

“Singing Sand”

Sometimes we don't hear song lyrics right the first time, nor do we get them right with subsequent singings. The lyrics sound similar to other words, and when sung instead of the intended lyrics, interesting creations result. Children are prone to such substitutions, especially when it comes to Christmas songs. For example, “He rules the world with truth and grace,” comes out, “He rules the world *with Ruth and Grace.*” “Hark! the Herald Angels Sing,” becomes, “*Hark! the hairy angels sing.*”

Here are other examples of misunderstood classics:

- ❑ *Later on, we'll perspire as we dream by the fire...*
- ❑ *Troll, the Asian Yuletide carol...*
- ❑ *Oh no, the missing toe, hung where you can see...*
- ❑ *While shepherds washed their socks by night.*

And here is my favorite:

- ❑ *Joyful oily nations rise.
Join the triumph of disguise,
With the jellied toast proclaim,
Christ is born in Bethlehem.*

When I was a kid, one of the hymn regularly sung in my church was, “My Hope Is Built.” You know the words of the chorus—
“*On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand.*” But that is not what I heard. I thought the chorus went, “... all other ground is *stinking sand.*”

For our purposes this morning I will put *sinking and stinking sand* aside for another sermon and talk instead about, “*singing*”

sand.” In the Bible, not only humans have a voice. In Luke 19 Jesus makes his Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem. His followers shout, “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” It was an echo of the anthem the angels sang to the shepherds when Christ was born—“*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those he favors!*” The Pharisees told Jesus to shut the disciples up, and Jesus replied, “If they were silent, the very stones would cry out.”

The incredible news that God became “one of us” to be “one with us” was such an earth-shaking revelation that if no human voice uttered it, the rocks would shout it. If Balaam’s jackass talked, if hills and trees clap their hands, and rocks cry, then sand can sing.

The prophet Isaiah spoke discouraging words, but he had another voice. He also spoke encouraging word to God’s broken people. They had spent over seventy years exiled in Babylon. The end of their captivity was in sight. It wouldn’t be long until they would head for home.

However, there wasn’t much to go back to.. Their Temple was leveled; and Jerusalem and all other cities had been destroyed. After their return it would take a long time before life had some semblance of order. But for the moment this wasn’t Isaiah’s concern. After he pronounced at fitting end for God’s enemies, he mixed the colors on his pallet and painted a beautiful picture of what awaited them:

***The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
The desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it
shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and
singing...***

(35: 1-2)

Imagine that—a singing desert! If you have ever driven through the deserts of the Southwest, you know what a beautiful *and* forbidding place it is. Distances are vast and the land is largely

uninhabited. The heat is sweltering. Riverbeds are bone dry. Gaze at the horizon and you'll see heat convection currents and dirt devils spinning over the parched terrain like little tornadoes.

Driving through the Indiana countryside, you don't think to yourself, "I could die walking through soybean fields." But if you are alone and without provisions in the desert, you're toast! Even the interstate rest stops are dangerous. Signs read—**CAUTION! RATTLESNAKES!**

The desert is a dry, desolate place. Rainfall is exceedingly sparse. But when it does rain, an incredible transformation occurs. The desert blooms. Seeds that lay dormant for years come to life and the desert floor explodes with color.

I heard a Bible scholar say that in the Old Testament, God's work can be described as *turning brown into green*. The landscape for God's people was a crusty, dusty brown. Isaiah came down hard on the people's sinful rebellion and the judgment that fit their transgressions. But by chapter 35, Isaiah shed his asbestos suit and preached a green message of redemption... *The wilderness shall be glad—the desert shall rejoice and blossom and rejoice with joy and singing.*

He wasn't talking about a literal desert breaking into bloom. His speech was about God making good on a promise to deliver the people from their barren and broken lives. They lost their land and their Temple-- everything that had given them meaning.

They needed hope. "Get a grip on life. Tone up your Jell-O knees. Tell the faint-hearted not to fear. Your God is coming to save you," (Isaiah 35: 3-4).

When I call this poetry, it doesn't mean that it is some kind of flowery wishful thinking. Isaiah used poetry to connect with the situation in which the people found themselves. The desert was a brutal and barren place littered with the bleached skeletons. Desert meant death. It was a description of what their lives were like.

I heard about a woman being crushed by life. At a church function, someone noticed her quietly crying. When they approached, the hurting woman said-- "You have no idea how painful Christmas is for me. My husband divorced me and later died. My son was killed by a drunk driver, and my daughter died of cancer. A few weeks before she died, my son-in-law, an attorney, stole all the property she had intended me to inherit. As she was dying, she took comfort thinking that I would inherit her condo. I'm utterly alone in the world, without any family." She knows what its means to live in the desert. Color her world brown.

There's a single mother who drops her two small children off at a friends house after school. She will pick them up after she gets off work at 10:00 p.m. She's a cashier at Wal-Mart. She is a conscientious and hard worker, a fact that she hopes is not lost on her boss. It would help a lot if she were given more hours so she could catch up on all the delinquent bills and maybe find a better place to live. She doesn't know that her boss is under orders not to give her more hours. That could lead to benefits, so they hire more part-time cashiers and keep her where she is. She knows what it means to live in the desert. Color her world brown.

There's a man who has worked at the same plant for twenty-five years. He is loyal, and takes pride in his work. While his mind is on the task at hand, in an office suite overlooking the Chicago skyline, men in suits sit around a long, mahogany table. They study stacks of papers and charts spread before them, listening to the CEO talking about the corporation's newest acquisition. They will make millions, but first, jobs must be eliminated—lots of them. "It's unfortunate," the CEO tells the other executives, "but it's the price of doing business these days. Now if you will excuse me, I have other meetings to attend."

One month later, the man's job is eliminated. One year later, he still can't find work, nor can he find what it will take to keep his marriage together. He knows what it means to live in the desert. Color his world brown.

On the cover of your bulletin is a vision test I want you to take. It doesn't have a big "E" at the top. Look at the picture on the left and tell me the primary color you see? BROWN. Now look at the picture to the right. What color do you see? GREEN.

We can't *wish* brown into green. We can't paint the world to make it look the way we want. Being frail, finite, sinful people, subject as we are to the powers of darkness and death, we can't talk ourselves into seeing a life different from the one we see right now. A brown world only looks green to those who see with the eyes of faith. Do you recall the definition of faith found in Hebrews? "*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen,*" (Hebrews 11: 1).

Faith is a gift to those who believe in God's promises more than the world's priorities. We believe God gave Creation its start by creating something out of nothing. We believe God made light out of darkness. We believe God made life out of death. We believe God makes a way for us when there are no paths we can pave for ourselves. We believe God makes the blind see and the deaf hear and the lame leap and make the speechless sing. We believe God makes springs in the desert and turns burning sand singing pools. We believe God paves highways through deserts of pessimism and perplexity and predicaments and persecution and problems because God wants to bring his children home.

At Christmas we rejoice in the miracle by which God came to us and comes to us and continues to come to us. Someone observed that sooner or later, hell and heartbreak *come to every home for a visit*. It has knocked at door of everyone listening to my voice. It has knocked at the door of everyone who will read these words on the Web. I understand why some of you think that these unwelcome visitors have camped at your door.

Who would have thought that the remedy would come in a stable, in a barely noticed, unlikely, but decisive birth?

The British writer G. K. Chesterton wasn't a prophet. He was a poet. Like Isaiah, Chesterton wrote poetry to point us toward God's promises, and give us hope that our final destination is

not in some brown desert of present circumstance, but in a verdant, green hopeful future that is God's good pleasure to give us. So let me leave you with Chesterton's poem, *The House of Christmas*:

There fared a mother driven forth
Out of an inn to roam;
In the place where she was homeless
All men are at home.
The crazy stable close at hand,
With shaking timber and shifting sand,
Grew a stronger thing to abide and stand
Than the square stones of Rome.

For men are homesick in their homes,
And strangers under the sun,
And they lay on their heads in a foreign land
Whenever the day is done.
Here we have battle and blazing eyes,
And chance and honour and high surprise,
But our homes are under miraculous skies
Where the yule tale was begun.

A Child in a foul stable,
Where the beasts feed and foam;
Only where He was homeless
Are you and I at home;
We have hands that fashion and heads that know,
But our hearts we lost - how long ago!
In a place no chart nor ship can show
Under the sky's dome.

This world is wild as an old wives' tale,
And strange the plain things are,
The earth is enough and the air is enough
For our wonder and our war;
But our rest is as far as the fire-drake swings
And our peace is put in impossible things
Where clashed and thundered unthinkable wings
Round an incredible star.

**To an open house in the evening
Home shall men come,
To an older place than Eden
And a taller town than Rome.
To the end of the way of the wandering star,
To the things that cannot be and that are,
To the place where God was homeless
And all men are at home.**