

In an ecological reading of Isaiah 35:1-10 ELAINE WAINWRIGHT explains how paralysing hopelessness can change to active hope.

Isaiah 35:1–10

- 1 The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus
- 2 it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.
They shall see the glory of God,
the majesty of our God.
- 3 Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.
- 4 Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
“Be strong, do not fear!
Here is your God.
Who will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.
God will come and save you.”
- 5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
- 6 then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;
- 7 the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.
- 8 A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it,
but it shall be for God’s people;
no traveller, not even fools, shall go astray.
- 9 No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.
- 10 And the ransomed of God shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.



This extract from the Book of Isaiah is the work of a prophet of Israel who was preaching in the late 6th century BCE — towards the end of Israel’s exile in Babylon. The prophet bears the name “Isaiah”, as did a previous prophet in Israel in the early 8th century BCE who predicted the exile. The first 34 chapters of the Book of Isaiah in our Bibles are associated with the earlier Isaiah.

This poem from the later Isaiahan prophet was calling the exiled people from the despair of their situation to a new hope for their future. The prophet couches the message of hope in idealised language and imagery drawn from countryside around them and remembered by them. As ecological readers we can attend to the imagery of the message as a way of shaping our own Earth consciousness.

The prophet uses different words to distinguish various aspects of Earth in the opening verse — wilderness, dry land, desert. We could miss these nuances describing the land, but for the exiled people yearning for the land from which they were taken forcibly, these nuances have kept alive their hope.

My ecological awareness of these nuances is sparked by images of the drought-stricken parts of Australia at present. The desert is extending its boundaries and where there were once verdant farmlands, thousands of hectares have become “dry land”. For many, especially those who farmed in these regions, there is a harshness like that of a “desert” and there is no transformation in sight. Perhaps the poem’s opening verse can evoke hope that the “dry land shall be glad” and that the “desert shall rejoice” (Is 35:1).

As the poem continues, the language differs from that which would normally be associated with wilderness or dry land — that it will “blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing” (Is 35:2). Such language is necessary within our lexicon so that we do not despair. The prophet



continues with a plea, which in our own time we can join when we feel overwhelmed by the extent of ecological change needed – “strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees ... Be strong, do not fear” (Is 35:3-4).

The prophet draws attention to the presence of God in this struggle between despair and hope. We can read it as an invitation to enter deeply into the experience of despair in the face of the societal and governmental lack of engagement with the effects of climate change – even denying its existence.

The strong language of “vengeance” and “recompense” which is attributed to God, is not necessarily descriptive of God. Rather it alerts contemporary ecological readers to the enormity of the disaster that is being caused. We can feel this same wrath when we look at the deserts and wildernesses created by tearing down old-growth forests, polluting our waterways, and much more. While the promise of vengeance and recompense is attributed to God, rather than thinking of it as describing divinity, we can read it as alerting us to the urgency of the situation where the human community is putting the future of the planet at risk. It is alerting us all to change.

The future, which the prophet envisages for a repentant and reformed Israel, is expressed in ecological imagery and captures the process of transformation.


“The eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped” (Is 35:5) imagines the world of human transformation. The two senses described as being transformed – our seeing and hearing – are those which give us greatest access to our human community. Their restoration will transform individual and community life, as do the transformations of the lame leaping like a deer and the speechless singing for joy (Is 35:6).

The description of transformations continue in the poem – the desert, the wilderness and the dry land will blossom. And the human community is brought into the song of transformation. This new way through the desert is for “God’s people” (Is 35:8b).

As the poem continues, the ecological reader will find that the lion and other animals in the category of “ravenous beasts” will not be found on the new highway, the Holy Way. It is for the “redeemed” to travel safely back to the land of Israel.

The theology of the redeemed, of God’s chosen people, can give hope to the people in exile. At the same time, we need to keep a critical approach ensuring that we don’t put some members of the ecological community ahead of, or superior to, others. For example, dividing the Earth community into the “chosen” and “others”. We cannot put some at risk by judging who are the “redeemed of God” who will walk the new highway and who are not – the “unclean” and “ravenous beasts”.

In our own time prophetic voices are calling us to move from the despair that can paralyse us as we face the enormity of climate change that we are experiencing already and the effects which are being predicted. Like the prophet, we can keep before us the possibilities of a transformed future and join with those who are endeavouring to bring it about.

As we engage reflectively with the readings during Advent, Christmas and the New Year and with the cry of the Earth rising around us, we can be shaped by an ecological perspective and praxis.. 



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