

## Isaiah 35:1-10

Having the Big Lake in my backyard, it's just a little hard at first to enter into solidarity with the people of Isaiah 35. How could I truly understand the power of water in a dry land? What experience do I have with the parched places on the earth? But as I watched the sandy-fine lake-effect snow come down and come down on Friday and Saturday, I finally realized that the frozen world is a great deal like the desert world. As we perch on the branch of midwinter, we too are waiting for water to gush forth and for crocuses to burst into blossom. Isn't that true? In the landscape of austere greys and browns we long for a streak of color. Slathering on hand lotion or chapstick, we do know something about being dry.

All of Advent is a season of waiting, but in my experience, by the time of Gaudete Sunday, we have begun to sense a shift in the light. The longest night has not yet occurred, but we feel the days begin to gather themselves like buds beginning to swell. If we are waiting, we now wait *expectantly*, like Mary. You may begin to sense joy on the horizon, even if the first trickle of a late-winter thaw is still weeks away. *Something* is changing.

Now joy is not the same thing as happiness, not just a passive feeling-state. In this portion of Isaiah, the word joy or rejoice occurs six times in the space of 10 verses. It's important to point out that the larger context of this hopeful prophecy is still fire and smoke and war, exile and dismay. So "to rejoice" in the midst of such bleak circumstances is a conscious choice, a practice more than an emotion. Joy can coexist with grief or anger, absolutely, but it insists that grief and anger are not all there is. Joy is the promise that there is something beyond the present situation, water bubbling up in the desert. Which is why joy is such a powerful Advent word.

Because even as the people of the Babylonian captivity look forward to a return to their homeland, *their* present situation is formidable. The images of blindness and physical injury found here correspond with real physical damage sustained on the battlefield. Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, had seen his sons put to death and then had his eyes plucked out. But there's also a sense in which these physical issues represent injury to the community, even generations later. The descendants have grown up away from customs and culture, without rights of citizenship or self-

determination. Many have been enslaved. Now that the Temple has been destroyed, there's confusion about whether it's even possible to worship God anymore, much less to do it correctly. But Isaiah promises that joy is possible even in the midst of tragedy.

While most of us have not faced the pain of literal exile, I think you might be able to remember a time you have felt uprooted, disoriented, even unmoored. This passage assures us that there is still a way back home, a highway to be exact. All of God's people can travel this road in security, without worry, since it's next to impossible to get lost. The road allows the whole community to return home with singing and with joy: "Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear!'"

OK, but where is such a road located? To my mind it's important not to jump too quickly from this prophetic word in Isaiah to the coming of Messiah, but its patterns are familiar to Christians. We think about Mary and Joseph setting out on their arduous journey to the outpost of Bethlehem; they are walking along the way. Before Christianity had even been named, believers and non-believers alike called it the Way. And the way is wherever and whatever leads us back to God.

Charles Campbell was a professor of preaching at a nearby seminary when I first started this whole pastor journey in 2006. He tells a story about the Open Door Shelter, a ministry for homeless people in Atlanta, where I also volunteered. One day he was leading worship in front of the shelter, which was located on a main thoroughfare, and traffic noise was drowning out both his words and the song that the assembly tried to sing.

"I noticed one homeless man waving to me and pointing to himself. I was surprised when I saw him for the man can neither hear nor speak and is normally very reserved. But there he was, eager to do something. He stepped into the middle of the circle, bowed his head in silence, and began to sign a hymn for us. It was beautiful, like a dance... In that moment our notions of 'abled' and 'disabled' were turned upside down. The rest of us had been shouting to be heard, but the noise was no problem for our friend. Our worship became a token of the resurrection in

the midst of the powers of death, a glimpse of God's beloved community."<sup>1</sup>

I tell Campbell's story both because it *is* a beautiful vision of God's restored community, and because it is a helpful corrective to the way many of us tend to read passages like this one: "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be opened; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy." It took me a long time working in proximity to people with disabilities to realize that not all of them hoped to be "healed" in the sense of losing their disability. For my blind co-worker, blindness is part of what makes her *her*.

Healing, rather, is always about finding one's place again in the circle of belonging, and that is a healing we all need. Such healing is why we await the coming of Christ.

Barbara Lundblad, another renowned preaching professor, then created this litany to emphasize a different take on God's restorative justice:

Then the blind woman and her dog  
shall process with the choir;  
the deaf man who sees what we often miss  
shall paint the text on the sanctuary walls;  
the veteran in the wheelchair  
shall break the bread of life,  
and the homeless man who cannot speak  
shall sign the hymns for everyone to see.

So maybe we too, in the middle of a snowy landscape, can revise our idea of desert lands and pools, healing and wholeness, expectancy and joy. We all long to belong and to be restored to our one true home.

"Joy," writes Henri Nouwen, "is the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing — sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war, or even death — can take that love away."

As we wait once again for Jesus to be born in us and in our world, we wait together, knowing that Love waits with us. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Barbara Lundblad, "Commentary on Isaiah 35:1-10," working [preacher.org](http://preacher.org)