

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Isaiah 35:1-2,8-10; Matthew 11:2-11

Isaiah 35:1-2, 8-10

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,

the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus 2 it shall blossom abundantly,

and rejoice with joy and singing.
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.
They shall see the glory of the Lord,
the majesty of our God.

A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it,
but it shall be for God's people;
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.
No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.
And 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.

Matthew 11:2-11

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples 3 and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" 4 Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: 5 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. 6 And blessed is anyone who takes no offense 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? 8 What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. 9 What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 10 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.'

11 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.

Christmas day is getting close now. It's just 10 days away! Are you excited? Maybe you're looking forward to being with family and friends. Maybe you can't wait for a Christmas feast. Or maybe you can't wait to rip open packages to see the surprises loved ones got for you—or maybe not. Are you prepared with responses to any weird gifts you might receive? If not, let me share with you eight possible responses you can use.

8. Well, well, well, now, there's a gift!
7. No, really, I didn't know that there was a Chia pet tie! Oh, wow! It's a clip-on too!
6. You know, I always wanted one of these! Jog my memory—what's it called again?
5. You know what?—I'm going to find a special place to put this!
4. Boy, you don't see craftsmanship like that every day!
3. And it's such an interesting color too!
2. You say that was the last one? Am I glad that you snapped that baby up.

1. And the number one thing to say about the gifts you didn't like is:
"You shouldn't have! No, really, I mean it, you really shouldn't have!"

There you go. Hopefully, this list is helpful to those of you who may receive that surprise, even weird gift. Or, maybe the wise thing to do is to keep your thoughts to yourself and in a few days, take it back to the store to exchange it, or regift it in a few years.

Christmas is an exciting and fun for most people; however, for others it may be a painful and depressing time of year. With this in mind, one of the themes, which we are going to consider, from today's scripture readings is joy. What is joy? According to John Piper, author and preacher in the Reformed Baptist Church, "Christian joy is a good feeling in the soul, produced by the Holy Spirit, as he causes us to see the beauty of Christ in the word and in the world."

Joy is not an idea. It is not a conviction. It is not a persuasion or a decision. It is a feeling, an emotion. One of the marks of the difference between an idea and an emotion or feeling is that you don't have immediate control over your feelings or your emotions. You can't snap your fingers and decide to feel something. Joy isn't like happiness which is based upon happenings or whether things are going well or not. No, joy remains, even amidst the suffering. Joy is not happiness.

Joy is a gift. The Apostle Paul tells us that it is one of the fruits of the Spirit along with others like, "love, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, and faithfulness." Therefore, joy is a result of having the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, which means that true joy involves a having a good relationship with God. Just like you cannot fake a relationship with God, you cannot fake joy. You either have it or you don't.

The imagery in the prophet Isaiah's poem in the first two verses of chapter 35 paints an amazing picture of joy. This follows a period of exile for the Israelites, who were being punished for their unfaithfulness to God; therefore, these were welcoming words to the ears and souls. Their exile experience was an emotional season of drought and dormancy. But now Isaiah paints a picture with words saying, "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing," which speaks of the spiritual joy that is now growing out of their experience of suffering and pain.

The April 2019 Newsweek magazine reported that,

"This spring, parts of the California wilderness experienced a rare "super bloom" event that could even be seen from space. Thousands of people arrived to snap images for their Instagram and be 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.

"What are the elements that lead up to a rare super bloom? Prolonged dormancy, of course. Many wildflower seeds must remain asleep through many seasons 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 an unusually cold winter to lock in the moisture.

"Harsh, undesirable conditions over many years seem to pave the way for the stunning explosion of a super bloom."

Harsh, unwanted, conditions that arise in our lives, over time, have the potential of paving the way for a super bloom of joy in us. In the midst of personal turmoil and pain, we may not be able to fathom anything positive coming out of our experience, but it is possible.

In verse 8 of Isaiah 35, the word “highway” is used. But as is the case with so much of Isaiah’s language, this term is used figuratively rather than literally. Rather, the prophet refers to a holy way of life, the Sacred Way. Isaiah goes on to tell the people that when they return home, they will practice a religion without crookedness. The way will be so straight and clear that even foolish people can follow. Nothing ferocious will hide on the path either. And all on the highway known as the Sacred Way will experience everlasting joy at long last because God, himself, is coming to save them.

As we think about the highway that leads us out of darkness and drought, we may think of our faith, our salvation journey, on a path laid before us by the grace and love of God himself given to us through his Son, Jesus, the Christ. It’s as we walk this path with Jesus by our side that we make it through the wilderness periods of life and find joy—spiritual joy that is deeper than mere happiness.

Isaiah encourages us to walk the highway, not seek to take shortcuts, not allow fear to suspend our journey, but walk the path that leads to open doors of freedom and joy.

In the Matthew text that was read for us today, we find John the Baptist sitting in prison. That certainly was a dark time in his life. It may seem odd to us that after baptizing Jesus and announcing to the world that Jesus is the One that they’ve been waiting for—the Messiah—that he would send out his own disciples to question whether Jesus really was the promised One.

While we do not know what John was thinking or feeling, if we put ourselves in his place, going through a difficult time, we might have our own doubts about Jesus. But through this story we learn from John that getting through our difficulties involves seeking Jesus. We address our doubts and hold on to even the thinnest thread of faith within us by seeking Jesus. That’s what it means to walk on the highway that Isaiah spoke of, the highway of freedom allowing the Holy Spirit to release in us a spirit of joy, like the deserts in California, exploding into a super bloom.

Christmas ‘tis the season when we reflect on joy, even while some of us may struggle to feel joy. We cannot deny the deserts we may be in nor the unwelcome visitor of pain from the past. In that case, we may need to take hold of what we are feeling, take a look at it, acknowledge the place it has in us, and then, put it away, giving it to God, and look honestly and openly seeking the good things in your life now, including most importantly, Jesus, allowing then, the Spirit to do its work in you to bring you joy.

May the celebration of the birth of Christ, bring unending joy into your life this season.
Amen.