

A desert in bloom

by [Ruth A. Meyers](#) in the [November 21, 2001](#) issue

Since I live near Lake Michigan, I take frequent walks along the lake and gaze out at the water, which stretches to the distant horizon. Sometimes it's still, sparkling in the sunlight, an oasis of calm soothing me on a hectic day. On other days, gray clouds gather overhead, waves crash against the breakers below my path, and water sprays high into the air. One day the water is a deep green, another day murky gray and yet another day dark blue—any of an array of hues and moods. My walks refresh and restore me, giving me new energy for work and family and play.

The water near my home contrasts sharply with the high plains of north central Wyoming where I spent several summers when I was a young woman. In that semiarid climate, I lived amid sagebrush and dust. Days were long and hot. When the rain did come, it was as a violent thunderstorm that passed through quickly and turned dirt paths into mud. But by the next day, the hot sun turned mud back to dust.

Isaiah describes a desert climate dry and barren as the northern Wyoming plains. In Isaiah's prophetic vision, waters gush forth in the desert, and the dry, parched land springs to life. In the early summer in the Wyoming plains, the cactus blooms, offering a brief glimpse of lush color, a promise of life in the midst of desolation. I used to hike in the Big Horn Mountains, up beyond the plains, and come upon meadows filled with wildflowers, crowded fields of vivid color. Isaiah sees the desert come alive this way, sees its blossoming abundance as new life announcing the glory and majesty of God.

The new life in the desert signals the presence and power of God. Those who are weary, enfeebled or fearful can take heart because God comes to save. This means healing and transformation in specific ways: sight for those who are blind, hearing for those who are deaf, speech for those who are mute. So great is the joy and so profound the healing that those who were lame now leap and those who were speechless now sing.

Isaiah's prophecy promises restoration to a captive people, and this prophecy is fulfilled in Jesus. John the Baptist has promised that one is coming who is greater than he. Then John is imprisoned. Hearing of Jesus, John wonders whether this is the one. Jesus doesn't answer directly, but instead lets his deeds speak. Through Jesus' ministry the blind receive their sight, the deaf hear, the speechless speak. Jesus' deeds inaugurate the reign of God as they fulfill Isaiah's promises.

We live, however, in the tension between the reign of God established by Jesus and the final fulfillment of that reign. Despite Jesus' healing presence, we still have among us those who cannot see, hear, walk or speak. Neither the wonders of modern medicine nor the power of prayer can restore these abilities to all who lack them, nor keep any of us from death.

Yet we live in the hope of resurrection. We proclaim Christ's death and resurrection, and we proclaim that he will come again. Advent turns our hearts and minds to all of these "comings"—Christ coming as a baby born to Mary and Joseph, Christ coming to be baptized by John, Christ coming to heal and inaugurate the reign of God, Christ coming at the end of time. The Letter of James invites us to be patient just as a farmer is patient in waiting for crops to ripen. It is the rain, both early and late, that waters the crops and enables them to shoot forth and then mature. It is the rain, unexpected in the desert, that allows new life to blossom in the midst of barrenness.

In recent years I have discovered the delight of cultivating the earth, coaxing beauty out of the wild overgrown corners of my yard. Last summer I planted an herb garden, and then went away on vacation for almost two weeks. I was surprised on my return to discover herbs stretching up and spilling over the borders of the bed I had prepared, their fragrance enveloping me as I passed by. I was reminded that gardening is as much about patience, trusting the fertile earth and nourishing rains, as it is about my labor. Like the farmer, I must be patient with my crop and with the earth.

The needs of the world cry out to us. On some days, the prayer list of those who are sick and suffering seems endless, and I know that they are but a few of the many in the world in need of healing. Hunger, poverty and homelessness are ever present, even in this affluent nation. With the exiles of Israel and the disciples of John the Baptist, we yearn for salvation, for one who enables new life to blossom.

The promise held before us offers God's love and mercy, God's power to heal and restore. Through Christ, we are immersed in the waters of new life, transformed and

made whole. Creation joins in this transformation, water in abundance bringing forth life, the barren desert blossoming with fragrant flowers. Those who are transformed sing and dance for joy. Will we join them?