

“Streams in the Desert, Isaiah’s Ode To Joy!”

By Steve Ramer

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Fourth Sunday of Advent, FCMF #2

Scripture

Isaiah 35:1-10

1 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... 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... God 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; ...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

The prophet, Isaiah of Jerusalem, is thought to have been active over a forty year period that stretched from 740 to 701 BCE.

His call to prophetic ministry is recorded for us in chapter 6 - a stunning vision of Yahweh, the Holy One of Israel, “high and lifted up” in God’s Holy Temple, far above the corrupt and sin filled people of Israel.

Isaiah’s commission was to announce the coming doom, the imminent and unmitigated destruction of both Jewish kingdoms. The Kingdom of David had split into Israel in the north and Judah in the south, existing independently of and at times antagonistically with each other.

Isaiah did, in fact, live to see the complete annihilation of the northern kingdom of Israel when it fell to the Assyrian Empire in 722.

According to Isaiah, the destruction of both kingdoms would happen because both were guilty of a number of things. One was the wholesale violation of the rights of the common people, as well as both kingdom’s headlong rush to amass quick wealth and political power at any cost. (Is. 1:12-17, 3:3-15; 5:1-7, 8-10).

The 34 chapters prior to what we read this morning also indicated that Isaiah held little hope for and saw few indications of, a possible change of heart in the ruling elite of either nation.

A change of heart which could lead to a change of course and the necessary reforms that could institutionalize God's historic demands for social justice and equality. His pessimism then, may have led him to thus conclude that nothing short of total national destruction lay ahead.

Chapter 35 is then a dramatic change in both tone and content!

What was read this morning is a complete and dramatic departure from what came before - real climate change I suppose.

Isaiah's constant cries of certain doom and the hovering clouds of gloom they created now suddenly give way to the promise of full restoration. "A big rock candy mountain!" of all that common folk might desire in any utopian world of Isaiah's day.

The modern prophet, priest and activist, Daniel Berrigan, entitles chapter 35 as, "Isaiah's 'Ode to Joy!'"

Allow me to read Berrigan's interpretation of the passage that we read earlier, as well as his inspirational thoughts on the passage. The following is taken from his book, "Isaiah: Sprit of Courage, Gift of Tears." (pages 92 and 93)

Let the arid land breathe free,
sweet respiration, rain!
Let the steppes cry out (winter locked,
beyond the warmhearted sun's midday ministrations)
in bird song, song of flowers, spring's freehold,
winter's yielding at last, cry - Life!
evermore, abundant - Life!
And the Giver of Life, a glory half glimpsed,
the bridegroom at the portal lingering -
our strength, our passionate One!
His shadow falls, pure light.

You, the sorrowful, glean
from that glance of his,
hopes's first faint inkling,
then strong and stronger!

See! Hands impaired, aged,
at merest touch of his

flex and flow - graceful grow,
apt to appointed tasks!
And the sagging knees the spines bent double
(unremitting the heft as on beasts of burden laid)
straight, upright sprung, aside once for all
cast their slavish estate!

Come blind, come deaf -
sit at the undreamed banquet of sound and sense!
loosened the tongue to praise worth, to song!

Speedy our homecoming!
The way like a royal tapestry,
the Via Regis close-woven of creation -
we ransomed, we exiles
leaping, dancing for joy!

It is as though the wickedness of worldly events were a mirage, as though judgement were finally dissolved in mercy. The prophet's final word, when all else is said, all darkness taken into account, celebrates the goodness of creation under the benign gaze of Yahweh.

All things are restored and reconciled! Attend to the promise! Its utterance, its fullness, its fidelity and sure realization break the heart. Isaiah has come through it all - slavery, humiliation, scorn, exile. Even so, his people have come through, purified and restored. They have survived not only a weak and vacillating king, wrong turns, bad polity and the poison of public violence endorsed by themselves but also wars and rumors of war.

They have survived the wrath of Yahweh, unleashed again and again on their heads by the fierce prophet in their midst. They have survived - Isaiah.

The heart of this great one, this recalcitrant amanuensis of the Holy, this unyielding one, this stone in the path of empire, the one who must be silenced and dismissed and scorned and finally disposed of!
Yet his heart is like a full vessel, immeasurably enlarged, wide as the world to contain and convey the hope of generations. His heart overflowing in joy, he composes a very ode to joy!

What, we muse, were the circumstances of his joy? Was he still favored in the king's court? Was the king (for the time being) granting him a hearing, even seeking him out for a clue, a word from on high? Or was Isaiah already banished and unheard from? Is this... his swan song, composed just before his execution?

And what, if you were to afford yourself the time to muse,
on the circumstances of your joy?

What is the content, what is the source of your joy
as you wait in the darkness of 2015 as it draws to a close?
Another year filled with so many horrible events draws to a close
events that want to enflame fear and eliminate joy.
What is included in your hoped for vision?
What components would cause you to truly and deeply
shout, sing, dance and rejoice with unutterable joy?

What unlikely transformations must occur in order
to ignite such a fire with in your soul that it cannot be quenched?

An "Ode to Joy" for each and every one of us hangs in the air.
This too is a promised gift of the Advent season.
A cool, refreshing and abundant stream of water
waits to flow into and over our parched throats
to create a flowering and verdant field for praise to grow!
A gushing spring is within you and me waiting to erupt
into a fountain of courage and confidence this season!

And not only will these streams and springs quench your thirst,
but they will form lakes that can soak and saturate
your dry bones and withered souls.

God is coming, God is coming to be with us!
An uncontrollable waterfall seeks to wash over us!
A Niagara of love, forgiveness, hope, healing, comfort
and peace to overwhelm, cleans and resuscitate us.
And whatever one of those you need the most right now
let it pour on you, saturate you, refresh you,
and fill you with joy and praise!

If you need to walk away from the enslavement of the past
or to move into the future that God has prepared for you -
God offers to strengthen every weak joint
and eliminate every feeble excuse that holds you back!

And if the road ahead looks too rough and difficult,
the "God With Us Paving Company"
will be there to provide a direct and smooth highway to travel.

According to Isaiah you could say their motto is:
"Ain't no mountain high enough, ain't no valley low enough,
ain't no river wide enough, to keep Me from getting to you!"

And if your path appears to take you through dangerous territory
God assures us that there will be no "ravenous beasts"
along the route to hurt you or make you afraid.

And with God with us, we can never even get lost.
Which is good for me cause you see I never, ever,
stop for directions, even when I am horribly lost,
so it won't matter - it will be a win, win!

I would like to conclude this morning with an important reminder.
A reminder that Isaiah's ode was originally written
not for an individual but for a large group of folks,
in this case, specifically for two nations.

His theology, and likely that of all the Biblical writers,
could not understand the kind of hyper individualism
we promote in our current western culture.

His promise of deep and abiding joy is meant for everyone
for all of us, for all people regardless of nation or location.
And so, if you are feeling particularly filled to overflowing
and joy and praise is always at the tip of your tongue,
then maybe you will need to help build those irrigation ditches
for those whose lives are weak kneed and parched?

All will be redeemed, all of creation, ev-ver-ree-thing will be transformed
all will become as it aught to be, as it was originally intended to be!
God, God with us, will make this happen!
And the choir will include all of us, all of God's people!

All of God's creation will lift their voices one day
and sing loud with gladness and joy!
It will be a resounding chorus, a chorus that will drown out fear,
like the deafening roar of a waterfall,
and like a raging river that can completely saturate all that
is parched with sadness and sorrow!

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