

# “Joy Can’t Wait”

*Advent 3A*

*Isaiah 35:1-10; Matthew 11: 2-11*

*Part III of VI in the sermon series “What Can’t Wait”*

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From the Pulpit

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## “Joy Can’t Wait”

*Isaiah 35:1-10; Matthew 11: 2-11*

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*Prayer for Illumination: Oh God, may our words this hour give honor and praise to the Word made flesh, your son, Jesus, whose coming we celebrate in this season and always. In his name we pray. Amen.*

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This past spring, parts of the California wilderness experienced a rare “super bloom” event that could even be seen from space.<sup>1</sup> This was certainly a main tourist attraction, as thousands of people arrived to snap images for their Instagrams. They were awed by the sight of once dusty brown hills splattered with color upon color. When the desert blooms, it blooms abundantly. Not half-heartedly. Not hidden in some lonesome valley. For a few brilliant weeks, the world is transformed into one living Van Gogh landscape.<sup>23</sup>

The desert’s explosive color occurs every spring, beginning in mid-March, [thanks to the annual](#) plants that grow in deserts. But harsh and undesirable conditions over many years seem to pave the way for the stunning explosion of a super bloom.

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Avery. “In Photos: California’s Wildflower Super Bloom Can Be Seen From Space” in *Newsweek*, April 4, 2019. <https://www.newsweek.com/super-bloom-2019-photos-1386440>

<sup>2</sup> Sarah Gibbens. “Why California Deserts Are Experiencing a ‘Super Bloom’ (National Geographic News, March 9, 2017) <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2017/03/california-desert-anza-borrego-super-bloom/#close>

<sup>3</sup> Casey Thornburgh Sigmon, [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=4318](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4318), December 15, 2019.

Instead of struggling to stay alive year-round in harsh desert conditions, the wildflower seeds lie dormant and decide to wake up at roughly the same time after a long hibernation. The bloom is also helped by a long rainy season, followed by unusually cold winter to lock the moisture in. What is interesting is that the plants sprout when water washes the protective coating from their seeds.

That made me think of the text from Isaiah chapter 35, that Joe/Lynn read a few moments ago. The prophet Isaiah speaks of “the wilderness and dry land shall be glad and the desert shall rejoice and blossom like a crocus and it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing... (Isa.35:1, 6-7).”

In a bleak period in Israel’s history when much of its leadership was forced to live in Babylon, cut off from their beloved homeland, this text proclaims a truth. Isaiah’s promise is of transformation as a people return to Jerusalem from their exile, a time when the very desert will blossom forth as a fertile garden and those who are broken shall be restored to the fullness of life.

Isaiah amplifies the promise of God: the ransomed captives will return to Zion. The drought for Israel out of its land will end. This journey home will be filled with joy and singing. Sorrow and sighing will flee at last. The road to restoration will be paved with abundance and safety.

Like any good prophet, Isaiah anticipates each argument for not make the return trip home.

*Our hands are too weak...* Isaiah says, God will strengthen them (Isaiah 35:3)

*Our knees are unsteady...* Isaiah says, God will support them (verse 3)

*The move will cause a panic attack! ...* Isaiah says, God will come to save you (verse 4)

In this Advent season, what more powerful words to hear than, “Be Strong, do not fear! Here is your God!” (verse 4). Isaiah is wooing a broken people home to God, and to establish ways of justice and righteousness in a broken land.

We know too well what broken is. We see broken all around us.

Young captives and refugees fleeing for their lives and separated from their families.

The Earth being scorched with an increase of degrees each year.

Our bodies are breaking down.

Cities are joyless.

Political upheaval of epic proportion in our nation’s capital.

The truth is, at the very time when life seems most out of control, God may well be doing something remarkable in our hearts and lives. We wonder if there will ever be peace.

When you can't get anything done because there is too much work to do.

When your mind races with events of the day and you lose sleep with anxiety.

When people you love are spiraling in a pattern and you are caught in endless worry.

Maybe, just maybe, in those moments when life feels so out of control, nothing will bring a sense of order---that's exactly when we can hear from the prophet---to hear what God is up to. What a vision God casts for us. We seek to stir memories of liberation and glad homecomings, healing the broken and the blossoming of joy.

The central theme not to be overlooked in the passage with such imagery is the presence of God. Verse 4, "Here is your God, says the prophet. God will come and save you" (Isaiah 35:4). As if Isaiah is calling, "Your home is with God. Come back home. Rejoice and be glad. God is waiting to welcome you home." Here and now---not in some faroff place, not in a time yet to come...but here and now. On this very day and in this very dark night of our lives-God is with us.

The promise of everlasting joy, where sorrow flees away, stands forever. In the middle of Isaiah's soaring promise of a victorious kingdom, he stops to whisper to those who are lost

and hurting that God is here now. God is with us. God is for us, now.<sup>4</sup>

It's the promise of the incarnation---Emmanuel.

This time of year can be the most difficult for many. Isaiah's vision is appropriate for us to hear again and again. When we forget that God is near, Isaiah reminds us. When we can't imagine hope or joy filling our lives, Isaiah reminds us.

This past Tuesday in this Sanctuary we held a Service of Remembrance and Hope. We held space for those for whom this season is overwhelming. For many, the sadness and searching is far away from the joy Isaiah proclaims. We offered prayers for our need for wholeness, and lit candles as we remembered those we have loved and lost. We also offered a place for personal prayer and an anointing with oil. It was an opportunity to receive healing for old wounds, past hurts, and for unspoken words weighing heavy on our hearts.

In the wilderness places where people find themselves, the simple act of naming the hurt was a healing balm. It offered the tender space for waters to break forth and for tears to be shed.

The tears, like the water that washes away the protective coating on a seed, allow our hearts to sprout with new life. In the parched and barren places of our lives, tears of love and grace are the waters of healing and streams of wholeness. In

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<sup>4</sup> David A. Davis, Isaiah 35: 1-10, Connections: Advent 1 through Epiphany. WKJPress, 38.

them, God offers the opportunity to rejoice and blossom, once again.

Isaiah proclaims that before the lion and the lamb rest together, we hear the words of new life and renewal. For those returning from exile, or for those experiencing in pain and grief today, Isaiah's words repeat the sounding joy. What was once loss and heartache is reversed as God redeems God's people. And all people shall see the glory of God. Can you see it? A vision of the kingdom of God come near where the glory of God is revealed?

When deserts bloom, even super bloom, in California!

The glory of God is like that.

When a bullied teenager claims her voice, sails across an ocean and inspires a generation!

The glory of God is like that.

When non-violent offenders are released from incarceration!

The glory of God!

As friend emerges from paralyzing fear into a life of peace!

The glory of God is like that!

May the rest of our Advent days be filled with this new vision to place our trust in the One who, even now, is doing something far better than we dare imagine. Jesus' instructions

to the disciples of John are our instruction as well: “Go and Tell...what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them (Mt. 11: 4-5).”

The One who is to come is the One who brings hope to our lives, who offers peace in our relationships, and who fills our hearts with joy and singing.

That Joy just can't wait.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

## **Matthew 11: 2-11**

A reading from the Gospel according to Matthew, Chapter 11.

2 When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples <sup>3</sup>and said to him, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?’ <sup>4</sup>Jesus answered them, ‘Go and tell John what you hear and see: <sup>5</sup>the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. <sup>6</sup>And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.’

7 As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: ‘What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? <sup>8</sup>What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. <sup>9</sup>What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. <sup>10</sup>This is the one about whom it is written,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.”

<sup>11</sup>Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

The Word of God for the People of God.

Thanks be to God.

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