

“Joy Beyond Comparing”

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 (Isaiah 35:1-2).

The Advent hymn begins, “Once He came in blessing / All our sins redressing; / Came in likeness lowly. / Son of God most holy.” These lyrics seem a fitting introduction to the silent night we all hope Christmas will bring. But if you stick with the hymn, you’ll notice a disconcerting shift in tone when you get to verse three. Instead of the “lowly child of Bethlehem” we know from our carols, we hear the following words of warning, “Soon will come that hour / When with mighty power / Christ will come in splendor / And will judgement render.” So much for Christmas cheer!

This may not convey the joy we expect during this festive season, yet these ominous words are a very fitting introduction to today’s first reading. You see, this text follows a section of Isaiah where the prophet speaks of this judgment. Here, Isaiah writes, “The Lord is enraged against all the nations; he has devoted them to destruction, has given them over for slaughter... For the Lord has a day of vengeance... (and the land) will become burning pitch... it shall not be quenched... from generation to generation it shall lie in waste” (Isaiah 34:2-3, 8-9).

In this Advent season, as we proclaim Christ’s coming and await His return, we need to understand that when Jesus comes back, He will come in power. Sin is absolutely serious to God, and the words Isaiah used to describe this “day of vengeance” are terrifying. They tell us that the Lord is coming to judge the world, and unless we recognize and repent of our sins, the condemnation and desolation described by Isaiah will include us as well.

And it’s here that today’s text begins. Here, in the shadow of death and destruction described in chapter 34, God unveils a completely different picture. Isaiah writes, “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” (Isaiah 35:1-2). And the contrast couldn’t be more dramatic. Out of the wilderness of God’s judgment on sin, out of the dry, cracked, barren ground of the desert, scorched by wrath and steeped in death; out of this desolate land, life will come! In this text, Isaiah speaks impossible words of transformation, and even though the imagery of new life is inspiring, this picture of promise seems too good to be true, especially when the world around us appears to be falling apart, and our own sin is always before us. How can this possibly be? How can we hope for the good things promised in Isaiah 35 when all we see is dry and desolate ground?

This is the same problem John the Baptist struggled with in today’s Gospel reading. John had served the Lord well. He had pointed to Jesus as the Messiah. He had stood up to the self-righteous religious leaders. He had preached against the sins of King Herod. He had done everything right, but instead of honor and reward, John was arrested and now awaited his fate in the darkness of a prison cell. The life that John was living looked so very different from the Messianic kingdom of peace that the prophets had proclaimed, and, in this fog of contradiction, John doubts, and he even sends his disciples to ask Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” (Matthew 11:3).

This is exactly where we so often find ourselves. We hear the promises in a text like Isaiah 35, and yet our lives look so different from the language of life in this prophecy. People we love struggle with illness, personal sins persist, anxiety grows, depression looms, and the ground in which we are planted

seems to get drier by the moment. In these times, we find ourselves asking the same kinds of questions John did. Is faith in Jesus really the answer? Is the Bible really true? Is the life that God promises really possible? “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” The reality of sin and the weakness of our hearts create doubts about God’s Word, and in our sin, we are tempted to take our eyes off of God’s promises and focus on our own sinful selves...and that is exactly why today’s text matters.

This prophecy was written for people who would be facing exile. These words would be read by a people whose nation was destroyed, whose lives had been ripped apart, and whose world was left desolate. The people for whom these words of prophecy were written had every reason to doubt and every cause to despair; their lives had been laid bare, and their future looked hopeless. And to these broken people God said, “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...they shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God” (Isaiah 35:1-2). And today, God speaks that same Word to us!

At the height of our sin, in the pit of our despair, in our darkest and driest hour, God comes to us, and He points us to life – He points us back to Christ! When John asked, “Are you the one who is to come?” Jesus said, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up...” (Matthew 11:4-5). In Jesus, the impossible things become possible, and the promises of God become reality! And even though our lives are riddled with sin, and even though we are gripped with doubt, Christ’s promises are given to us in their fullness.

In our first reading, Isaiah said, “they will see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God...” *Who* will see? Who will benefit from the presence of the Savior? Look at the text! The weak, the feeble, and those with fearful hearts! That’s us! God knows our sin, and He knows our weakness. He sees our doubts, and He understands our struggle, and in response, He sent His Son. With full knowledge of our sin and full understanding of our need, He came to save us. We are those with weak hands and feeble knees, with fearful hearts and shaky faith, and it is for us that Christ has come, and it is for us that Christ will come again.

Jesus said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:31-32). Jesus came to *save*! And He has nothing to offer to those who need no saving. But for us who struggle with our sin, for us who are broken by our failings, and for us who are crushed by our inability to do it on our own, God comes, and He does it all. The cross of Jesus Christ is the place where God dealt with our failings. The cross of Jesus Christ is the place where God punished our sin. The cross of Jesus Christ is the place where we see the majesty of our God. It is a place of love, it is a place of forgiveness, and it is the place where judgment becomes joy! Or in the words of the Advent hymn: “Soon will come that hour / When with mighty power / Christ will come in splendor / And will judgement render. / With the faithful sharing / Joy beyond comparing.

Repent and rejoice in the peace of this promise God has made to you today, and all God’s people say, “Amen.”

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