Israel and their wandering in the desert, their ongoing search for a home that goes unfulfilled, their trial in the wilderness of their own making.

And yet the Bible tells us that the story of Israel is our story. That it's the story of the world. That it's the story of the human condition.

That we're all pilgrims. And this world is a desert. A spiritual desert. And that this world is not our home.

[1 : 14] Now, it doesn't look like a desert. But when we see violence or racial injustice or exploitation, or when someone we love is taken from us, why do we feel in our bones that deep sense of wrongness?

This is not the way things are supposed to be. When you look at our most enduring, most popular stories, stories like Star Wars or Harry Potter, these are stories that often tell us that there's more to this world than we can see or hear or touch or taste.

They point us to an enchanted world. A world full of cosmic forces. And children and adults alike yearn to know that there's a world beyond the world of the Muggles.

That there is a magical, enchanted world. If only we could discover it. I think when we feel these feelings inside, it's because some small part of us remembers this is the desert.

This is not our home. And yet many, many, many people have forgotten that there is anything more than the desert. Many people have forgotten that there's anything beyond this.

[2 : 53] And when that happens, when we begin to believe that this is all there is, and there is nothing beyond this, when we begin to believe that, then we begin to do whatever we have to do to make this world into a permanent home.

And that's when the good things in our lives start to become ultimate things. One example, many, many, many people these days are putting all of their hope in politics.

We believe that with the right administration, we can turn the desert into a permanent home. We can make it habitable. Maybe even slurish.

So to quote Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sachs, people to the right dream of a golden past that never was. People on the left yearn for a utopian future that never will be.

And yet people on the left and the right are experiencing this longing more and more and more as a kind of religious longing.

[4 : 07] More and more people are finding their entire sense of identity and meaning and purpose in party affiliation. And you know the litmus test to know whether or not politics has become a religion for you.

How do you treat people with whom you disagree? How do you view people on the other side of the aisle? Are they merely people who have different ideas?

Or are they heretics? Are they blasphemers who don't deserve to be heard? Government is essential and good leaders can make a tremendous difference in the lives of many people.

Regardless of who you voted for in the last election, regardless of who you vote for in the coming election, no administration can turn the desert into a garden.

This is not our home. Now, of course, many of you know this. And you're tired of the political polarization.

[5 : 16] You say, I know life isn't about politics. And many people say, I'll tell you what life is about. Life is about love. Love, love is what life is all about.

And of course, often we mean romantic love. The passion of human love. I think like politics, love has become its own religion in our society.

People say, if I could only find someone to love for the rest of my life, if only I could find somebody who would love me, then it would be enough. And I wouldn't have this longing.

And I would be satisfied. It's so tempting to think that marrying the right person will bring us contentment. And so, you know, some people never get married because they never find someone who checks all the boxes.

Some people are afraid that if they never get married, never have kids, they'll never be complete. They'll never be whole. Some people wonder if the person they're with is the one.

[6 : 34] Maybe some of you are here tonight with somebody and you're sitting next to that person right now and you're wondering, is this the person? Show of hands, how many people are thinking that?

I'll let you work it out. Maybe you're haunted by the fear that you married the wrong person. Or maybe you had a really good person, but that person was taken from you.

It's so tempting to think that marrying the right person will bring us contentment. But you know we have it exactly backwards. Marriage is not what makes contentment possible.

Contentment is what makes marriage possible. Contentment is what makes marriage possible. All human beings are flawed.

Even the best people will let you down. Even in the best relationships and the best marriages, sometimes you still feel lonely. And so we have to find that contentment elsewhere.

[7 : 58] If you look to your spouse or your significant other or your children to give you contentment, you will crush them under the existential weight of your need.

Because nobody can meet that need. As wonderful as human love can be, it cannot change the desert into a garden.

And this is not our home. Now some of you know that politics isn't the answer. Some of you have maybe tried love and maybe it's not all it's cracked up to be.

And you say, well love didn't really work out. I'm tired of all the political back and forth. Well, at least I have my career. At least I have a job that I can pour myself into.

And so we tell ourselves that it's hard work now and you haven't taken a day off in 15 or 16 years. But one day it will be worth it.

[9 : 05] One day we'll arrive. One day we'll succeed. And then we'll stand on that plateau and enjoy the view and look back and say it was all worth it because I've finally arrived. And so it's worth asking ourselves what will that be like when we arrive?

How will we know that we've arrived? What will that rush of success do to our souls? Will it finally be enough? I think of Jim Carrey, the wise old sage, who said this.

He said, I think everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed so that they can see that it's not the answer. People are always saying, go after your dreams.

There's that weird video with Shia LaBeouf who says, just do it. Chase your dreams. Make them happen. Does anyone have any idea the existential catastrophe that would come about if you ever got everything you dreamed of?

Because then you would be faced with the massive quandary of realizing, that's not what I was looking for. It's not enough. The longing is still there. Now what?

[10 : 24] As meaningful as our work can be, no amount of work no amount of success can change the desert into a garden.

It's not enough. This is not our home. And so then many Christians say, well of course, of course politics isn't the answer. Of course human love isn't the answer.

Of course our career and our success, of course that's not the answer. Put all of your trust and your faith in Jesus and Jesus will satisfy all of your longings here and now. And if you don't feel satisfied, maybe it's because you don't have enough faith.

And maybe if you believed more, Jesus would satisfy you more. That's not the Christian gospel.

That's what we might call the emotional prosperity gospel.

Isaiah 35 tells us that this world is not our home. Which means that we will never be fully satisfied here and now.

[11 : 32] But then Isaiah 35 goes on to say even though this world is not our home now, one day this world will be our home. One day this will be the place where we are made whole and satisfied.

In Isaiah 35 a miracle happens. As the pilgrims wander through the desert, the desert begins to transform around them. The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, it says.

The desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus. It shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing. And then the pilgrims themselves begin to be transformed.

The blind can see, the deaf can hear, the lame can walk, the mute can sing, and then the pilgrims come to a great highway. And that highway brings them streaming into the city of God.

Verse 10, And the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing everlasting joy shall be upon their heads. They shall obtain gladness and joy and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

[12 : 39] One day God himself is going to turn the desert of this world into a garden. One day the desert of loneliness will give way to the garden of communion.

One day the desert of racial division will give way to the garden of one global multi-ethnic family who all share the same name.

One day the desert of violence will become the garden of shalom and one day the desert of death and dying will become the garden of eternal life.

this is the home that we were made for. This is the home that we long for. And if you know this if you know that even though we're in the desert now one day this desert will become a garden and a great city and we will be welcomed home if you know this number one you can give this life permission to be imperfect.

you can give your spouse permission to be imperfect. You can give your kids permission to be imperfect.

[13 : 52] You can give our government leaders permission to be imperfect. You can give your job permission to be imperfect. You can enjoy them and celebrate them for what they are without needing them to be something they never could be.

If you know that one day God will turn the desert into a garden then you can have more hope than you ever thought possible because you know that even the best experiences of this life are just the tiniest foretaste of that which is yet to come and the best is yet to come by a long shot.

And if you know that God will one day turn this desert into a garden then you can know that what you do here matters. And it matters for eternity.

Because God doesn't scrap the desert and start over. God transforms the desert into a garden and a great city.

And so all that is good and true and beautiful in your life and in your work will become a part of that new creation. And so everything we do matters.

[15 : 07] matters. And this is why Easter matters so much. And this is why the bodily resurrection of Jesus matters so much.

Because a resurrected Jesus is the first sign of a resurrected world. world. And to all who ask for Jesus to forgive you.

For all who desire to be reconciled to the Father. For all who are baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. You are invited to join in to the renewal of all things that is already underway.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.