For the past three weeks, we’ve read about two people in Scripture who encountered Jesus, the woman at the well in the fourth chapter of the Gospel of John and Zacchaeus the tax collector in Luke chapter 19. For both of them, their encounters with Jesus led to an immediate transformation: their longing, their restlessness, their thirst had been met and satisfied in him. It’s the same thirst that each one of us has, the one that, even if we don’t recognize it or know what it is, longs for the Lord, especially when we try to substitute other things in the Lord’s place. Those things can be stuff we generally think of as negative like addictions or vices, but it can also be things we often consider positive, like relationships, like careers, heck even church can be one of those things if the Lord isn’t at the center of it, things that will ultimately let us down if that’s where we seek our rest and our fulfilment. It’s the sort of longing that Augustine wrote about in his *Confessions*, in the prayer we’ve been offering to close each week’s message, “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you. The woman at the well and Zacchaeus both had sought out rest in all the wrong places, but one encounter with Jesus, and everything changed.

It’s powerful to think about. One encounter with Jesus, and the answer’s right there, an epiphany, followed by sudden and lasting transformation for the better. There was a weight, a burden, a restlessness, a thirst, and then boom, it’s gone. It’s powerful. That happens sometimes. Might have happened to some of you. But I’d be willing to bet that many of you haven’t had one of those Road to Damascus, blinded by the light, turn to Jesus epiphanies. You read about the woman at the well, about Zacchaeus the tax collector, and about their sudden, astounding amazing change and one hand you think, “Hey that’s great,” but in your heart, you know that’s not what you know. What you know is, that’s not how it always happens. Will you pray with me?

*Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.*

It would’ve been about this time of year eleven years ago when I was hitchhiking in Latin America. That’s a much longer series of stories as far as how I ended up doing that, but the short version of it is that it was during a very restless time of my own life. But in this particular instance I was in northwestern Argentina, and what you need to know about northwestern Argentina is that it’s mostly desert and mountains. So if you’re hitchhiking through it, or just driving through it, you better hope the car you’re in has the legs to make it up and down a mountain and to the next pit stop or you’re in a world of trouble.

So I needed to get from one side of a small mountain ridge to other side, and the best way through was this winding mountain road right over the ridge. I manage to get a ride, so here we go. It was just a random guy saying he was heading over the ridge on business, and he was being kind to an obvious backpacker on the side of the road, so we’re driving over this desert mountain ridge, winding this way and that, and the two of us are just carrying on conversation. And at one point on the drive, he pulls over to the side of the road, gets out, and goes to the trunk of his car.
So I’m thinking, well this is how it ends for me. Nah, I’m pulling your leg a little; he had told me what he was going to do. Everything was fine. He goes to the trunk of his car and he pulls out 2L bottle of Coke, except there wasn’t Coke in it. He had filled it up with water. He takes the Coke bottle and heads up a short path heading away from the road and steps up to what I saw was a small shrine to a Catholic saint. And he leaves the bottle there, and comes back.

When he gets back into the car, I ask him what that was about, and he said that it was water left for travelers who had broken down on the road and were stranded. He said it was a custom for folks on that stretch of road, a custom as you drove past to leave a bottle of water at this shrine. And I looked up at the shrine and saw not just the bottle this guy had left, but dozens of other ones, all filled up with water, left on the side of a desert road.

We can talk another time about shrines to Roman Catholic saints, but that image has stuck with me. Bottles of water left on a desert mountain road for stranded travelers.

Beginning in v. 10 of our text today, “They shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them down, for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them. And I will turn all my mountains into a road, and my highways shall be raised up.” In the same way as the bottles of water along the desert mountain road, so too are there promises here for water along the way in the desert.

And if you read just that verse, just those two verses, we think, someone’s going on a road trip, and just in case something goes wrong, there’s a promise for water along the way. It’s nice and reassuring. But then you back up a bit and you find that this isn’t some joy ride down Route 66; it’s a jail break. The ones being led down this road are “prisoners,” as v. 9 says, “saying to the prisoners, ‘Come out,’ to those who are in darkness, ‘Show yourselves.’” And if you go back a little bit more you find that someone has been charged to call out to these prisoners, someone who has been given, as v. 8 says, “as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages, saying to the prisoners, ‘Come out.’” And so who are these prisoners, where are they heading? All that talk about being led by springs of water and not hungering or thirsting is all well and good, but where’s this coming from?

So a bit of background on Isaiah. It’s a prophetic book, a major prophetic book in the Old Testament, but we have to remember that its being “prophetic” doesn’t mean that it’s about predicting the future. The future’s definitely a part of it, but it’s also about galvanizing a response among the faithful who hear it, so there are always shades of meaning. As far as the subject matter, well, it’s a big book. You go to one spot, you’ll find judgment and wrath, to another, warning, to another, comfort, and to another conviction.

But even with that wide variety, there are many who identify three discernible sections of the Book of Isaiah. Now folks disagree on whether it was the same singular prophet Isaiah who wrote the whole thing or whether it was a few people under the moniker of Isaiah in different time periods, but that’s a topic for another day. What is clear is that these three different sections at least have in mind three different periods in Israel’s history, and the subject matter usually follows suit. The first section of Isaiah is while the Israelite kingdom is hanging on by a thread, but there are grave threats around it. So, in that first section, there’s a lot of, “You better shape up, because destruction is coming.” Well, destruction comes, and in the second section Israel has already been conquered, the temple destroyed, and much of the population taken away into exile, and so in this second section, the tone in Isaiah is one of comfort and assurance in God’s faithfulness to deliver his people. Then in the third section, the people have been restored to the land are rebuilding, so the tone is kind of, “Now don’t make the same mistakes twice.”
This passage is in that second section of Isaiah. Israel has been conquered, the temple destroyed, the people taken away from their homeland into exile to Babylon, and there they remain. Not much hope in a life of exile, especially one like this. You’ve been taken from your homeland, thrown into a second-class existence in a foreign land. But even more than that, your very identity has been shaken to its core. With the temple destroyed and the land taken from your people, it’s as if God himself is no longer with you; he’s abandoned you. And so many are tempted simply to accept their fate and resign themselves to continue in what is an empty existence.

And these people, these people in exile, these people tempted to accept their fate and abandonment by God, are the ones the text names as prisoners. Because a word is going out to them, to the prisoners “Come out,” “to those who are in darkness, ‘Show yourselves.’” It’s an invitation to come home. The only trouble was, for all these exiles, going home would mean traveling across a literal desert to get back.

Some of you here today may consider yourselves to be in a place of exile, feeling distant from the Lord, feeling like God has abandoned you, feeling like the very notion of coming home, so to speak, makes about as much sense as looking out across a desert and starting to walk. You hear the stories of the woman at the well and of Zacchaeus the tax collector and how their lives were transformed in a matter of minutes by encounters with Jesus, and you think, well that’s nice for them, but for you, you just don’t see things playing out quite that way. You instead look out over a desert road and think, why on earth would I start going down that thing?

Earlier last week, I was blessed to hear from Stephanie Benko, whom many of you know. She’s not here today, but I asked her if I could share a little of what she wrote. She reflected on what we’ve been talking about the past few weeks and shared what she noticed as a difference between Zacchaeus the tax collector and the woman at the well. She wrote, “It occurred to me to contrast how Zacchaeus actively sought Jesus, while the woman at the well was actively avoiding everyone, but Jesus pursued her…redirecting her life with purpose…. The woman at the well always hits home, because we are more likely to take the path of avoidance, and it’s comforting to know that Jesus won’t stop taking that path with me too.”

Now look, y’all need to stop sending me stuff like this, or y’all are going to realize you don’t need me up here preaching.

But something Stephanie picked up on this past week is the very thing this text is telling us. That sometimes this change, this transformation, this discovery of peace and rest in Jesus, it doesn’t always just happen in an instant. It’s a journey, it’s a road. And a lot of times, that road is terrifying. It’s a road out of exile. Now exile stinks, but at some point you get used to it, so when some strange person cries out, “Come out,” to those of us who are in darkness, “Show yourselves,” that’s the last thing we want to do. Doesn’t matter that the road before us is a road to peace, a road to rest, a road to find our deepest thirst satisfied. Doesn’t matter. It’s a road through the wilderness, and you don’t know if you can make it.

But like Stephanie said, “Jesus won’t stop taking that path with [you].” You shall feed along the way. You shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike you down, and why? Because he who has pity will lead you, and by springs of water will guide you. It means that even though the road ahead of you might be a road to rest, if you look out at it, instead of worrying whether you should even start or whether you’ll even make it, what you see is the assurance that along that road there’s a stop with a bunch of bottles of water waiting for you.
Also last week, Sonya Ewell shared a short devotional among our staff—it really is great when y’all share this kind of stuff, you pretty much write these sermons for me. It was by a man named Dallas Willard, and he was writing about the “casual confidence” we should have as we journey in faith, not confidence in ourselves, and not casual in the sense that it’s not really important, but a casual confidence in the sense that our lives of faith are undergirded by the faithfulness of the Lord going with us. He writes this, “God’s presence is the whole story. This interaction between us and the God who is present with us always is what the resurrections is really about. The meaning of the resurrection isn’t just that Jesus won; it’s that He is now living with us.”

Friends, there is a thirst in all of us, that much is true and clear to me. But for too many of us who have felt in exile, even seeking out the Lord is so daunting and intimidating, whether it’s because you’ve been burned by the church or burned by belief, or because you feel like the road is too long. Even though you’re not at all happy where you are, you’d rather stay there because it’s an unhappiness that you at least are familiar with. Friends, if this is where you are, come out of the darkness. Show yourselves. For the Lord will with you, and though the road through the desert may seem unsure, there is water along the way.

Will you pray with me?