

December 5th

Isaiah 35:5-7

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Isaiah's vision of the desert becoming a lush, green pasture, flowing with streams of water, and pools of water to quench the thirsty animals, paints a vivid picture. The people in exile longed for a return to the land that they had lost; longed for the restoration of their home and their freedom. This is a portion of a longer oracle that speaks of the coming day of the Lord, who will act with justice and restore the fortunes of Israel. In the language of restoration, the prophet also speaks of persons with disabilities being "restored" to wholeness by God.

We must be careful not to equate disability with sin, or with a condition of being less-than whole. Disability studies have advanced a great deal from the context of the Ancient Near East, where physical disabilities often impeded a person from being able to live a full and enjoyable life. In this context, the prophet's words speak of the hope of a restored future, in which every person will be able to participate fully. But in our present context, we know that people with physical or cognitive differences are capable of living full lives with their disability – it is part of their identity, and there are many accommodations that can be made for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in schools, workplaces, churches, and every sphere of life.

Lamar Hardwick, a pastor with autism and a disability inclusion advocate says: "One of the most important roles of the church in creating spaces for disability inclusion is to recognize the image of God that can be found in every part of God's creation, including those with disabilities.

How can the church bring hope and at the same time highlight the image of God in the lives of the disabled? How can the church intentionally look beyond their disability and look for the glory of God shining through their lives?" (Hardwick, Lamar. *Disability and the Church: A Vision for diversity and Inclusion*, InterVarsity Press, 2021, p 62.)

Let us look for the beauty of the image of God in each person that we meet, and let us work to find ways to become a more inclusive, diverse, and beautiful community as we seek to realize the vision of God's beloved kingdom and a world that is life-giving and liberating for humanity and creation alike.

Prayer: Creative, Redeeming, and Liberating God, you have formed each of us in your image, in all of our delightful differences and with our varied gifts and challenges. Help us to see the beauty in your diverse creation, and to look for ways we can honor and welcome the gifts of all of your children, in our houses of worship and everywhere we go. Amen.

Action Item: Identify a barrier to full inclusion for disabled persons in your worship space, and work with church leadership on ways to change it.