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Isaiah 35:1-10; Luke 1:46-55

JOYFUL ABANDON

I received a warning about my preaching this week. The warning was given by the esteemed Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann and was found in a commentary I was reading about the Isaiah 35 passage for today. In writing about this passage, Brueggemann warns me and other preachers “not to tone down or apologize for its lyrical abandonment.” He adds, “The poem is a healing alternative to the church’s grim despair and to our modern sense that no real newness is possible.” Brueggemann writes, “The text invites us out of our managed rationality to affirm that God does what the world thinks is not possible.”

Brueggemann speaks to the fact that sometimes we can be so blooming *rational* that we lose the joy, the utter and exuberant joy, at the unbelievable thing God is making possible, at the newness God is doing that no one thinks possible.

The poem is one of the loveliest passages of scripture. It speaks to every one of us and all the dried up and dead-end wilderness places we find ourselves in, and the despair we feel for ourselves, and the despair we feel for our world. And into that despair, the poem offers us, as Brueggemann states, a “healing alternative.” I know we all need a healing alternative to the damaged world we live in. So let’s listen to this poem again with ears attuned to the joy.

(Isaiah 35:1-10)

Perhaps it is my background of growing up in the Arizona desert that makes me really connect to this poem. I witnessed how even the smallest amount of rain results in the desert bursting forth with blossoms. Animals hidden away under rocks and other cool places suddenly

come forth to drink and look for a mate. Life bursts forth. And it does feel like nature is rejoicing.

Isaiah understood this to be the perfect metaphor for God's abundant, life-giving activity. And he offered his poem to his own people who were sitting in a kind of wilderness situation of their own. The Jewish people were being held captive in exile in Babylon, far from their homeland. And despair and heartache and hopelessness had become their reality.

And I think they were stuck in that state of mind. Just like we can get stuck in a state of mind of despair and hopelessness. We look around us and the world seems irretrievably broken. The mass shootings, the incidents of racism, the great political divide in our nation, the looming catastrophe of climate change, as well as our personal struggles and heartaches—all these weigh upon our hearts and souls. The weight of the world's pain and brokenness, the weight of our personal pain and brokenness, is too much. And sometimes the only recourse we feel we have is heave a sigh and trudge on doing our daily duties with little hope or joy.

Isaiah addresses this state of mind with this poem of joy-filled abandon. He tells his people that there is reason to be filled with joy. God is bringing life to the desert places. And even the wilderness will rejoice at what God is doing.

I want to be clear about what Isaiah is *not* doing. Isaiah is not suggesting his people, or those of us here today, adopt a "happy clappy" faith. "Happy clappy Christians," is the term I use for those Christians who feel compelled to be positive and cheerful about life and about God even when life is really awful, who don't give space in themselves for the real emotions of anger or sadness or despair toward God when life is hard or painful. This kind of artificial joyfulness is not even biblical. I invite you to read the Book of Psalms if you want to find people of faith who could be brutally honest with God about their pain, anger, and feelings of despair and

abandonment. It is therapeutically important as well as spiritually important for people to be honest about their feelings and real life hardships. That is why this time of year many churches host “Blue Christmas” services, so that people who are in sorrow or despair during the holidays can find a space that permits them to be honest with God about their pain.

Notice how Isaiah acknowledges that humans are deeply damaged and broken and wounded by life. When Isaiah speaks in this poem about the blind and lame and the deaf, he is acknowledging that *all* of humanity is disabled—emotionally, physically, spiritually. This poem is addressed to a disabled humanity, for we are all disabled—disabled by sorrow, disabled by anger and hatred, disabled by greed, disabled by racism and intolerance and tribalism, disabled by violence and selfishness. *And* we are also disabled by despair and cynicism. Despair and cynicism impair our ability to discover God, to see the flowers blooming in the desert, to experience joy and what God is doing.

Isaiah speaks to a disabled humanity when he writes, “Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees.” He proclaims that there is another truth, a healing alternative to the despair of our lives. The God who loves you and me, the God of compassion, the God who cares about justice and wellbeing, this God is coming to bring healing and life and to set things right. “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless shall sing for joy.”

The reason we disabled humans can know joy is because of this healing, life-giving God who does not abandon us to our disabilities, who does not abandon us to the wilderness. We regard our wilderness times as occasions we want to get *out* of—our grief, or illness, or hardship, our relationship struggles. We think better things await us on the other side of the desert we are in. But Isaiah tells us that God *meets us in the wilderness* and does something monumentally

amazing! God is there in that moment, that place, that condition, bringing healing and life and a newness we may think impossible. And knowing that, being open to that, recognizing that, is the source of great joy.

That's what Mary is singing about in today's reading from Luke. Mary's song, called the Magnificat, is her declaration of joy about the impossible newness God is bringing forth through the child she is carrying. Here is what I love about Mary's song of joy. Mary has every reason to be filled with despair and fear. She is an unwed pregnant woman in a society that would shun her at best or stone her to death at worst. And yet, Mary sings a song of joy about the incredible life-giving activity of God through the child she carries. She speaks about God coming to right the wrongs of the world: how the lowly are lifted up, and the unjust powerful are brought down. But she sings about these event in *the past tense*. She talks about them saying, "God *has done* these things" when in reality, God had yet to do those things. She was so confident in God's life-giving activity in her life and the world, that Mary could talk about them as if they had already happened. And she sang out her joy at the newness, the impossible newness, God was bringing forth. I wonder if we can imagine being in our own wilderness places and being so confident in God's goodness that we could still express joy and thanksgiving for the newness God has yet to accomplish in the future.

The world is a deeply damaged place. And our personal lives are sometimes filled with more heartache and struggle than any person should have to bear. And our Christian faith tells us that God sees and God cares. And importantly, God acts and responds. That is what we are preparing for during Advent. The birth of Jesus is our celebration of God seeing and God responding to a disabled humanity. The birth of Jesus is the crocus blossoming in of all places, a dried up desert. And because of this promise, we have joy.

Joy is an essential ingredient to the Christian faith. Our joy is rooted in who God is. God is love and grace.

Our joy is rooted in what God does. God loves, forgives, transforms. God raises us to new life. God does what we think is impossible.

Our joy is rooted in what God cares about. God cares about the least and the forgotten. God cares about injustice and wrong doing. God cares for you and me and all humanity in our various conditions of disability. Our joy comes from our understanding of God.

Cynicism is the belief that nothing can ever change. Cynicism is the belief that our world cannot change, that our lives cannot change, that our relationships cannot change. Cynicism is the belief that God is dead, or at the very least, God is powerless.

But the celebration Advent is our declaration of an alternative perspective. God brings healing and hope and life.

I wonder if we cynical, rational, modern people can invite joy into our lives? I wonder if we can resist the temptation to succumb to cynicism and despair and instead give ourselves over to joy-filled abandon. Somehow, while facing honestly the pain of this world and our lives, somehow can we also make way and make room for joy? Not a joy based on pretending that things aren't so bad, or adopting a façade of happiness. Rather, a joy that is that is rooted in God's goodness and the recognition that because of God's goodness, flowers can and do bloom among the thorns.