

Comfort and Joy  
Pastor Morgan Murray  
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Scripture

Isaiah 35:1-10

35 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.  
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.

3 Strengthen the weak hands,  
and make firm the feeble knees.

4 Say to those who are of a fearful heart,  
“Be strong, do not fear!  
Here is your God.  
He will come with vengeance,  
with terrible recompense.  
He will come and save you.”

5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

6 then the lame shall leap like a deer,

and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,  
and streams in the desert;

7 the burning sand shall become a pool,  
and the thirsty ground springs of water;  
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,  
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

8 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.

9 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.

10 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.

## **Sermon Notes**

Message

This is the third Sunday of Advent, which is traditionally called Gaudete Sunday. Gaudete is Latin for “Rejoice,” and the reason behind this special Sunday – and the rose-colored Advent candle that marks it – is to provide a joyful break in an otherwise sober, preparatory time. Gaudete Sunday is sort of a spiritual pit stop on the road to Christmas.

For this reason, the Old Testament reading directs our attention to new life and new hope:

35:1-2 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.

To a heartbroken people marking time in Babylonian exile, Isaiah’s bright vision of the future kept hope alive. In those dark days of drudgery and alienation, Isaiah the poet and prophet helped the people cultivate faithful imaginations. As dark as the times may be, God’s saving work will be accomplished and this is what it will look like.

It would be all too easy for the people to stay mired in regret about past failures, or to obsess about present troubles. Isaiah prophetic writings instead draw their attention to God as “The Holy one of Israel” or simply “The Holy.” Isaiah was obsessed with holiness, we might say. But he offers a different understanding of holiness from the way we usually think about it.

We tend to think of holiness as something we accomplish through moral effort. If I do all the right things and don’t do any of the wrong things, then I will be holy. Then God will accept me, help me, and love me.

If that were Isaiah’s take on holiness then it would only be salt in the wound of a people who had utterly blown it. Chapter 35 is found in that part of the collected writings known as “Messages of Judgment.” When a nation has turned its collective back on God, grace, and goodness for as long as Judah did, the consequences of sin were pretty disastrous. The kings – so we are told in 1 & 2 Kings and 1 & 2 Chronicles – “did what was evil in the eyes of Yahweh.” And those histories are quick to point out that the people followed along, trusting in political alliances, material wealth, and religious pretense instead of following God’s directions for blessed and abundant living.

What's great about Isaiah is that he doesn't rub their noses in it. He doesn't get bogged down with I-told-you-so's. God gifted him with an ability to see the big picture, to take past failure and present suffering in stride. He can hold the present moment's political and cultural crisis inside the larger context of God's salvation symphony. The gift Isaiah gives to us is his way of "taking the stuff of our ordinary and often disappointing human experience and showing us how it is the very stuff that God uses to create and save and give hope." Speaking on Yahweh's behalf, Isaiah's visions reveal that *Divine perfection is precisely the ability to include what seems like imperfection.* (Rohr Univ Christ 55)

For Isaiah, holiness isn't about an ethical code, but a divine encounter. Whenever we listen to Isaiah we are being invited into both the presence and the action of the holy. If we steep ourselves in Isaiah's visions of what the Holy is and what the Holy does, our understanding of that word is going to become far more vibrant and muscular. As Eugene Peterson puts it in the preface to Isaiah in *The Message*:

[For Isaiah] Holiness is the most attractive quality, the most intense experience we ever get of sheer *life*—authentic, firsthand living, not life looked at and enjoyed from a distance. [When we read Isaiah] we find ourselves in on the operations of God himself, not talking about them or reading about them. Holiness is a furnace that transforms the men and women who enter it. "Holy, Holy, Holy" is not needlepoint. It is the banner of a revolution, *the* revolution.<sup>[1]</sup>

To be part of this revolution is to travel Holy Road. Out of a barren and arid landscape, new life emerges. A body defined by weakness and incapacity gains new strength through God's saving power. Water, the universal sign of life and hope and cleansing and restoration – doesn't just trickle... it gushes. The way home that was once blocked is now clear, safe, and wide open.

(Verse 8)

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.

The Holy Way is holy because of Who made it, not who walks it. No purity toll needs to be paid. It is for God's people—that is, those who are trying to make it to back to Jerusalem, back to place of belonging, back to God. The unclean, the rude, the rebellious – those who have no interest in taking such a journey – will pass this road by. Neither they nor wild animals will be around to cause fear or distraction. In fact, the Holy Way will be so clearly marked that even foolish people and casual tourists can't get off track.

Isaiah seems to be saying: The Holy One is going to make the way for you, so relax! You can't screw this up!

There is always an inevitable fall. As the great English mystic Julian of Norwich described it, "First there is the fall, and then we recover from the fall. Both are the mercy of God."

What we remember each Advent is that the inevitable fall also leads to an inevitable rising. This is the path Jesus walks, the pattern that his life, death, and resurrection leads us to follow. The Holy way is opening up to us, even now.

Whatever hard and horrible thing we face, in Christ we will come back from it. The days may be dark now, but there will be gladness and joy that will catch us by surprise. Sorrow and sighing will eventually flee away.

Amen.

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[1] Peterson, E. H. (2005). [\*The Message: the Bible in contemporary language\*](#) (Is). Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.