

WGUMC December 3, 2017 "The Joy Coming At You"  
Isaiah 35:1-10

From Charles Schulz, we know that “happiness is a warm puppy,” but what is joy? That's a good question, which is why joy is the gift I want to spend the entire Advent season unwrapping. You may not have noticed it, but joy is all over the Bible. Isaiah tells the people in exile in Babylonia: "And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads...." Mary, the mother of Jesus, sings with joy upon hearing that she is pregnant out of wedlock: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." [Luke 1:46-7] And Paul is in prison when he writes to the Philippians: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say Rejoice." [Philippians 4:4]

It's likely that we wouldn't be overjoyed if we found ourselves in any of those circumstances. Apparently, "God would like us to be joyful even when our hearts lie panting on the floor...." That's what Tevya says in *Fiddler on the Roof*, and

evidently, the Bible agrees. Scripture doesn't think that bad fortune releases us from God's command to rejoice. So, what does joy mean to you? If you can answer that question, then I hope you will write about your experience of joy for our Advent devotional this year.

We usually think of joy as something we feel, not something we can see. But in the Scripture from Isaiah, we get a very visual image of joy. It's like a desert that blooms. It's like waters that break forth in the wilderness. It's like burning sand that becomes a pool and thirsty ground that turns into a spring. I get the image of Death Valley and the Superbloom that followed the rains that broke the drought last winter.

But the visual leads us to the spiritual. Isaiah's words invite us to think about a very dry time in our own life, when our soul was thirsty, when our hope was dried up, when our spirit felt as if it were wandering around in a wasteland. Can you remember a time like that? Then tell us about it. Write to

me about a desert experience you've had and tell me what God did to ransom you from that exile. Can you remember the joy that broke forth in your wilderness? Describe the streams that finally started flowing for you and the flowers that started blooming.

Perhaps by writing them down, you will realize how essential these desert experiences are for your spiritual growth. The Israelites didn't appreciate home until they had lived in exile for a while. Paul didn't know the joy of Jesus until he had suffered for him. None of us really know how deep love is until we have lost someone.

Joy is very much like love: precious to us because it comes at a cost. The deserts that we go through in our lives are the downpayments we make for the joy we will come to know.

A few weeks ago, we celebrated Children's Sabbath and you got to see the Desert Box, which is just a large pan full of

sand. It's part of the Godly Play curriculum that we use in Children's Chapel. We have a sandbox because so many of the important Bible stories take place in the desert. That's where Moses and the Hebrews wander for forty years. That's where Jesus is tempted by the devil. That's where John the Baptist preaches the kin-dom of God.

According to the prophet Isaiah, the desert is where we will see signs that the kin-dom is coming. Where we least expect to find any life at all, that's where the kin-dom life will blossom.

God knows that we will only see the signs if we are in a place where we cannot miss it. You just can't miss a stream running through a desert, so I think God lets us go to those wastelands, where everything looks uninhabitable and hostile, because that's what it takes for some of us to see the signs of what God is doing for us.

Migrants who cross the desert to come to the U.S. seldom miss what God is doing for them. Daniel Groody tells the story of Maria. Like so many before her, Maria left Guatemala and travelled across Mexico hanging from a boxcar. She paid a "coyote" \$2,000 to take her across the border. He told her that it would take two hours to cross the desert. It took four days. On the second day, she ran out of food. On the third day, she ran out of water. On the fourth day, she started hallucinating and was picked up by border patrol. Though she was deported, she tried to cross two more times. She was robbed at gunpoint and almost raped.

After hearing her tragic story, Daniel wanted to ask her, "If you had fifteen minutes to talk with God, what would you say?" He thought she might be mad at God or feel abandoned by God. But she looked at him in a way that said, "What a stupid question." Then she answered, "First of all, I don't have fifteen minutes to talk to God. You see, I am always talking to

God, and God is always with me. But if you ask me what I would say if I saw God face to face, the first thing I would do would be to thank Him. God has given me so much, and I have been so blessed by God, that the first words I would say are thank you for having been so good to me."

[Daniel Groody, "Undocumented Migration and Religious Experience: A Theological Interpretation of the Mexican-American Border," in *Encountering Transcendence: Contributions to a Theology of Christian Religious Experience*.]

Crossing any kind of desert has a way of making us realize how blessed we have been. And that's what the Bible means by joy. When we come to that realization, it's as if we were blind, and now we see. We were deaf, and now we hear. We were lame, and now we can leap like a deer. We were speechless, and now we can't keep from singing.

In March of this year, some church bells in Ireland couldn't keep from ringing. The "Joy Bells" of Christ Church Cathedral in Waterford had been undergoing restoration and hadn't rung for a year and a half. But with anti-immigrant sentiment boiling on both sides of the Atlantic, the Dean of the Cathedral invited

the former president of the country (the first female president), to peal the church bells in an effort to drown out intolerance and to send a message of fellowship and welcome to refugees and immigrants. She invited others to join in for the feast of Ireland's most famous immigrant, St. Patrick. On that weekend, bells of joy pealed in places as far apart as India, Italy, and New Jersey. [*National Catholic Reporter*, March 15, 2017]

As we enter the season of Advent, we remember that Jesus knew the perils of being an immigrant, too. According to Luke's Gospel, he fled with his parents to Egypt to escape King Herod. So he knew what it was like to have to cross the desert, to be hungry and thirsty and in danger for his life. But God ransomed him from Egypt so he could become the joy that rings for us whenever we are crossing any desert, whenever we are in any kind of danger, whenever we are feeling lost or

unloved or unwelcome. "If I had a bell, I'd ring it in the morning..."

Every time you hear a bell this Advent season, don't think of angels getting their wings. Think of Jesus and the joy he brings. The season gets its name from the Latin *adventus*, which means "coming." And the very best gift we can unwrap this season is the joy that is coming at us in Jesus. Therefore, rejoice in the Lord, always. Again, I say, Rejoice!