

March 3, 2019  
Luke 9:28-36  
Pastor Rosanna McFadden  
Creekside COB

## **“Water in the Desert”**

**Good morning! Both of the scriptures I chose to use for this morning’s service -- the one from Isaiah 43 which was the inspiration for the Call to Worship, and this text from Luke 9 about the transfiguration of Christ -- are about transformation. One is natural and one is supernatural. But before we jump to what this are changed to, I want to consider what they are changed from. In other words, we need to know what *is* before we can understand what *will be*.**

**Isaiah 43 is clearly talking about the wilderness, which in the Middle East means the desert -- a place with low rainfall and arid, rocky soil. Isaiah uses these terms interchangeably and repetitively. Isaiah 43:19-20 say, “I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.” In Isaiah’s time as now, the wilderness can be a metaphorical place as well as a physical one. The wilderness can be an emotional or spiritual desert. I know that some of you have been to that desert, some of you may still be there. I can’t imagine what the family and extended family and classmates and friends of KeShawn Smith have been through since last Saturday. I know the past weeks have been difficult for the Mann and Graber families. I don’t think it takes too much imagination to see walking through the valley of the shadow of death as a wilderness experience. If you can’t think of a wilderness experience in your own life, God bless you. But most of us have experienced loss and desolation in some form: the death of a loved one, the end of a significant relationship, a terrible diagnosis, the financial desert that happens when a job ends unexpectedly. Isaiah was writing to a nation which had been devastated by war, had its leaders deported and the rest of the population left behind to starve. The Jewish temple was destroyed and its valuables carried off to Babylon. The**

**holy city of Jerusalem was desolate and deserted. It was an entire generation of wilderness.**

**But here's the thing about the wilderness in both the Old and the New Testaments: it is not only a place of emptiness and privation; it is the place where the people of God and the prophets and even God's Son Jesus encounter God. The wilderness is the place where we are desperate and lost and alone, and where we find God -- or where God finds us. In Isaiah 43:19 God is speaking and says, "I am about to do a new thing: now it spring forth, do you not perceive it?" and the truth is, sometimes we don't see it. Sometimes we don't perceive things which are right under our noses.**

**You heard in the adventures of Tim and Diane this morning that the Community Ministry Grant team has felt like God is leading us into the desert: a desert right under our noses in Elkhart County. Some of you have read about this in the February and March Connection, and you may have even followed the link to the YouTube video that was sent with the March Connection. You can also find that link on Creekside's website. I want to show about two minutes of that video to try to give you a clearer sense of the deserts where we are hoping to encounter God in ministry with our neighbors. This video was produced by Goshen College student Carol Lee in 2017. [YouTube]**

**Access to fresh, healthy food is not a simple problem -- if you have an chance to watch the whole thing this video explains some of the reasons which food deserts develop -- and there will not be easy solutions, but I think the rest of the Community Ministry grant team would agree that it feels like we can partner with our neighbors to do a new thing. We are making plans to identify and talk to people who are guests at the CCS food pantry, families from Concord Intermediate School, and clients of the Council on Aging to provide them education and supplies for a container garden so they can grow their own vegetables. We've already had an enthusiastic response from ministry partners at CCS; we hope we can make even some little oases in our county food desert bloom -- and make some new friends in the process.**

**I said at the beginning of this sermon that the transformation of the desert is a natural process. I want to explain a bit more about what I**

mean by that. [Slide 1] this is a photo of the Atacama Desert in Chile.; one of the driest places on earth. This is what it looks like most of the time, even for years at a time. [Slide 2] This is the same scene after Hurricane Patricia brought an usually wet year. This is what happens when there is water in the desert. Where do the flowers come from? The simple answer is from seeds. [Slide 3] During dry years, the seeds won't germinate: they stay in the ground until the conditions are right for them to bloom. Some of you have seen my photos from the last time I visited family in California, two years ago. The California poppies were breath-taking. Tim and I will be back in California in just over a week: they've had a wet winter, and I understand the flowers are beginning to blossom again: I can't wait to see them. [Slide down]

Our text from Luke is taking about another kind of transformation: this story is from Jesus' ministry, and it also appears in Matthew 17 and Mark 9. Those three gospel accounts are all very similar, and they're all titled "The Transfiguration" in my Bible, even though the word "transfigured" doesn't appear in the any of the texts. What each of the three gospels describes is Jesus going up to a mountain to pray: mountains were also deserted places where prophets encountered God -- think about Moses receiving the Ten Commandments. That's what the disciples were thinking about as they watched the appearance of Jesus' face change and his clothes become dazzling white. Jesus was joined by two men, Moses and Elijah, the greatest prophets of Judaism, who had each had their own mountaintop encounters with God. These three dazzling men are discussing Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem: the same events which we will be talking about in Lent and especially during Holy Week. Although Peter, James and John don't understand it at the time, they are being given a preview of Jesus ministry, death, and especially his resurrection. The next time we see any biblical character in a dazzling white robe, he will be standing beside an empty tomb.

I want to make a distinction between the transformation of the desert and the transfiguration of Jesus Christ: wildflowers in the desert may not be an annual occurrence, but it is still a natural one: whenever there's enough water, the desert will bloom. The transfiguration of Christ is more mysterious than that: the disciples who were present didn't understand what was going on, so I can't claim that I have it

right, but I believe that the transfiguration was more about a change in the disciple's perception than it was a change in the nature of Christ. Peter, James and John had been living with and listening to Jesus since the beginning of his ministry. They already knew him as a human teacher, healer and friend. But here on the mountain they see him as divine: not only the equal of Moses and Elijah, but as the voice from the cloud proclaims: This is my Son, my chosen; listen to him! They have been given a glimpse of the divine character of Christ. It's as much a part of him as the human nature of Jesus, but the whole thing is a little much for the disciples to take in. They don't tell anyone else, but Jesus has revealed his nature as God's Son in a dazzling encounter, and given the disciples a hint of what is to come. I am about to do a new thing: do you not perceive it?

As we prepare for the beginning of Lent this Wednesday, I want to say a few more words about transformation. I believe that transformation is the work of God and only God has the power to transform desolate situations and bring new life. (You can say Amen, if you want) [Back to slide] If God wants that desert in Chile to bloom, it will bloom. But that whole blooming thing -- it goes a lot better if there are seeds. We don't transform ourselves, but we can participate in that work with God. In other words, if you're praying for a miracle so that you will win the lottery, the least you can do is buy a ticket.

Lent is a traditionally a time for study and prayer, a time when we are intentional about spiritual growth. There is no one-size fits all prescription for how this growth happens: some people study in solitude, some people learn through interaction with other people; I believe that everyone can benefit from gathering as a community to worship Christ, especially if we come willing to perceive a new thing. The point is not that everyone needs to do the same thing, but I would encourage you to do *something* to plant seeds of spiritual growth. I have put together a Creekside devotional booklet which has a scripture reading and a short prayer for each day of Lent, beginning this Wednesday, March 6. It will take you to more places in the Bible than we typically can go on a Sunday morning. Please pick up a copy if you wish, write your name on it, and use it however it works for you -- get together as a Sunday School class, use it on your own, or find some other way to read the Bible and pray. It's OK if the seeds are not all the same, the important thing is to put something out there and

**see what God can do with it. We'll email you the readings each week so you can get them that way if that's simpler for you. I have already been blessed by assembling these readings. If you have an opportunity, thank Marita, our administrative assistant for her work to put this booklet together during a week when there were lots of other things going on.**

**God is doing a new thing! May Jesus shine through us as we look with eyes of faith. Amen.**