

Sermon (12/11/16, Isaiah 35: 1-10):

In 1940, Walt Disney productions released an animated film like nothing ever seen before. It was far different than the animated Snow White film released earlier as well as the many cartoons Disney had created.

The film's name was Fantasia - an imaginative work teaming animation with classical music. Unlike other animation features he had done, there were few words and dialogue. Instead, it included a number of animated shorts whose movements and visual story matched the character and dynamics of the classical music piece it featured. Many of these animations gave human type characteristics to animals, plants, and even inanimate objects like brooms.

While the 'Nutcracker Suite' played, fish, flowers, mushrooms, and even leaves danced.

During the playing of the 'Dance of the Hours' a comic ballet flashed across the screen inclusive of a Hippo sporting a tutu!

And, of course, the biggest draw of the movie was the 'Sorcerer's Apprentice' featuring Mickey Mouse playing a young Sorcerer's apprentice who tries out some of his Master's magic tricks only to quickly lose control leading to a jumble of chaotic mayhem.

Admittedly, I wasn't all that impressed when I first saw this movie. I was pretty young at the time and I just didn't get it. I'm guessing it was because I was expecting something like Snow White and other Disney movies I had seen with a clear story line, catchy songs, and endearing characters. Fantasia was far different than that – a fanciful, artistic, even playful rendering of animation matched with a kind of music one would normally hear in a symphony hall.

In the year 2000 a revamped version of Fantasia was released with a number of new segments including a broken toy soldier protecting a ballerina from an evil Jack-in-the-box while ‘Piano Concerto No. 2, Allegro, Opus 102’ is played. There’s also a family of humpback whales that fly into space while ‘Pines of Rome’ is played as well as a flock of flamingoes fumbling around with a yo-yo while strains of ‘The Carnival of Animals’ floats in the background.

Mushrooms dancing; goldfish performing; flowers revealing their colors in perfect timing with the music; brooms marching in lockstep while carrying buckets of water; toy soldiers protecting toy ballerinas; hippos, elephants, and ostriches trying out their ballet skills; humpback whales soaring skyward. It was quite the visionary display of a world far distant from any kind of reality we know!

Even so, the movie asks, what if mushrooms could dance? What if hippos did take a fancy to ballet? What if brooms could march? What if cartoon like animation could intrigue adults as much as children? What if?

‘What if’ asks the poet Isaiah. What if the entire world was flooded with the full on magnificence of the Lord? What if all that is was transformed into all that God intended it to be? What would it look like? In what ways would we have to adjust our mindset, eyesight, our actions, our certainties, our anticipations, our plans?

With these provocative questions, the poet’s imaginative gears are set into motion and, long before Disney or Fantasia, we glimpse a sort of animated creation come to life in a way never before seen.

First, the desolate, seemingly lifeless places burst forth with

mind boggling fertile abundance. The dry, cracked ground where rain has not fallen in ages is suddenly flooded. The drab, sandy landscape of the desert suddenly explodes with color as crocuses burst forth from the ground. The desert awakens. Creation dances and sings. Seems like a scene straight from Fantasia right?

Unfortunately, we know well what dry, cracked earth looks like. We've seen it in places like California, Somalia, Yemen, and numerous other places. The toll it takes is devastating, depriving people of vital food sources and destroying the means by which families garner income. The color brown insidiously takes over the places where bright colors once flourished. After a while, the ground becomes so dry that it turns to dust, easily kicked up as one walks.

What if? The poet asks. What if the magnificence of God flooded all of creation? Could the dry places fill with color and life again? Could the flowers dance and sing and rejoice?

'The waters shall burst forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert.' Isaiah imagines. 'The burning sand will become a pool of refreshing, healing water.'

I remember my first experience of seeing the ocean as I stood on Daytona Beach in Florida. What an incredibly grand sight! I was a novice at beach going, though, and quickly learned, the hard way, just how hot that sand could get as the summer sun beat down on it! Filled with excitement to test out the ocean waters, I flicked off my sandals and mindlessly raced out onto the sand. My friend called to me, 'Hey, be careful, that sand is pretty hot!' Too late, I thought, as I felt the soles of my feet cry out in excruciating pain. Faster and faster I ran to get to the water's edge. When I finally reached it, I was certain I saw steam rise up from my now smoldering feet! Ohhh...that water felt so good!

‘The burning sand shall become a pool...’

In the midst of creation’s exuberant dancing and rejoicing, a highway will appear. Not any ole highway, though, filled with pot-holes and crazy drivers and confusing signs and inching traffic, but a safe highway. A highway where no one gets lost, not even fools like me! That’s right! It says so right in the text! I’m surprised it doesn’t have my name in parentheses next to the word ‘fool’! If this isn’t a sign of God’s Kingdom come than I surely don’t know what is. Imagine, a highway with a flashing sign saying ‘David...don’t even think about taking this exit!’ Yes, this image alone is enough to make my feet want to dance. In fact, such a vision suggests home to me. You know the kind of place where the streets are so familiar we can navigate them almost without thinking. The place where we know the backroads we can use when traffic is heavy or if we just need a change of scenery. It sounds like home...doesn’t it? And who among us doesn’t longingly sigh for home, in some shape or form?

One of the Christmas songs Bing Crosby made popular during World War II was ‘I’ll Be Home for Christmas’. Almost everywhere he went, people requested it. And every time he sang it, it brought tears to many an eye longing for the comfort and safety of home, including many soldiers and their families. Even today it has the ability to make us sigh with yearning.

‘Christmas Eve will find me, where the love light gleams. I’ll be home for Christmas, if only in my dreams.’

What if, suggests the poet Isaiah, even the deserts - the barren places, the broken places, the empty places, the lonely places, the hurting places, the grieving places could be transformed into home where ‘sorrow and sighing shall flee away’.

Isaiah’s animation of a future hope is one that speaks to deep

places in the human story. We retell this vision every year as we anticipate the birth of Jesus in the ongoing hope that he will be the one who will cool the burning sands and awaken the long slumbering flowers. We retell this vision every year in the hope that Jesus will come and create a path of safety in this dangerous wilderness we often find ourselves in.

The struggle I face as a preacher and the struggle we face as a congregation of believers is that each year it feels like a vision unfulfilled. It feels like a hope that only gifted cartoonists can animate into existence. It's the reason why such songs like 'I'll Be Home for Christmas' still stirs nostalgic sighs. It's the reason why we continue to sing, 'O Come, O Come Emmanuel'. The vision Isaiah paints is not yet.

Even so we need animators like Isaiah; poets able to paint images that awaken the imaginations in us all. In fact, perhaps our human ability to imagine is faith's strong reminder that the Creator's spirit is alive and well, coursing through our very own veins.

Much of what this imaginative poem features, are things we humans have had a hand in breaking and we humans can have a hand in fixing. The damage we inflict on creation causing the dirt to crack with dryness; the diseases we have the ability to relieve; the safe havens we could create, if we were determined enough, for the refugee, the lost, and the frightened; the pools of refreshing waters we could provide for those whose lives have been burnt, nearly to a crisp.

That's the interesting thing with such imaginative visions like the one Isaiah provides. Perhaps it might not yet have the ability to stir up an abundance of dancing crocuses in the desert but maybe it can remind *us* how to dance. Maybe it can awaken our own

imaginative spirits, moving them from a place of helpless resignation to a place of hope fueled determination. And maybe the more we set that hope into action the more we will begin to sense that, maybe, just maybe, dancing flowers are not quite so far-fetched as we initially thought.

This past week, it suddenly occurred to me that I needed to pick up the wreaths a number of us had ordered from St. Paul's shelter. I had almost forgotten and I must confess that I made this last minute trip not in the best of moods. There was a lot going on and a lot I needed to tend to, all pressing in on me at once. I hopped in my car and headed off, anxious to get the task done. I rang the doorbell, telling them who I was. What followed was an overwhelming, almost embarrassing flood of gratitude for our support of the shelter, as small as it was. As she filled my arms with wreaths, she excitedly told me what a success the wreath sale had been. "Thanks to these proceeds," she said, "we'll be able to cover the cost of sheltering a lot of families. I'm so excited!"

Interestingly enough, it was about then that I realized just how much I needed this trip. The hot sand of a busy life had scorched my feet more than I had realized and I had almost forgotten just how good a pool of cool water could feel, bubbling up in the most unexpected of places. I guess that's the kind of thing that happens when the imagination of God triggers the holy imaginations in us all.

To God alone be all the glory! Amen.

## Congregational Prayers and Lord's Prayer:

Leader: The Lord be with you.

**People:** *And also with you.*

Leader: Let us pray...

God of all that is and ever will be we pray, on this Advent Sunday, for the moving of your spirit over all that is broken, wounded, and colorless. We long for the arrival of your Son, whose grace will overtake the world in ways unimagined and unanticipated. We long to feel the refreshment of your creation made new again, filling all that is drab with color, flooding the cracked earth with lifesaving moisture, providing cool springs in which our feet and bodies can be healed, restoring within us an energy to not only feel hopeful but to live hope.

We confess this day, we are tired of waiting. We are tired of the unfulfilled sighs for home and the tears that still await drying. We are tired of a creation that has forgotten how to dream, and rejoice, and dance. We are tired of traveling on highways filled with danger and peril.

Breathe again the breath of your spirit into our lungs, we ask. Stir to life our imaginations like crocuses springing forth in the desert. Galvanize our determination to repair what we have broken so that we might come to know that the visions of prophets and of our Savior are more possible than we ever thought they could be. Make the year that is to come a heaven sent one so that when we return to this season of Advent we will be pleased with what we have done and what we have become in your name.

Loving God, we know that there are many here today,

many whom we love and care about, and many in your world whose sighs for hope are too deep for words. Grant them, we ask, the refreshment of your spirit. Be near to those who are ill, frail, hurting, broken, wounded, desperate, and grieving. We especially pray for those whom we now name in our silence or aloud...

We ask this in Jesus' name who taught us to pray...

***All: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.***

***Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.***