

**Sunday, March 13, 2016 - The Desert: Simplicity**  
**Isaiah 43:16-21 CEB**  
**Marysville United Methodist Church**  
**Pastor Jenny Smith**

What do you think of when I say the word, “simplicity?” *Ask for answers.*

What’s the opposite of simplicity? Complexity. And when I think of complexity, I think of...*(hold up items)*

- Book = knowledge/information
- Phone = connection
- Clock = time/not enough
- Money = security
- Food = emotion/enjoyment
- Hand weight = strength/health
- Pennant = memorable experiences
- Family picture = family has it all together

All of these things together can make our lives incredibly complicated and confusing.

Isaiah 43:19: **Look! I’m doing a new thing;** now it sprouts up; **don’t you recognize it?**

**Can I see the new thing** God wants to do in my life if my life looks like this? **Do I have room to receive it?**

God is doing a new thing all around us - everyday. But we often miss it. Our arms are too full.

There are many gifts in the desert, but one of them rises to the surface: **simplicity.**

Simplicity is something most of us crave. Especially in an overconnected, oversaturated world. We have plenty of voices telling us to go after more. We need more voices telling us we have enough. More importantly, **we are enough.** The good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ is the One who made you and me, says this to us all the time.

I had the last two weeks off from preaching and so appreciated Heather and Tanya’s messages with us. It gave me time to do some big picture work and lots of reading. I found myself digging into some great contents from different voices in church leadership. After two or three days of this work, I found myself jittery and unfocused. It took me another day or two before I felt God nudge me with this, “which voice are you listening to?” I had been listening to so many opinions and voices that it overwhelmed me. I had filled my head with voices that were helpful and encouraging but they were not the voice of God.

Simplicity is an undivided heart. We trust God and are free to wonder and explore this beautiful life. Because we know, deep deep deep down, that we have what we need. We don’t need more of anything, except an awareness of God’s presence in our lives.

Another gift of the desert? It helps us sift away the important and the not as important.

I’m eight months into this calling to be a lead pastor of a church. And I love it. It’s been one big experiment in time management. And just this past Monday, I came home and my husband asked, “how was your day?” And for the first time, I heard myself say, “I was productive in the things that really matter.”

I’ve had plenty of days where I reflected back on my day and I have no idea where it went. I’m sure good things happened and I followed God’s leading. But did I steward my time and gifts well so I could help our church move towards more clarity, purpose and vision for how God can best use us in this world? I’m learning every day to **not let the urgent overwhelm the important** (Craig Groeschel).

And that's what happens in the desert. It helps us define the important and the not as important.

Walking into the desert, refusing to return to Israel, being open to conversion taking a long time, daring to believe that life can grow in the desert == **it all leads us to let go of the things we thought we needed, so we can be open to the new thing God is doing.**

#### **Difficult journeys force us to prioritize.**

- Caregiving for a loved one? - things that felt important fall away and you do the most important things
- Bringing a child into the world? - you give up things you love for things you love even more
- Starting a new adventure? - fear tries to keep us on the old path, trust helps us let go so our arms are ready to welcome the new

This time last year, I told my beloved home church family in Alaska that it was time for us to move on to the next big adventure. I was 50% joyful and 50% heart broken. On one hand, I was starting to catch a glimpse of what God could do through our family in a new place but on the other hand, my brain and heart were firmly entrenched in the world I knew in Alaska. I was safe and comfortable there. I knew what to expect.

But here? I'm still trying to accept that flowers are blooming in March and it's *still* raining - but I am not safe and comfortable here. **And I love it.** I've never had to depend on God as much as I do in this new role. I wake up each morning and spend time reading my Bible, journaling and talking and listening with God. Because I've learned if I don't, then I walk down paths that are more about me than about God.

Depending on God with an undivided heart - with a simple trust - and enjoying the simplicity of the life God lays before us **is possible.** Our transition here to be with you was a difficult journey. It forced us to prioritize lots of things and relationships. And to let go of people I loved. But we walked through that desert with purpose and a vision of what might be coming next.

Are there times I want to pick everything back up? The complexity of life? Yes, every day.

I've always thought of the desert places in our lives as the lonely, off limits place to be avoided. That if I gathered all these things, worked hard on them, that I would be successful and "finally get it together." We would arrive.

And yet, for the past four weeks, we've seen over and over that God is in the desert. Waiting for us. Calling us forward. There's **life** in the desert. There's **life** in the very places we avoid.

And maybe it really is okay to let everything else go.

So where does that leave us? Sitting on a rock in the middle of the desert, with nothing. It's all fallen away. It's just us. And God. Feeling vulnerable - a little uncomfortable - and **somehow realizing this is all we need.**

In the desert all the things that we use to define our identities are missing, and we are left with nothing except what we have inside. A lot of us fear that we would find we had nothing inside, or only fear and pain, and so we never venture into the desert. In the desert there is nowhere to hide. God comes to us, as he came to Jesus, as he came to Moses, as he came to Jacob, to show us who we really are to him. And we clutch our thin rags of identity to use like armor, and shrink back from his touch - better the little we have, we say, than risk even that being taken away as well.

But those who try to save their life will lose it all, and God needs to strip us naked, in spite of our fear and embarrassment - and if we let God remove these filthy rags, and wash the wounds, God will reclothe us as something we never imagined, or only caught glimpses of in dreams - and when we put on the identity God offers us - the one God sewed, until hands bled - we will know that we have become our real selves at last, we have found out who we really are, that we are free, and need never search, lost, through the world again...

And maybe the desert turns out to be a beach, after all, so we make a bonfire of those old rags and watch the sun rise over the ocean...(*Lent Identity* - Alternative Worship - p75)

Amen.