

Series: Transition

July 30, 2017

Title: Streams in the Desert

[Slide 1]

Text: Isaiah 41:11-20

Starting Over

Starting Over?

What do you think of when you hear the words “starting over”? Perhaps you think of a time when you moved into a new house or started a new job. Maybe you felt that way when you brought baby #2 home from the hospital.

Starting Over: New beginning, new opportunity, new future!

Or perhaps your mind goes to a time when you *had* to start over. It wasn't that you wanted to start over, but life put you in one of those places where you had no choice. Maybe you were let go from your job and had to find a new one. Maybe you went through a great loss and had to rebuild your life. Maybe your family moved and you found yourself in a new school with no friends.

At times like these, starting over seems difficult if not impossible! We can get bogged down with all of the reasons why it will never work, or why we'll never find the energy or faith for a new start. How do we know it will be worth the effort?

The Yatir Forest:

[Slide 2]

In 1964 a visionary named Yosef Weitz stood on a desert hilltop in southern Israel and declared that in precisely this place he would plant a forest. Talk about “starting over”! He had chosen a location at the northern edge of the Negev – the great desert region that comprises more than half of modern Israel.

In 1966 the tree planting began. Eventually, 4,000,000 trees would be planted in a 7,000 acre area, creating Israel's *largest forest!* It was named the Yatir Forest, after an ancient Israelite city that once stood there.

The trees in the Yatir Forest are about 30' high, with a density of 120 per acre. The trees absorb dust and pollutants, their presence lowers summer temperatures by as much as 4 degrees. They provide homes to dozens of species of birds, and they enhance water retention and absorption.

Talk about starting over!

Starting Over!

The Yatir Forest is nothing less than a literal fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy:

[Slide 3]

Isaiah 41:18-19 NIV

"I will make rivers flow on barren heights, and springs within the valleys. I will turn the desert into pools of water, and the parched ground into springs. I will put in the desert the cedar and the acacia, the myrtle and the olive. I will set junipers in the wasteland, the fir and the cypress together...."

If a desert can become a forest, think of what God can do in when He calls us to "start over"!

Nothing There

Obstacle or Opportunity?

Making a fresh start means coming face to face with the seemingly endless obstacles that stand in the way. The very things that conspire to make our current situation intolerable seem to form an impenetrable barrier to moving forward.

The idea of planting a forest in a desert seemed impossible for a thousand reasons. Nothing was growing there. There wasn't enough moisture. The list went on and on. But the scientists developing the project saw the *obstacles* as *opportunities*. The ground was already cleared and available for planting. The dryness meant a chance to discover drought-resistant plants. The trees themselves created a more hospitable environment.

God promises to do the same when we step out in faith and take the "starting over" journey. To downtrodden and defeated Jews who were living in Babylon, He said:

[Slide 4]

Isaiah 41:11-12 NIV

"All who rage against you will surely be ashamed and disgraced; those who oppose you will be as nothing and perish. Though you search for your enemies, you will not find them. Those who wage war against you will be as nothing at all."

The nations had conspired to see Israel cease to exist as a nation and a people. Babylon had destroyed her land, her cities, her Temple. Babylon had carted off most of the survivors to be assimilated into the conqueror's culture. End of story.

But God says: Look away from your enemies. Stop listening to their taunts and propaganda. The very act of starting to believe that I am leading you on a starting over journey exposes them as powerless over you!

The very things that look like impossible barriers are going to turn out to be the doorways to the new start that you are making! The new emperor will pay your way home!

The Redeemer:

This new beginning all rested on one word: Redeemer. God said to His people:

[Slide 5]

Isaiah 41:13-14 NIV

"For I am the LORD your God who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you.

*"Do not be afraid, you worm Jacob, little Israel, do not fear, for I myself will help you," declares the LORD, your **Redeemer**, the Holy One of Israel.*

When God sent Moses back to Egypt to lead them to the Promised Land, He commanded him:

[Slide 6]

Exodus 6:6 NIV

*"Therefore, say to the Israelites: 'I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will **redeem** you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment.'"*

Now, the God of the Exodus, the LORD, is offering to once again redeem His people from slavery and exile. He is the God of "starting over." He will be there every step of the way.

A New mission:

So what does "starting over" look like? God says that in her new role Israel will have spiritual authority she never knew before:

[Slide 7]

Isaiah 41:15-16 NIV

"See, I will make you into a threshing sledge, new and sharp, with many teeth. You will thresh the mountains and crush them, and reduce the hills to chaff. You will winnow them, the wind will pick them up, and a gale will blow them away. But you will rejoice in the LORD and glory in the Holy One of Israel."

Sounds fierce: threshing mountains/reducing hills to chaff. But God is not talking about turning His people into another empire that conquers the world around it. He is talking instead about a people who serve Him and bring His rule into the world.

Remember how Isaiah told them to build a highway for the LORD in the desert? That meant filling the valleys and cutting down the mountains. It meant reshaping our world according to God's plan and rule.

The result of this work is that they rejoice and glory in the God who created them and rescued them. The journey in the desert is not just an escape from slavery; it is a victorious procession that celebrates the fact that the world's one true Lord is finally here!

Streams in the Desert

Thirsty:

Sounds great! But isn't this vision just a tad idealistic? After all, God was speaking to a destroyed people. They were forcibly cut off from their land. Their social, political and religious institutions were destroyed. Their families and clans were scattered. They no longer had any of their former identity. In other words, they didn't even know who they were.

God addresses this stark reality by saying:

[Slide 8]

Isaiah 41:17 NIV

"The poor and needy search for water, but there is none; their tongues are parched with thirst. But I the LORD will answer them; I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them."

God is saying: "I will be there with you when you start over, even if it's in the middle of a barren desert. This is all part of my plan."

Streams in the desert:

And when we make the decision to join God in "starting over," He comes and makes the desert a well-watered garden:

[Slide 9]

Isaiah 41:18 NIV

"I will make rivers flow on barren heights, and springs within the valleys. I will turn the desert into pools of water, and the parched ground into springs."

He goes on to promise that He will turn the desert into a lush forest, filled with cedars and acacia trees, myrtle and olive trees, junipers, fir and cypress.

In other words, He promises to create something *brand new: New Creation*. And He does it right in the middle of what was once a desert.

New Creation!

What is the reason that God is willing to invest Himself in our desert journeys and help us start over?

[Slide 10]

Isaiah 41:20 NIV

"...so that people may see and know, may consider and understand, that the hand of the LORD has done this, that the Holy One of Israel has created it."

Your "starting over" is God's best advertisement. It is proof that God is present and active in the deserts of our world and our relationships. It is proof that the God who created the world *is still creating*.

So when you look at what lies before you and feel like you're all the way back at Square One, ask God if this is a time for "starting over." If so, focus on Him, not the obstacles. Invite Him into the dry places so He can turn the desert into pools of water. Then watch as He grows His garden in a place where you never thought anything good could happen!

Streams in the desert.