

Text: Isaiah 35: 1-10
Title: Trampled by Joy
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Years ago, the neighbor kid saw his mother return from an afternoon at the mall. After some time passed, and his mother was distracted, the temptation was too much....

He slipped out to the garage,
 popped open the trunk,
 pillaged the bags,
 peeked under the wrappings,
 and saw the hidden Christmas presents.

You'd think he would've had the sense to stop there, but his next mistake was telephoning his sister to tell her what he saw. And, while offering his report, he didn't realize that his mother had picked up the other phone. She heard his full confession....

That year, for that neighbor kid, advent was filled with anxiety. His mother threatened to cancel Christmas and withhold his gifts. Everything hung in the balance.

Dear friends, underneath all the hopes and expectations of the season there's also the reality that we're anxious. There's often a shadow over the season and joy is elusive and muted. We're not unlike Charlie Brown who opens his Christmas show with this line

I think there must be something wrong with me, Linus. Christmas is coming but I'm not happy. I don't feel the way I am supposed to feel. I just don't understand Christmas, I guess... I always end up feeling depressed.

It's relatively easy to catalogue what disrupts, distorts and depresses the season. We've peeked under the wrapping and we know what's there....

We're grieving the loss of a loved one; we traffic in the fear that our country is coming apart at the seams; we know wars and rumors of wars; we're acquainted with cancer, Alzheimer's, and addictions; we can't quite address our existential unsettledness; and to quote the Apostle Paul, "the good that I want to do I don't do, the bad that I don't want to do I keep on doing..."

You get the idea. Philosophers and poets have characterized modern life as "anxious dread." Under the wrapping paper we're all anxious.

To which Isaiah belts out:

*Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees.
Say to those who are fearful of heart, 'Be strong, fear not!'
Behold your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God.
He will come and save you....*

And, then he trots out this vision wherein desolation is transformed into a garden and the wilderness is changed into a place of welcome. It's lyrical and lovely and we're told that joy will run us down – sending sorrow and sighing scurrying away.

So, when it feels like everything hangs in the balance, what can we hear in this prophetic voice? What can we learn from this ancient text? What might it say for the living of these anxious days?

Most scholars think that Isaiah was written over three different historical periods. We read of First, Second, and Third Isaiah. Our text was probably written in the second period – about 500 years before Christ – to a people in exile. Cast out from their homeland the people of Israel were in a physical and metaphorical wilderness. Therefore, this section of Second Isaiah is a vision of their return to the safety, shelter, and *shalom* of home. They will walk a highway home wearing crowns of joy....

However, prophetic visions have been and should be read in a variety of ways, and one reading doesn't rule out another. Therefore, our text can be understood as the return of God's people from exile, or the establishment of an eternal messianic kingdom in Jesus Christ, or a symbolic picture of salvation in a human heart.

But whether you read this text as history, prophecy, or metaphor, however you read it....

The hinge is that God will come. And, when God comes then the blind will see, the lame will leap, the desert will blossom, the tongue of the dumb will be loosened to sing, the ears of the deaf will be opened to music, and hearts of fear will be transformed into hearts of joy. Thanks be to God!

Let's come at it this way....

The previous chapter (34) stands in stark contrast to the picture of our passage. There the nations are destroyed, dead bodies send up a stench, the land is a sulfuric burning pitch, the stars have fallen from the sky, the heavens are rolled up like a scroll, and all is wasteland with no one remembered or passing through.

But, in our text there's a total transformation, a complete reversal, and the order of things is turned on its head. Where there once was desert and desolation there is now an oasis and a highway of hope – because God comes.

The Grapes of Wrath tells the story of the Joad clan living and dying in exodus from Oklahoma to California during the Great Depression. They leave a dust covered wilderness in hopes of a new life out west. Their land and their lives were brittle, parched, and desperate. So, with both resignation and resolve the Joads join the pilgrimage down Route 66.

Listen to this line:

66 is the path of a people in flight, refugees from dust and shrinking land, from the thunder of tractors and shrinking ownership, from the desert's slow northward invasion, from the twisting winds that howl up out of Texas, from the floods that bring no richness to the land and steal what little richness is there.

Dear friends, may the word from Isaiah serve as a reminder that like the Joads, and the Israelites, we're a pilgrim people. We're refugees on a journey.

And sometimes anxiety thunders,
and fear howls up sucking the spirit out of us,
and the richness of living is stolen away,
California is nothing but a shimmering mirage,
and joy is ever elusive.

But the prophet calls us to journey with courage and faith because finally the gospel – the story of all scripture – is that God comes. That's the sum of it.

Whether God comes in a burning bush or smoking mountain,
whether God comes in a still small voice or a roaring pillar of fire, whether God comes to make covenant with us or camp with us, whether God comes as Jesus or the poured out Holy Spirit, over and over again the biblical vision of reality is that God has not abandoned his creation to the dustbin but that God comes – therefore don't fear.

God has not abandoned you or me.
God has not abandoned his people.
God comes.

And that coming is a matter of joy. Not happiness, for happiness is dependent outside circumstances. Happiness requires good health, good work, good relationships, good externals. But the only condition for joy is the presence of God.

As Frederick Buechner puts it:

God created us in joy and created us for joy, and in the long run not all the darkness there is in the world and in ourselves can separate us finally from that joy. Whatever else it means to say that we are created in God's image, I think it means that even when we cannot believe, even when we feel mostly spiritually bankrupt and deserted, God's mark is deep within us. We have God's joy in our blood.

I like that. We're created for joy and Isaiah announces that in the long run joy will overtake us and despair and anxiety will be sent packing. There's a folk-jam-band called "Trampled by Turtles" and that's the spirit of our text. It's not just that we'll journey with joy; we'll get trampled by joy. Again, thanks be to God.

But look, truth be told, joy doesn't come easy for me. I'm way more content with happiness and I know way too much of the anxiety and brokenness that lurks under the surface to be crowned with joy. For me, and maybe for you, joy always feels tempered, restrained, transient.

And yet I keep yearning, hoping,... believing that the vision of the prophet and the message of all scripture is true: In Jesus of Nazareth God has come into this wilderness. And the promise is that Jesus will come again.

The heart of scripture is not a wistful hope for some far-off heaven. It's not a list of qualifying behaviors or requisite beliefs. Rather, it's the unfolding drama of God's coming and the reign of *shalom* being embodied, in this world, and in our lives. This is the place where we'll be trampled by joy and gladness.

Scott Hoezee puts it this way:

"Joy," C.S. Lewis famously wrote, "will be the serious business of heaven." Indeed, joy will landscape the entirety of the New Creation. It will be tangible and palpable such that sighing and sorrows will, as the prophet says, have no choice but to flee away. Sadness will get chased out of the New Creation the way mice will flee a room full of cats. Sorrow will dissipate the way a strong wind can blow every cloud out of the sky so as to leave behind nothing but a blue sky so achingly beautiful as to make tears leap to your eyes.

Dear friends and fellow refugees, may the vision of the prophet strengthen and sustain us even in the anxiety and absurdity of this journey. May it inform and shape our living. Rather than view it as little more than magical thinking for a happy ending, may we live in a manner that reflects the coming of God and may we feel joy nipping at our heels. For God in Christ has come and is coming; there is nothing to fear.

Amen.