

Pastor Luke C. Werre

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Sermon Text: Isaiah 62:1-5

## FROM DESERTED TO DESIRED

In the heart of the little, unincorporated village where I grew up was an abandoned two-story house. It looked like a classic haunted house. The windows were all shattered. The front door hung precariously open on a single hinge. The whole house was a dingy brown as the paint had long ago peeled away. Grass and weeds all around it were two feet high. My parents had forbidden me to go near it.

Then one day as I was riding my bike past it, a pickup truck was parked in the driveway. What was this? It appeared someone had bought the place. Throughout that summer it seemed someone was there every day working on the house. New windows, new siding. They rebuilt the chimney on top. The yard was reseeded. Flowers were planted. Pretty soon a family was living there and children were regularly seen going in and out and playing around the house. It was quite a transformation. What had been dead and abandoned was now fresh and lovely and filled with life. It had been deserted but became a place that was desired.

This is similar to the picture that the prophet Isaiah paints in our reading today from chapter 62. Only Isaiah isn't describing a single house, but the whole city of Jerusalem and the land of Judah. To take it a step further, he is painting this picture of Jerusalem as a depiction God's Church during our earthly sojourn so as to revive our faith and give us hope to carry on. To frame it succinctly, Isaiah chapter 62 speaks of our transformation *From Deserted to Desired*.

It can be hard to understand the Old Testament prophets, For one thing, it is a style of preaching that's foreign to us. It's a sing-songy, poetic style of proclamation packed full of mixed metaphors. Many Old Testament

prophets even had music playing as they prophesied. Isaiah assumes his listeners have a native familiarity with the land of Israel and with Israel's history and its political landscape. Even so, be assured of this: everything Isaiah wrote is from God. Word for word. This is God's message and therefore it is still a life-giving message for us today – a message that transforms us from being deserted to desired.

Isaiah lived in Jerusalem about 700 years before Christ. His ministry lasted about 60 years. Part of his ministry was dedicated to warning the people of Jerusalem that the Babylonian Empire was going to invade and lay waste the city, reducing it to a smoking pile of rubble. The land of Judah was going to lie fallow, uncultivated and desolate. Those citizens who survived the destruction by the Babylonian armies would be forcibly marched back to Babylon and transplanted there.

But then Isaiah also held out hope to his fellow Jerusalemites. If they paid attention to Isaiah they would know that their exile to Babylon would not be the end of the story. It would not be the end of their city. It would not be the end of their hope for a Messiah. Isaiah announced that after 70 years God would use a Persian ruler by the name of Cyrus to conquer the Babylonians. Once Cyrus assumed control of Babylon he would permit the Jewish people to return to Jerusalem and to begin rebuilding the city and start farming the land once again. A place that would be lying desolate and fallow for 70 years would become rich and verdant once again: from deserted to desired.

If you understand this background Isaiah chapter 62 starts to open up. God is making a parallel promise here. He is speaking about a historical reality but also making a promise to you about your life. So when God says in Isaiah chapter 62, *For the sake of Zion I will not be silent. For the sake of Jerusalem I will not rest easy, until her righteousness goes forth shining brightly, and her salvation burns like a torch* – on the one hand He is promising that He will not rest easy, He will be constantly at work, controlling the course of history until He brings the Jerusalem-exiles back

from Babylon to their homeland. On the other hand, God is promising to you and me that even though you might feel deserted or like nothing good is happening in your life, He is not resting easy. He is constantly at work behind the scenes until he finally brings you to salvation.

God's main concern in bringing the Jewish people back to Jerusalem was not merely so they could have a happy life again. Rather, it was from these people, these Jewish exiles, that the promised Messiah, the Savior of the world, would one day be born. And God had promised that this Savior would make His appearance in Jerusalem. So the people had to be restored. Jerusalem had to be rebuilt. The temple in Jerusalem had to be rebuilt. The Savior was coming! God had sworn since the very beginning, since the time of Adam and Eve that He would not leave the human race deserted to their sin and damnation, but He desired to save us.

I mentioned earlier that Isaiah's prophecies are packed with metaphors, oftentimes layers of metaphors overlapping each other. It's as if God is so excited to tell us His saving plans that He floods us with multiple pictures all at once. In Isaiah 62, God compares Jerusalem and the land of Judah to a destitute woman – childless and deserted. But God is going to turn events in such a way that she will be desired. Everyone will want to marry themselves to her. She'll become enriched with abundant companions and joy and love like prized wife to so many.

Listen again to Isaiah: *Nations will see your righteousness, and all kings will see your glory. You will be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will assign to you. Then you will be a beautiful crown in the LORD's hand, and a royal diadem in the palm of your God. You will never again be called Abandoned, and your land will never again be called Desolation, for you will be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land will be called Married, because the Lord delights in you, and your land will be married. For just as a young man marries a virgin, your sons will marry you, and just as a bridegroom rejoices over a bride your God will rejoice over you.*

Just as that deserted land would become desired because the Lord God was thrilled over her, was rejoicing to bring the Savior into the world through her, so God also rejoices over you and is thrilled to bring salvation to you.

We live in a sin-toxic world. We ourselves are infected with sin. One of the by-products of sin is the feeling of desertion, a sensation that manifests itself in so many ways. Loneliness especially during Covid has crushed staggering numbers of people with anxiety and depression. Maybe you've been widowed. You've never spent a Christmas alone before.

Maybe you are divorced and now you are on your own and you're just trying to make your way from one day to the next. Maybe you're caught in a marriage devoid of affection leave you feeling deserted. Perhaps you feel desolate when there's a rift in the family or the adult children are too busy to connect. Maybe it's the dread of being deserted at a nursing home. At school you feel like you have no friends, or bouncing back and forth between your parents' homes it seems there's no one who truly cares. Maybe it's the loneliness of wondering if there's anyone out there for me? Or will life just leave me deserted?

We can feel destitute when we experience bad times – we sense no richness of God's love, no fullness of His care. Where is God? Why won't He help? Will this cancer or my loved one's mental health be the remainder of my life story? I am the only Christian, the only person at my workplace, with my life-perspective! My whole family has fallen away from the faith and I am the only one who remains.

Perhaps at times you perceive your life as a sort of wasteland – so much wasted time, so much waste energy – devoid of anything truly spiritual or constructive or selfless. Or worse, you have been a little like a wrecking machine leaving so much damage in your wake. How much harm you've inflicted! Your life is not verdant with good deeds but a regrettable desert. Surely God would abandon someone like you.

When we have the sensation of being deserted, it's a little taste of hell. For hell is the ultimate desertion.

But dear friends, here in Isaiah 62 God reverses your status from deserted to desired. He tells you that He rejoices over you the way a bridegroom rejoices over a bride. For when Jesus died on the cross He atoned for all your sins. When Jesus rose from the dead He crushed all of Satan's power. He secured for you life and peace and salvation and light and never-ending wellness and God's ever-present blessing. God chose you and betrothed Himself to you calling you by name in Holy Baptism washing you clean of any impurity, sheltering you under His name and prizing you as His crown-jewel. He will not, He cannot, rest until He has you safely at home with Him in heaven.

He has made you rich with Christ's goodness, rich with Christ's righteous works, rich with countless brothers and sisters of Christ and with His entire heavenly family. In fact, far from being deserted God makes His home with you and in you. Does He not prove it every time you receive the Lord's Supper?

How rich you are! How lush and green you are with grace! How abundant you are with love and companionship as Christ takes you to be His own bride and through His Word embraces you with His Spirit.

No, dear friends, you are not deserted. Not at all deserted. For Christ, the Son of the living God, was willing to sacrifice His own life to redeem you for Himself. And He lives again to keep you for Himself for all eternity. Not deserted. You belong to Him. You are desired.