



ADVENT 3

December 14, 2025

St. Timothy Lutheran Church, Portland, OR

THE LESSONS: Isaiah 35:1-10; Psalm 146:5-10; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

THE SERMON: “God's Garden Grows in the Wilderness...”

Grace and Peace to you in the NAME of GOD: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Introduction: Bridge Out Ahead?

You’ve probably heard the old joke about the country preacher standing by the roadside holding a giant sign that read, “The end is near! Turn back before it’s too late!” A driver slowed down, rolled down his window, and yelled, “Hey, you religious nut—leave normal people alone!” Then he sped off, rounded the bend... and—*splash*. Right into the river. The preacher sighed, turned to his friend, and said, “Maybe the sign should’ve just said, ‘Bridge out ahead.’”

It’s funny how the message we *need* is often the message we ignore. A warning, a promise, a truth—until we’re soaked and sputtering in deep water—just feels like a nuisance we’d rather breeze past. But what if the message isn’t about scaring us? What if it’s about a road we’re already on... and the future it’s hurtling toward? Today’s Scriptures show us a journey—not a walk through comfort, but a trek through wilderness that leads toward an astonishing, God-shaped future. A future shaped by hope, sustained by patience, and driven by the quiet, relentless work of God turning deserts into gardens.

Isaiah 35:1–10 – The Vision: God Is Tending the Desert

Isaiah begins exactly where many of us live: in the wilderness. Desolation. No shade. No sign of life. Israel knew this terrain well—they stood on the brink of Babylonian exile, staring at a future that looked like a spiritual wasteland.

But Isaiah refuses to let the desert have the last word. His prophecy erupts with unexpected joy: *“The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad... the desert shall rejoice and blossom... it shall rejoice with joy and singing.”* Isaiah’s message fits perfectly with our Advent candle message. We are reminded that no matter how bad things are; we can rejoice because God is with us.

Isaiah doesn’t say that the desert “might” bloom. Not “if you behave yourselves.” Isaiah promises the desert “shall” bloom. God is already at work turning sand into roses.

And we know what the desert feels like. A health scare. A season of bone-deep loneliness. Endless boredom you never asked for. Life becomes a spiritual Sahara—you’re parched for comfort, longing for something, anything, to break through the dryness.

Isaiah tells you: You are not abandoned in the desert. Even when you can’t see it yet, God is tending the ground beneath your feet.

Psalm 146 – The Anchor: Hope That Does Not Expire

While Isaiah shows us the landscape, the Psalmist shows us where to plant our feet. “Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God.”

We are warned not to trust things with short shelf lives—governments, health, wealth, success, or our picture-perfect plans. These things evaporate like morning fog.

But the Psalm points us to the God who is not fickle, not fragile, not bound to election cycles or market trends:

- GOD executes justice.
- GOD feeds the hungry.
- GOD raises those who are bowed low.

Many of us know what it feels like when the big promises of life collapse. A promotion never comes. A diagnosis blindsides us. A leader disappoints. A relationship fractures. But Psalm 146 declares: **God’s help doesn’t expire. God’s promises do not come with fine print. God’s faithfulness is the one solid ground in a world of shifting sand.**

Matthew 11:2–11 – The Reality: Doubt Does Not Disqualify

But what about when the desert gets darker? What about when we're not just thirsty—we're dying?

John the Baptist, the great prophet, the bold truth-teller, ends up in a prison cell. The one who announced Jesus now sends messengers with a painful question: *"Are you the one, or should we wait for another?"* Even John—John!—doubts. And Jesus doesn't roll His eyes. He doesn't say, "Seriously, John? After all that camel-hair preaching?"

Instead, Jesus answers gently: *"Go tell John what you hear and see: the blind see, the lame walk... the poor receive good news."* In other words: *"John, I'm at work—maybe not in thunderclaps, but in real lives, real healing, real hope. Hold on."*

Then Jesus turns to the crowd and basically asks, *"Why are you following me?"* We need that same question.

Are we here because church looks good on a résumé?

Because it's what "good people" do?

Because we like Gary's music or Ernie's coffee?

Or are we here because we are imperfect, doubting, stumbling people who believe Jesus is still the One? Unlike that woman with Christian bumper stickers all over her car who drove so recklessly the cop assumed the car was stolen because "no Christian would drive like that." Our outward signs don't save us.

John's doubt didn't disqualify him. Our questions don't either. They bring us closer to the One who *is* the answer.

James 5:7–10 – The Response: Patience Like a Farmer's

So how do we walk the road through the desert, past our doubts, toward God's future? James hands us a very unglamorous, incredibly necessary tool: **patience**. "Be patient... like a farmer waiting for the early and late rains."

A farmer doesn't sit on the porch saying, "Well, maybe God will grow something." Farmers prepare the soil. They water. They weed. They trust the invisible work beneath the dirt. That is what spiritual life looks like:

- You plant prayers that no one sees.
- You tend relationships even when they're thorny.

- You water faith with time, Scripture, worship, service.
- You wait—not passively, but with holy expectation.

James says, “*Strengthen your hearts.*” Why? Because the waiting is the battleground. Because God is working in the hidden places—aligning rains, preparing harvests, shaping hearts. Your patience is never empty. It is the soil where miracles sprout.

The Call and the Challenge: The Holy Highway

Isaiah ends with a breathtaking image: a Holy Highway—straight through the wilderness—leading God’s people home. It’s not a road for the strongest or the most pious. It’s for the redeemed—the limpers, the weary, the ones with shaking hands and wobbling knees.

This road is our journey of faith.

Every prayer: A step.

Every act of kindness: A step.

Every time you choose hope instead of despair? Another step.

When life shifts, when you feel lost in unfamiliar terrain, don’t panic. God is tending your desert. Streams are flowing into the dryness. Flowers are getting ready to break through.

Doubts are not your disqualification—they are your invitation to lean in. Patience is not surrender—it is your declaration of trust. Every moment of obedience moves you forward on God’s road.

So as you step into this week, walk with hope, patience, and love. The Lord goes before you, behind you, beside you. Know that God loves you and God is with you. The night may be long, but the Redeemer *will* appear. And, as our Advent candle reminds us, today the church rejoices because God is with us. Even when we face the dry desert, God promises Hope and Peace. Because of God’s faithfulness, we can rejoice. We know that God will come into our spiritual dryness and sooth our thirst. We can rejoice and sing Joy to the world because the Lord has come to us in love and heaven and nature burst forth and sings. Joy to the world the Lord has come to bring Hope, Peace and Joy. Hallelujah! The Lord has come. Let us rejoice in God’s presence here and in our hearts as we sing **(ELW 267) “Joy to the world, the Lord is come!”**