

Scripture: Isaiah 35:1-10; Luke 1:44, 47

Message: Imagine What Joy Sounds Like

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Advent 3

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What does joy sound like? What comes to mind as you think of the sound of joy?

As we read Isaiah 35, we hear many different expressions of the sound of joy.

Imagine what joy sounds like: "Wilderness and desert will sing joyously; they will celebrate and flower, like the crocus in spring, bursting into blossom."

Imagine what joy sounds like: "Strength in feeble hands; courage for rubbery knees."

Imagine what joy sounds like: "Water gushing forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert; the thirsty ground becomes a bubbling spring."

Imagine what joy sounds like: "A crowd of people walking together, breaking out in spontaneous song, singing at the top of their lungs."

Sure. That might be what joy sounds like. But it's hard to hear it above the shouts of hatred from one person or group to another. It's hard to hear it above the threats of war and riots, whether in North Korea or Syria or Palestine. It's hard to hear the sounds of joy in the refugee camps in Kenya or Jordan or Ethiopia.

It's hard to hear the sound of joy above the voice of the doctor as he uses the "C" word: cancer.

It's hard to hear the sound of joy when we stand beside another grave, or see the empty chair at the dinner table.

In fact, this whole chapter in Isaiah doesn't seem to fit. It follows a chapter that talks about "the stars of heaven being dissolved and the sky rolled up like a scroll...like withered leaves from the vine." That chapter talks about "the sword of the LORD bathed in blood" and the LORD's day of vengeance when "Edom's streams will be turned into black tar, her dust into blazing sulfur...that will not be quenched."

That doesn't sound like joy. Maybe it sounds more like your reality, or how you see the world. Joy is as lasting as those sugar cookies being served over coffee after the service. A couple bites, a few moments, a fleeting experience, and the sound of joy disappears to be overcome by the cacophony of sadness, pain, loneliness, fighting, arguing, hunger, injustice, hatred, and the credit card bill that shows up in January reminding us that we overspent on Christmas presents, again. You name it. It shouts loud and clear, and it doesn't sound like joy.

That's where this chapter sits as part of God's Grand Story. It's a story of sadness of sin and the promise of joy. The people of Israel heard these words while suffering the consequences for their disobedience. Far from the home of the Promised Land, the temple destroyed, under the authority of an enemy nation, realizing that it was their own disobedience that brought them there. "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept. How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?" is the cry expressed in Psalm 137.

How can we sing the songs of joy in today's world? How can you expect *me* to sing the songs of joy? Don't you see what is going on around us, in my own life?

Sometimes, it's just too hard to imagine what joy sounds like.

Into that story, that reality, Isaiah dares to speak a word, as if it is out of place. He doesn't wait till things have improved. He doesn't wait for change to take place. He doesn't wait till everything is better, till everything is fixed up. He boldly speaks of a new reality that not only God will someday usher in, but also that shapes the current realities of God's people of every place and age.

The key to this new reality, the key to hearing the sounds of joy, is found in a central statement in the structure of Isaiah 35. Without getting into all the technical details of how this chapter is set up, that central statement is in verse 4, "your God will come."

Our hope for the renewal about which Isaiah so beautifully writes, our hope to hear the sounds of joy, is found in our God's coming. We can try on our own, but we do really well at making a mess of things and hurting other people.

That's why it's such good news that God, as the prophet insists, comes to make all things new. God comes to a groaning creation. God comes to us, even when our bodies and spirits groan in pain and misery. God comes to alienated, hurting people everywhere.

When God comes, "Gladness and joy will overtake them. Everlasting joy will crown their heads."

A time is coming...yes.

There is promise of great change and joy...yes.

In fact, it is not only coming. It is here. "Your God will come." He has come!

It's the joy of Elizabeth when Mary came to her door. "Why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy" (Luke 1:44).

It's the joy of Mary, expressed in her song, "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour" (Luke 1:47) Her song continues to speak of the world that is about to turn because God is come in the person of Jesus.

"His mercy flows in wave after wave on those who are in awe before him. He bared his arm and showed his strength, scattered the bluffing braggarts. He knocked tyrants off their high horses, pulled victims out of the mud. The starving poor sat down to a banquet; the callous rich were left out in the cold. He embraced his chosen people; he remembered and piled on the mercies, piled them high. It's exactly what he promised, beginning with Abraham and right up to now" (Luke 1:50-55, *The Message*).

"My heart shall sing of the day you bring. Let the fires of your justice burn. Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near, and the world is about to turn!" (from the song, *"My Soul Cries Out with a Joyful Shout"*)

Imagine the sounds of joy. Your God has come.

God has come into this world of sadness. The desert of destruction and emptiness will blossom. Scared, shy people can be strong. Blind, deaf, lame, and mute people will see, hear, jump and shout. That which limits and harms will be changed into new life, victorious, joyful life.

We live in the fulfilment of this prophecy. God has come and delivered us from the power of sin, to be his sons and daughters

God has come, in the person of Jesus. He was born as a baby to be like us, tempted in his life as we are, yet without sin. Jesus died willingly on a cross in our place. God raised him from the dead. Sin and death have no lasting power. We are forgiven, adopted as God's own children.

Even now, we can imagine the sound of joy. We can imagine the joy of walking with God on the Way of Holiness. We can imagine the sounds of joy as we "enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown our heads." This is not just a future reference to that day when we enter the glory of heaven to receive everlasting joy.

Already now, our God has come. Already now, our God is with us. Already now, "Gladness and joy will overtake us, and sorrow and sighing will flee away." Already now, we can experience the joy of God's presence in the coming of our victorious Saviour.

Imagine the sounds of joy, every day. This is not just a Sunday thing, when you get

your “fix” of joy in church. This is not just a “Christmas thing,” as if this is the one season of year to get an overload of joy that has to carry us through for another 11 months.

The children of God, the redeemed, the ransomed of the Lord *are* on that Way of Holiness, always. We take our place now, with God’s people, through faith in Jesus Christ.

While we are on this Way of Holiness we are overtaken by joy and gladness. Knowing that our sins *are* forgiven, knowing that we *are* free from the power of sin and death, knowing we *are* accepted by God and claimed by him as being his very own, gives us joy. God is with us, in our pain and loneliness and worry and fear. We can find joy in God’s victorious presence.

It’s a joy we live and share, and in so doing we bring joy into the lives of others. This chapter speaks of people who experience weakness and pain, various physical and intellectual disability that is sometimes nearly crippling. We identified the lack of joy in our world in so many different ways. Our presence with hurting people is a sign to them that God is present among and with them. We can bring God’s joy into their lives. Our presence, our joy, is also a sign that God is already preparing a new and better day for all of us.

Imagine what joy sounds like.

Amen.