

Isaiah 35:1-10 Singing the Joyful Songs  
December 15, 2019

We have been talking about the “minor” prophets in our Sunday School class all through this fall season. We have come to realize how exotic this literature really is, like nothing any of us would write. While each prophet is unique, they also have much in common. We listen for God’s voice to speak in them.

They were written in tragic times. The tragedy of their times *is* a part of their message. They wrote to explain, to assign blame, and vent, but mostly to restore and encourage, give hope. Sometimes they speak as if the people are solely to blame for their plight, sometimes it seems as if they are victims, and the situation is the responsibility of their enemies.

Sometimes they point the finger directly at God. The story they convey seems to move back and forth from one party to another, and not in a seamless way, but in a way that might not please a high school English teacher trying to teach how to write a research paper, with an outline and notecards and all that.

They also write about a great cosmic joy. By “cosmic” I mean that they not only depict joy among people, but in nature too, all the heavens and the earth, the trees and the forest, the sea and everything in it, all in a great cacophony of splendor, singing for joy. And the best idea that we have for what the singing is all about,

is reflected in the meaning of the words, “redemption,” or “salvation.”

Mixed in to all the other tragic representation, we find these expressions of joy, like here in Isaiah 35, a text we read every third year, and always during the celebration of Advent because part of what we are getting ready for, the arrival of the Lord, is so joyous that even our best attempts, usually in symphonies and other musical and artistic expressions, fail to do it justice.

### Joyous Times

We *do* have joyous times. I do not need to tell you about them. Some of them are predictable, birth, graduations, marriage, beginning a new job, a raise, the buying of a new house, hearing the doctor’s report, “you are healthy.” Some of the joyous times are spontaneous and can’t be anticipated; meeting of a new friend, the winning of a championship or the receiving of an award. The time an old friend stops by and stories are told that bring such laughter that tears come along with it.

Among all the prophets, there is no other work more influential than the “major” prophetic work, The Book of Isaiah. The poem we have read today speaks of an overwhelming joy. It speaks of a desert coming to life with God’s glory and splendor. It speaks of the strengthening of those who are weak and the

encouragement to those who are afraid. The eyes of the blind are opened, the lame are not only able to walk, but are found leaping and running like a deer, water in what was once a desert. And it speaks in such a way that we know no earthly experience can bring the promised joy. All these happy times are meant to point beyond themselves to a greater more permanent joy.

And then it speaks of a highway called the “Way of Holiness,” upon which the redeemed of the Lord will make their way, and it says,

“They will enter Zion with singing, everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, sorrow and sighing will flee away.”

### What We All Have in Common

In my attempts to understand history, I have sometimes wondered what it might be like to go back in time and try to explain to important historical personages what were the long-term outcomes of their actions, decisions, and efforts (I am sure no one else has done this in their minds).

For Instance, what would it be like to show the founders of our country what The United States of America has become, both good and bad? Or what it would be like to show Peter and Paul what Christianity has become, both the good and the bad? Or the

prophets? What might it be like to show Isaiah what has happened all these centuries since he lived?

Perhaps one could show them movies like, “Pearl Harbor,” or “Ben Hur,” or “The Diary of Anne Frank;” or televisions shows like “NCIS,” or “The Big Bang Theory,” or “The Game of Thrones?” One wonders what J. Edgar Hoover would think of, “FBI,” not the institution, but the TV show.

But showing movies would perhaps obscure the substance with the technology itself. How would one explain rocket ships or the Cloud, or NFL football to people who have no context to understand them?

I have decided it would be pointless to try, yet we read what *they* wrote and learn about what *they did*, and sometimes mis-interpret them because even with the benefit of hindsight they are as exotic to us as as we would be to them.

I am convinced we are interested in them not only so that we can better understand how the world came to be as it is, but also because we have more in common with them than first meets the eye. They can teach us.

Just to name a few things: *Life*, there is not one among us or them that was not conceived and birthed, without consent, and without having any say in the circumstances of life. *World*, it is given to us to live for a brief time on *this* planet, for better or worse, in this

world. They saw the same geography, had to scratch a living from basically the same resources. While they had a different understanding of it, it is still basically the same earth. *Death*, and they all died, as we will, after a period of time.

Along the way *good* and *bad* things happen. One way or another we are all “disappointed” by the experience of life, yet still marvel at the wonderful goodness of things. We experience desire, fear, anxiety; love, friendship, honor, and all the rest.

And Joy, joy is as pervasive as ever and as elusive. It is part of the human experience, a part that seems to come on its own steam and depart as mysteriously as it came. But when once we know it, we strive for it, we pray for it, would do anything to know it again, look for a path towards it upon which to travel.

## Christmas

If in the bible earthly life is acknowledged for its tragic burden and pain; the gospel word is also surprisingly joyful and filled with meaning.

The prophetic discovery is that life is Christmas! There are presents to open. Everyone wants to open them, wants everyone else to open them too. We hear the invitation to come to the feast and find it compatible with our desire to be filled and satisfied. We are invited to journey past the mirage of earthly pleasure and pain

to the reality of God’s Grace. This invitation comes to us as good news.

To have faith in Jesus Christ is to receive this good news with joy, and to step out in faith onto the Way of Holiness. It is God’s will that we do this. Along the way, we anticipate the end of the journey when:

Our heads are crowned with joy  
Gladness overtakes us  
And we sing the joyful songs . . .

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