

ADVENT IN ISAIAH: 3. JOY

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Isaiah 35:1-10

Today is the Third Sunday of the season of Advent. The four weeks of Advent mark the beginning of the Christian Year. I find Advent to be odd because in this particular season we are called to prepare ourselves for the birth of a child—a birth that took place twenty centuries ago. Sometimes Advent seems like a month-long baby shower for a great-great-grandparent.

We commonly describe Christmas as being the celebration of the birth of Jesus but it is much more than that. Christmas is the celebration that God did something remarkable, something completely without precedent, something that changed the world. God came to us.

Since the time of creation, there is no doubt that God loves us. The scriptures witness to this over and over. But also from the beginning, there has been the ongoing problem of people sinning and turning away from God. For some reason, God would forgive us... repeatedly. However, to break the never-ending cycle of sin and restoration, God intervened directly and came to us—not as God but in human form—as a man from Nazareth named Jesus. We know the Jesus story. Jesus is the Messiah, the Savior, the Son of Man, the Son of God, the Holy one of God; Jesus is God. Emmanuel—God with us!

Advent is weird because we spend it preparing for a birth that has already taken place. Each year, we act as if we are approaching the very first Christmas ever. But it is not the first Christmas. Christmas is a time to celebrate the miraculous event that God loves us. Advent is the time for us to prepare ourselves not for the fact that God is coming into the world, but that God is in the world already. Advent is the time to prepare ourselves to meet our Lord.

Advent is just one season on a calendar crowded with special times. There is Valentines Day, Labor Day, Mother's Day, Independence Day, and more.

A lesser-known day would be the National Bill of Rights Day. It takes place this Thursday, December 15. It was designated by Franklin Roosevelt in 1941 as a day to celebrate those ten amendments to our constitution.

And for those of you who are librarians, I don't have to remind you that yesterday, December 10, was the Dewey Decimal System Day in honor of the birth of Melvil Dewey in 1851. Many people credit Dewey with inventing the system of book classification that we still use today. That is not correct. What Dewey created was the little white stickers that go on book spines where those numbers can be written. (I made that up. He did invent the Dewey Decimal system.)

We also have month-long observances. November was Lung Cancer Awareness Month. February is Black History Month. My birthday is in July which makes me proud to celebrate National Ice Cream Month.

We have these special days and weeks and months to remind us of that which is important. Advent is one of these times. It is a time of preparation for the celebration of God coming into the world. Advent is one point on our calendar to remind us that every day we should prepare ourselves for God in our lives.

So, how do we do this? How do we prepare? We do this through prayer and study, through the disciplines of giving and service. We have tools for this such as advent candles and advent calendars. Advent is like training for a marathon that is always a year away.

During Advent, we dig into the scriptures—the accounts of Jesus' birth and life and even his death, as well as his teachings. We also look at the words of the OT because, as Jesus explained, he is the fulfillment of that scripture. In the OT, we find the promises of God for the salvation of his people. This year, for Advent, we are looking at four prophecies from the book of Isaiah. So far, we have seen how Isaiah compares the world we live in with the world of God's reign.

Today's reading offers us another prophecy of God's reign. Unlike the previous two weeks, the occasion for this passage is unknown. In those passages, Isaiah was addressing the impending invasion into Judah by the Assyrian army. We can't put a time or place or occasion with today's reading. None-the-less, it is a beautiful and powerful passage that reveals God's power to bring about the salvation of his people.

This passage is set in the wilderness—not a wooded wilderness but a desert wilderness. As you know, the wilderness was a powerful image for the Jews. Wilderness represented their escape from Egypt, their isolation, their journey with God. Led by Moses, the Israelites headed into the desert and nearly died there. But God stayed with them providing them water and food. It was in the wilderness that God gave them the Law.

The journey through the wilderness ended with salvation in the promised land. The wilderness is a harsh, unforgiving environment. It is possible to live there, but just barely. In the wilderness, one exists at the very edge. It was no coincidence that Jesus was tested by the devil in the wilderness.

Here, in Isaiah, the prophet reveals that in God's kingdom the wilderness of our lives will be transformed. No longer will our existence be hot and dry and lifeless. With God, our desert will *blossom abundantly*. The desert shall become like the land of Lebanon. Lebanon, of course, was renowned for its great forests and flowing

streams. Those who are spiritually dry, those who are spiritually dead, they shall witness the *glory* and *majesty* of God. In God they will discover abundant life.

Isaiah talks about people with physical infirmities. But this is poetry, so this includes spiritual infirmities as well. Those with weak hands will be strengthened. Those with feeble knees will be made steady. The eyes of the blind shall be opened, the ears of the deaf unstopped, the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless shall sing for joy. And then there are the words directed at those whose hearts are paralyzed with fear. *Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.* What I like about this is that this God is powerful. Honestly, this God is more powerful than whatever it is we might find frightening. *God will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense.* God will deliver salvation. God will bring joy.

And lastly, Isaiah offers not only a promise, but a plan. How do we get from here to there, from this present reality to God's kingdom? We do it the same way we get anywhere—we take the road. But now, God provides a special road, a holy highway that leads straight through the wilderness. This road is for God's people. It is safe, it is straight. Once you are on this road, you will not get lost.

And on this wonderful way, those who have gone astray, those who have been kidnapped by sin will return to God's holy mountain. They will be home.

The ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

That is the joy of Christmas—that God calls us back to him. In this season of Advent, let us prepare.