

SERMON

Pastor Cris Frigm

From Here in the Sand

written by: Rev. Sarah Speed

You've been here before.
I squeeze that truth like an orange in my hands,
willing some form of comfort to run out,
roll down my wrists,
calm these aching nerves.

You've been here before—
in the wilderness, in the desert,
in the place where nothing is what it seems
and everything is sharp.

You've been here before
so surely you know how hard it is
to hold tight to what is real
in the middle of a storm.

But because you've been here before,
I will stand tall.
I will sing songs of the river,
from here in the sand.
I will sing songs of the river,
into the wind.

You've been here before – in the wilderness, in the desert...

I spent 330 days in the desert. It was 2013 and I mobilized to active duty for the first time. I can honestly say I was 98% excited and 2% scared, or maybe it was 98% scared and 2% excited. I had very little understanding of what to expect. I knew nothing about Djibouti...a tiny democracy (at least on paper) sandwiched in between land-locked Ethiopia to the west and war-torn, pirate and terrorist run Somalia to the east.

I knew it was a harsh desert climate and that I would be one of four chaplains working in the base chapel. As the day approached I learned a little bit more – I met about 25 other sailors who would be going with me as we were trained for 3 weeks at Ft. Jackson, SC. I learned a little bit about living conditions at Camp Lemonnier, the only permanent US military base in Africa. And that was about it. I flew on a military rotator flight – a chartered plane – for an indeterminant number of hours, or maybe days, I'm not sure, stopping in

Rota, Spain; Sigonella, Sicily; and Manama, Bahrain until it finally arrived in the early morning hours in Djibouti.

I settled into my job and the rhythm of base life. I moved into a Containerized Living Unit – or CLU, think a shipping container turned into a very spartan bedroom. The base was almost entirely made of older French-built semi-permanent and permanent structures, lots of CLUs, a few building projects to create more permanent spaces, a really nice dining facility, an artificial turf field, a couple of gyms, some tents, and lots and lots of dirt and gravel.

That's not to say there wasn't any plant life – there were a few shrubs that stubbornly held on in the dry ground. There was some vibrant greenery over by the sewage treatment facility – but you didn't want to be there very long. There was a bit of animal life – mostly lizards and the occasional mongoose.

When I would go for a run on the trail along the fence line, I could get a look at the Djiboutian desert where I saw an impressive amount of...nothing. A few scrub trees, a lot of rocks – big and small, but mostly just a lot of ugly brown dirt.

Perhaps, like me before deployment, you picture a desert a little differently...maybe you imagine the wind-swept sand dunes of the Sahara that you see so often in movie desert scenes. It always seemed like the desert was just a really big beach. That wasn't my experience in Djibouti. There was no beach-like sand. It was just dry, hard dirt.

A few months after I got there, I had the chance to finally get off the base and out into the countryside to see more. And I did see more...more of nothing. The same scrub trees and rocks I saw from the fence-line went on for miles and miles. You could see mountains in the distance and when you got to the hillier parts, you saw rocks and dirt on many levels instead of just being flat. It was truly an amazing amount of **nothing**.

Except when it wasn't.

Because it became very clear that there was plenty of life in all that nothing. It was nothing like what I was used to experiencing here in this country – not even as lively as the Arizona desert I've seen.

But every once in a while, as I was running along that fence-line, I'd look out and see a camel wandering among the rocks and shrubs.

As we drove out through the desert, we pulled over to have the often sought for but rarely seen goats-in-a-tree experience. It's true, I have pictures. One of those barely alive scrub trees that is about the size of a dogwood had 4 white goats standing on top of the branches eating the dry leaves.

And most telling, when we stopped to see the rugged beauty of a canyon, desperate people trying to survive in a barren wilderness, came out from the shade of rocks to plea for what we could offer them. Not far from the road, in the middle of the nothing, there'd be a ramshackle tent sheltering an unknown number of people who had nowhere else to be.

I've taken from that experience – now over a decade ago – an appreciation for the rugged beauty of rocks and determined wildlife. But my favorite image – the one that I keep coming back to, over and over again, was the day I noticed a beautiful white flower in full bloom on one of the camp shrubs. I saw it one day as I was walking across camp and it struck me that it was such a beautiful sight in the midst of so much brown nothingness.

It stays with me all these years later as a reminder that the wasteland that Djibouti seemed to be was never completely total. Even in that desert, even in that place of deprivation and harsh emptiness, there were signs of life. There were signs of God's sustenance.

Of course, as I was thinking about this image this week, I used google to search for what that flower might be...turns out it was probably oleander, which is poisonous. Very poisonous. So, I'm going to have to think a little bit more about this image I've held onto for so long.

But in truth, I had no intention of eating that flower or the evergreen leaves it was growing on. It stays with me because I needed a sign of beautiful life that day. And with my discovery came a different kind of sustenance. It didn't make me miss my family any less. It didn't get me closer to home. But it reminded me that all was not lost. Even in that desert, harsh as it was, life continued.

I don't know exactly what kind of desert you're experiencing right now. Maybe life doesn't feel at all like a desert. But I see the hard, cracked, dry ground of unkindness and hate and long for the stubborn goodness to break through and bring life. It's in those driest places that the goats go to great lengths to find nourishment. It's when the ground is the bleakest that the beautiful flowers suck up the moisture they can find and burst forth...even if they're poisonous.

Even in the desert, the persistent love of God continues to find us, nourish us, and carry us forward. Even in the desert of conflict and war, the promises of God's grace and forgiveness fill our life with hope. May the hard, cracked, barren surfaces of your life be nourished and filled to overflowing with that love. Now and always. Amen.

Please stand, as you are able.