

Joy in the Journey

Isaiah 35:1-10

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Advent is about joy and Advent is a journey—a journey to Christmas. We travel with Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem. We travel with Shepherds and Wise Men to honor the infant Savior and King. We recognize that we are traveling toward the final fulfillment of God's promises when Jesus returns in glory. And on the way to that final destination, we travel toward God's purposes and promises for our lives, knowing that Christ blazes the trail ahead of us and travels with us.

This message of Isaiah's has two parts. The first tells us, "Get ready. God is coming and nothing will stay the same." The second part describes the joyful journey of God's people out of bondage all the way home to Zion. They travel through a transformed desert on a highway called the Way of Holiness.

How do we get on that road? How do we know that we're traveling in the company of God's people and that we're on our way to the place God has for us? Sometimes wise sayings get repeated so much they become clichés, but there is still wisdom in them. I'm thinking of the saying, "The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step." The joyous journey of following Jesus begins with a step of faith. We may be going one direction, then we turn around and go the other way. We may just be milling around and not really going anywhere, then we find direction and begin moving the way God leads.

When does a marriage begin? When do two people start traveling together through life? Certainly, when they stand before God and people and say to each other, "I will be yours and stay with you." But they couldn't come to that moment without many other moments preparing the way—meeting, discovering what they have in common as well as their differences, discovering love for each other, deciding to make the commitment of marriage, and all the other conversations and plans that go into that commitment. And, there's a lot of growing and a long journey together after that public commitment to each other in a wedding.

Like the exiles envisioned in today's Scripture, our joyful journey with God begins when we decide to walk with God out of our bondage and into the future God has for us. Until we make that choice we won't be ready for Christmas, we won't be ready for God's coming in the Holy Spirit each day, we won't be ready for Christ's return. The joy and celebration of God's coming will seem like a party that we can only look at through the window. The songs and laughter are muffled. We're not part of what's going on. We can't enjoy the food and the warmth inside.

But when we say yes to God, Christmas and all the celebrations going on around us take on new meaning. We get caught up in the joy. Everything is new because we are new.

Isaiah was talking about things becoming new. He said the desert, the dry wilderness, will rejoice. It will burst into bloom and become fertile and productive. He said that the arid wilderness will be like Lebanon, Carmel, and Sharon. Those were the most fertile and fruitful regions of Israel's land. Heaven and nature are getting tuned up to sing.

A while back, *Time* magazine reported on the deserts of Africa—how widespread and desolate they are. As the deserts grow and take fertile land and dry up water, conflicts arise between people who compete for dwindling resources. But there's been a movement for some decades to hold back the desert and even reclaim it for farming and new life. In some African countries, millions of trees have been planted. Ditches are dug to contain water, and fences are built to catch drifting soil long enough for it hold water and insects and to germinate seeds. People call this movement the "re-greening" of Africa. The article concludes by focusing on one village. The chief of that village says,

"For years I watched the wind sweep the soil and sand off our land and into the river." Then seeing the success neighboring farmers were having with *zai* [ditches and fences], he set his village to work. Crop yields went up. The village diversified from maize and sorghum into *jatropha* for oil, and pigs, ducks, goats, and chickens. The young men who had left to work in Togo or Benin returned home.

[The village's] farmers now have enough surplus food and cash crops like wood to see them through poor rains. [The chief], who had resigned himself to watching his village die slowly, now finds that he is presiding over not only its revival but the greatest prosperity it has ever enjoyed. "We stopped the desert," he says, "and everything changed." (Alex Perry, "Land of Hope," *Time* 12/13/10, 68-73)

What's happening in nature is a picture of God's supernatural restoration of God's people, of our lives, of the church, of all creation.

Isaiah also saw reason for the weak and stumbling and fearful to be encouraged. These exhausted prisoners, herded by the enemy, would have reason to hope and rejoice. It's the same reason the desert would come alive with rejoicing.

Be strong, do not fear,
your God will come,
he will come with vengeance;
with divine retribution
he will come to save you.

Not only will nature be healed, but when God comes he will also heal his people (vv. 5-6a). Hold onto that thought. We're going to take a detour into the New Testament.

John the Baptist was the Messiah's forerunner, preparing the way for the Lord. John's preaching was too much for King Herod to handle, so he imprisoned John. Then Jesus began his public ministry.

After a while John began to wonder if Jesus was really who John had thought he was. Jesus wasn't acting like John thought a Messiah should act (see Matthew 11:1-6). So John sent some people to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" Jesus told them to go back and tell John what they were hearing and seeing: "The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor." In other words, the prophet's words are being fulfilled in Jesus.

Now it's up to John to grasp the implications of this. Jesus doesn't overwhelm John with evidence. He leaves room for faith. Jesus wanted to encourage John, but he also wanted John to decide for himself if Jesus was for real. He concludes, "Blessed is the one who does not fall away on account of me." Hang in there, John! Don't give up.

Max Lucado says that, like John, all of God's people find ourselves at times in the dungeon of doubt. God doesn't meet our expectations and we begin to wonder where God is and what he's doing. We cry out at the unfairness.

Lucado finds in Jesus' answer to John some help for us in our times of disappointment and doubt. Jesus didn't get angry with John. God never turns away the questions of a sincere searcher. But also, Jesus did not save John from the prison.

In response to John's question, Jesus simply gave him a message about the kingdom of God. "Tell John that everything is going as planned. The kingdom is being inaugurated." Then Jesus highlights three traits of the kingdom: the rejected are received, the dead have life and the good news is preached to the poor. Legalism or performance-based religion results in either arrogance or fear. Arrogance if you think you've achieved it, fear if you think you haven't. Christ's kingdom is just the opposite. It is a kingdom for the poor. A kingdom where membership is *granted*, not *purchased*. You are placed into God's kingdom. You are "adopted." And you enter the kingdom not when you do enough, but when you admit that you *can't* do enough. You don't earn it; you simply accept it. Then, we serve, not out of arrogance or fear, but out of gratitude and joy (Lucado, *The Applause of Heaven* 161-76).

Jesus saw himself fulfilling what Isaiah had said—here in ch. 35 as well as in other places. The NT writers consistently portray Jesus as the fulfillment of the prophets' words.

So, for example, Isaiah's words, intended for a particular group of Judeans, had meaning for them in their situation. And this message was fulfilled as they were exiled and then delivered by God. But Isaiah was seeing more than even he knew.

When Jesus came, he showed the fuller meaning of Isaiah's message. Many of the prophets' words came to greater fulfillment in Jesus' life and ministry, death and resurrection. They continue to have meaning in Jesus' ongoing work through the Holy Spirit. They will be finally and completely fulfilled when Jesus returns.

In the first section of Isaiah 35 God comes, transforms the desert, and saves and heals his people. The second section is about the exiles going home. It begins like the first part—water in the desert, new life, and growth.

And going through the now fertile wilderness is a highway—the Way of Holiness. Only those who belong to God travel on it—only those who have said yes to God and intend to walk with him and live in him. The people of God walk together in the Way of Holiness. Another wise saying is, "If you want to go fast, walk alone; if you want to go far, walk together." We are going all the way to glory as we walk together.

The *redeemed* and the *ransomed* of the LORD travel this road. Redeeming someone was usually the responsibility of a relative. You would buy your relative out of slavery or purchase their land if they were being forced to sell. The book of Ruth in the Old Testament gives an example of how the "kinsman-redeemer" functioned.

To ransom someone was a voluntary act. You chose freely to set someone free or to buy their freedom.

God sets people free in both of these ways. For those Judean exiles this showed the loyal love of God for his people (redemption) and his gracious act in delivering them even though they had broken the covenant (ransom). God still treated them as his own people. He acted as their kinsman-redeemer even though they didn't act like his people.

We have a gracious God who longs for us to be his people and who will bring us out of whatever bondage we're in so we can have new life in him.

No wilderness is too wild for the activity of this grace-filled God. No desert is too dry for God not to find water and blossoms and reeds in it. No knee is too infirm for God not to strengthen it. No situation is too hopeless for God not to find hope. This vision of a God of infinite

and unstoppable hope is the one we need this and every Advent, for the one we celebrate at Christmas knew no person or situation so dead that he could not find life in it. In that way among many others, he is the spittin' image of the God of Isaiah 35. (John Holbert, "The Hope of New Vision," www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Hope-of-New-Vision.html?&showAll=1, accessed 12/6/10)

The result of all this is joy. As the redeemed and ransomed travel God's holy highway, they return and enter Zion with singing. Everlasting joy is like a crown for them. Gladness and joy overtake them. And as darkness fades when the sun rises, sorrow and sighing will flee away.

We know that this is our future hope. But we also know that Jesus came so we could have joy now. Joy is part of the Holy Spirit's fruit in our lives. All along the way of life in Christ, we can have joy. There is joy in this journey.

In a couple of months, I'm going to my thirtieth college reunion. I can't believe I've been out of college for thirty years. At my twentieth reunion, a woman from our class spoke. Reflecting on those years since school, she gave us three things to think about. They still hold true after another ten years. She said that life is more complicated than we knew. And she shared some of her struggles and disappointments. That's true, isn't it? Life is complicated. But then she said God is more faithful than we ever imagined. We keep experiencing that to be true. Then she said that the joy is not in the destination, but in the adventure. The joy is in the journey.

There is a joy in the journey
There's a light we can love on the way
There is a wonder and wildness to life
And freedom for those who obey

And all those who seek it shall find it
A pardon for all who believe
Hope for the hopeless and sight for the blind

For all who've been born of the Spirit
And who share incarnation with him
Who belong to eternity stranded in time
And weary of struggling with sin
Forget not the hope that's before you
And never stop counting the cost
Remember the hopelessness when you were lost

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(Michael Card, originally on *The Final Word* 1987)

Are you on that joyful journey? Have you made that beginning with God? Are you traveling the Way of Holiness? There's not a better time to begin than right now. Heaven and nature are tuning up. Let's join their song of praise to God.

Our celebrations of Christmas are full of joy when we know for ourselves the Christ who fulfills God's promises. Come to know Jesus for yourself. Come to the party and share the joy.