

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN

Roanoke, Virginia

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Third Sunday of Advent

“Joy”

Part III of the Advent Sermon Series, “What Can’t Wait?”

Isaiah 35:1-10, Luke 1:46-55

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This year, I decorated early for Christmas. We just needed a little something special. I think everyone else on our street got the same memo. Lincoln Ave. has more lights than usual, more candles in windows, more wreaths, more tacky lawn art... and I love it. It’s amazing what a few homemade lighted Christmas balls can bring to a yard, or a 6-foot-tall blowup dinosaur with presents down its back.

We all need a little extra cheer this year. It’s been hard. And so, small things like peppermint lattes and Hallmark Christmas movies in November have sprinkled bits of joy in the desert.

Chris and I are fortunate, really. While we’ve decided to forego our Christmas travels and stay home for the holiday, watching Christmas unfold through the lens of our two-and-a-half-year-old has been nothing short of joy. She doesn’t know about the parties that didn’t get scheduled, the dinners with friends that won’t happen, or the family traditions we have to adapt. To her, Christmas with the three of us is a party, church pageants always happen via YouTube, and holiday themed face masks are just a regular fashion accessory.



So, when I approached our texts for today, I tried to read them with the faith of a child—with the hope that such joys may not be found only in some far-off future, but in the here and now—because joy cannot wait.

Isaiah 35:1-10

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus ²it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.
They shall see the glory of the LORD,
the majesty of our God.

³ Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.

⁴ Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
'Be strong, do not fear!
Here is your God.

He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you.'

⁵ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

⁶ then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;

⁷ the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

⁸ A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it,
but it shall be for God's people;
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.

⁹ No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.

¹⁰ And the ransomed of the LORD shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;



everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

“They will rejoice.”

This is the first word of Isaiah’s vision in chapter 35 and, put into context, it feels completely out of place. Isaiah speaks without addressing anyone by name, without any particularity of time. And this vision comes on the heels of a poem filled with destruction. In Isaiah 34, we read that:

⁹ ... *the streams of Edom shall be turned into pitch,
and her soil into sulphur;
her land shall become burning pitch...*

¹³ *Thorns shall grow over its strongholds,
nettles and thistles in its fortresses.*

For millennia, scholars have understood the first part of Isaiah to have come from years of exile. This section of the Old Testament book is full of poems and prophecies from a mournful and painful place. Some say this hopeful promise in Isaiah 35 actually belongs later in the book—in the chapters originating *after* the exile. To them, Isaiah 35 comes too early.

Who moved it? How did it get here? Some things even the best scholars cannot explain. So, here it is in Isaiah 35, a word of hope that could not wait until it might make more sense:

¹*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus ²it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.*

Here, in the wilderness, Isaiah dares to proclaim this dry earth will be given glory and splendor. This dry earth will live again.

Wilderness has many meanings for God’s people. It is a place of flight and freedom (Genesis 16, 21; Exodus 3, 13). It is populated by dangerous animals (Deuteronomy 8:15). Water is scarce (Exodus 15, 17), and crops do not grow. It can be deadly (Exodus 14:3). It is wide (Deuteronomy 1:19). And it is easy to get lost (Num 32; Psalm 107:4). But wilderness is where God’s people learn to trust. In wilderness God carried them (Deut 1:31), fed them (Exodus 16), and quenched their thirst (Exodus 17). In wilderness God found God’s people, guarded and cared for them, and lifted them up (Deuteronomy 32).ⁱ

Isaiah dares to speak a word out of place. A word that refused to wait until things improved. As Walter Brueggemann has reminded us, “Israel’s doxologies are characteristically against the data.”



We see and hear the data every night on the news and every morning on our homepage and the front page. Add to that the data of our own personal lives: waiting for the test results to return, mourning the death of a loved one, wondering if we'll make it through the next round pay cuts or lay-offs. We know the data all too well and we long for a word out of place.ⁱⁱ

Generations after Isaiah, a lowly peasant girl will boldly sing a word of joy, completely out of place.

Luke 1:46-55

⁴⁶ And Mary said,
 'My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
 Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
 and holy is his name.
⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him
 from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
 he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
 and lifted up the lowly;
⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
 and sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
 in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
 to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

We guesstimate that Mary was about fourteen years old when she gave birth to baby Jesus. (Oh, sweet girl.) The Gospels tell us little about her. Even today, the church universal can't seem to make up its mind about her. Some traditions pray to her. Others ignore her on principle. Others call her *Theotokos*, God-bearer. Others still champion her as a model of holy femininity—ever sinless, ever virgin, ever mother. Hymns and carols wonder about her and pose the question of whether she had any idea what was in store.

And then this young, young woman opens her mouth in Luke 1 v46, and we see, as unlikely as it may be, God has opened up God's vision to her. She knows. And like a prophet, she sees clearly. And she sings. Mary's song balances fear with courage, doubt with faith, vulnerability with strength.



Hers is not just some pretty tune with lilting lyrics. It is a song of praise, and it is also a song of testimony. She testifies to the subversive nature of a God whose kingdom upends the expectations of our world. It is a powerful song.

And at first glance, it feels out of place.

If Scripture has taught us anything, the good news is surprising and comes from surprising places.

Israel has been waiting—through exiles and wildernesses, through victories and defeats. And here, this young girl sees a truth many still cannot proclaim. A pregnancy that under any other circumstance might have brought shame, brings joy and honor. What once was up is down, what once was down is up.

Mary uses her voice to share the news that God is coming in new and life-changing ways, and that the world will never be the same again. She sings of her confidence in the Lord's promise to upend the powers that be, reverse the fortunes of an unjust world, and lift up all those who have been oppressed.

A young girl with no voice and no rights in a Roman occupied state, Mary's song is characteristically against the data. Like Isaiah long before her, she speaks a bold word out of place.

Who will speak a word out of place for us?

In Advent, we wait for Jesus to come. We know, of course, Jesus has already come—but we remember he will come again. We remember the generations of God's people who prayed for a Messiah, a Savior. We remember the promise God kept. And we remember the truth that God became one with us—God became one of us.

Something about singing carols and stringing Christmas lights in the middle of a worsening pandemic seem out of place. Something about Christmas cards with perfectly coiffed children and proclamations of good cheer seem out of place. Something about finding joy in this isolated and isolating season seems out of place—but, believe it or not, it is exactly the kind of thing the prophets and the Gospels proclaim.

And it is exactly the word we need to hear.

The good news is still ours. It is our place as a people of faith to shine that light in the darkness (especially those tacky Christmas ones), send out those notes of good cheer, proclaim the promise—the truth that is ours. The good news that one day...

The nurse and the doctor
Shall walk into the hospital with confidence and joy.

One day...
The teacher and the student
Shall meet face to face and hug one another.



One day...
The depressed and the lonely
Shall sit at table and laugh and share stories into the night.

One day...
The fearful and the anxious
Shall go out in crowds and dance in the streets.

One day...
The disappointed and the exhausted
Shall make new plans and wake each morning refreshed.

One day...
The sick and the aged
Shall embrace children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and sing the hymns of our ancestors unmasked.

A word of joy may seem out of place this year. But it is exactly the word a people of faith are commanded to proclaim. Ours is the joy of Isaiah in the exile. Ours is the joy of Mary in a world that gives her no voice. Ours is the joy of the faithful throughout all generations who are holding us in these days and reminding us we are not alone.

The desert shall rejoice and blossom. There, in the place that once was wilderness, once a place of wandering, will be a raised road. Rejoicing and gladness will meet God's people. Sorrow and sighing will be no more (35:10).

Joy surprises us when we forge paths in the wilderness. Joy multiplies when we continue the good work to level oppression, injustice, and suffering, so that all flesh might see God together.

Whatever your desert feels like, have faith that this place is not the end of the journey. Very soon, the one you're waiting for this Advent will come.

While we wait, we work, we light the pink candle and rejoice. God comes. God is here.

Joy cannot wait a moment longer.

Benediction

“How Joy Works” by Jan Richardsonⁱⁱⁱ

You could not stop it
if you tried—how this blessing
begins to sing



every time it sees
your face, how it turns itself
in wonder
merely at the mention
of your name.

It is simply
how joy works, going out to you
when you least expect, running up to meet you
when you had not thought
to ask.

ⁱ Anthea Portier-Young, "Commentary on Isaiah 35:1-10," WorkingPreacher.org, Dec 12, 2010.

ⁱⁱ Barbara Lunblad, "Commentary on Isaiah 35:1-10," WorkingPreacher.org, Dec 15, 2013.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jan Richardson, "How Joy Works" from AbbeyfortheHearts.com, Mar 4, 2020.

