

# REJOICE WITH JOY AND SINGING

Isaiah 35

*Preached by Carolyn Grohman at North Presbyterian Church, Williamsville  
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Did you notice how many times the words “joy” and “rejoice” are used in the passage we read from Isaiah? Six times we heard those words: the desert shall rejoice and blossom; it shall rejoice with joy; those who were speechless shall sing for joy; everlasting joy shall be upon the heads of the ransomed of the Lord; and they shall obtain joy and gladness. What an exuberant outburst of joyous rejoicing! What a glorious passage for this third Sunday of Advent, when our theme is joy!

But do we really resonate with this passage on this Sunday in mid-December? Do we truly feel like rejoicing? Or, are we so stressed out by the pressures of the season that we’ve had it up to here with exuberant expressions of joy? Do we really want to hear any more Ho-Ho-Ho’s and Fa-la-la’s? Do we really want to listen to people who did all their Christmas shopping in July, and had their entire house and tree decorated by the day after Thanksgiving, and sent all their Christmas cards the first day of December, and finished all their baking this past week, and are now spending the rest of the time till Christmas leisurely enjoying all the parties and concerts? If you’re like me, you don’t even want to hear about people like that. Perhaps you’re struggling, as I am, to get the basics done by December 25th and wondering whether you’re going to make it. If that’s the case, then we may be too frantic and stressed out to feel any joy.

I think there are a lot of people who are like that. I read recently that people have more headaches during December than at any other time of the year, and the number one reason is stress caused by too much to do and not enough time to do it. Where is the joy when we are frantic, frenetic, and frazzled?

But being stressed out is not the only reason that people often have trouble being joyful at Christmas. Christmas is also a time for remembering the past and especially the happiness of the past. If your past Christmases were happier than your present, then that difference between past and present can trigger feelings of sadness.

In particular, Christmas is a time when we are acutely aware of the losses we have experienced in our lives. If you have experienced death or divorce in your immediate family, you know that those losses are keenly felt at Christmastime. Christmas as a time of joy? Sometimes we may feel like saying with Scrooge, “Bah, humbug!”

Maybe you’re feeling like that now. Maybe you’re stressed out by the pressures of the season, or depressed by the memories of the past and the realities of the present. We know we’re supposed to be happy and joyful as we approach Christmas, but many of us have trouble living up to those expectations. Our lives right now may seem more like a wilderness, a dry land, a desert.

That's the way it was for the people to whom the 35th chapter of Isaiah was originally written. This chapter was written to the Israelites who were living in exile in Babylon following the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587 BCE. They had lost everything---their families, their homes, their place of worship, their community. Life for them was a desert wilderness. "Joy" was not part of their current vocabulary or experience.

But Isaiah offers them hope for the future. Their wildernesses and deserts will be transformed into places of joy and beauty. The promise is not necessarily that the people will be taken out of the wilderness or the desert, but rather that the wilderness and the desert will be transformed. Listen again to the images of transformation in this chapter:

- the desert shall blossom abundantly like the crocus
- waters shall break forth in the wilderness
- streams shall appear in the desert
- the burning sand shall become a pool of water
- the thirsty ground shall become springs of water
- the weak hands shall be strengthened
- the feeble knees shall be made firm
- the fearful shall be made strong
- the blind shall see
- the deaf shall hear
- the lame shall leap like a deer
- the speechless shall sing for joy, and
- sorrow and sighing shall be replaced with joy and gladness.

What a glorious transformation! From barren wilderness to lush vegetation, from desert to oasis, from weakness to strength, from disability to ability, from sorrow to joy. This is the transformation that God promised to the Israelites. And God fulfilled that promise by being present with them in their exile and then by allowing them to return to Jerusalem 48 years later.

God also promises that same kind of transformation to us. But this transformation from sorrow to joy does not come about because of anything that we do or even can do. No matter how many Christmas cards we send, or how many Christmas cookies we bake, or how many gifts we buy, or how beautifully we decorate our homes, we can't really produce the joy we hope for at Christmas. That joy is a gift from God, and it is freely given to all who ask for it.

And that joy comes in the most unexpected place. It does not come in the department store or the shopping mall, but in a manger filled with straw. Joy comes to us in a tiny baby, born in desert wilderness circumstances: no room in the inn, only a stable for shelter, no doctor or midwife to assist in the delivery, and the young couple totally isolated from family and friends. But from this desert comes Living Water. From this wilderness comes joy to all the people.

This baby who brings "joy to the world" grew up to be described in exactly the same words of transformation that we read in Isaiah 35. In today's Gospel reading, Matthew has

Jesus describe himself and his ministry in these words: “The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.” In other words, the transformation from sorrow to joy that was promised in Isaiah 35 is fully realized in the life and ministry of Jesus, the one who came to usher in the realm of God.

At the beginning of his ministry Jesus announced the advent of God’s reign of justice, peace, and wholeness in a broken world with these words, also from Isaiah and recorded in Luke: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Jesus is the one whom God has sent to bring about the ultimate transformation promised in Isaiah 35. Jesus brings healing to the wounded, freedom to the oppressed, hope to the despairing, restoration to the needy, life to the lifeless, and joy to the sorrowing.

So it is in Jesus that we can experience joy even in the midst of sorrow, and peace even in the most stressful of times. He is the one who said, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest....Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you.”

Ann Weems, in her book Kneeling in Bethlehem, has a poem called “Not Celebrate?”

*Not celebrate?  
 Your burden is too great to bear?  
 Your loneliness is intensified during the season?  
 Your tears seem to have no end?  
 Not celebrate?  
 You should lead the celebration!  
 You should run through the streets  
     to ring the bells and sing the loudest!  
 You should fling the tinsel on the tree,  
     and open your house to your neighbors  
     and call them in to dance!  
 For it is you above all others  
     who know the joy of Advent.  
 It is unto you that a Savior is born this day.  
     One who comes to lift your burden from your shoulders,  
     One who comes to wipe the tears from your eyes.  
 You are not alone,  
     for he is born this day to you.*

As we go through the next week, with its pressures and deadlines, memories and emotions, let us remember that “Jesus is the reason for the season,” and that in him we “shall obtain joy and gladness.”

