“Joy to the World!”

Isaiah 35:1-10

Matthew 11:2-11

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The church I served in Memphis is one of the most beautiful churches in which I’ve ever had the privilege of worshipping. Idlewild’s sanctuary was constructed in the 1920s and it is a stunning gothic cathedral, filled with cold stone, dark, oiled wood, and beautiful stained glass at every window. During Advent, the Sanctuary is decorated much like ours here at Covenant, with greenery draped around the chancel, poinsettias in every corner, and candles in every window.

When I arrived at church on my first Christmas Eve in Memphis, the sanctuary practically glowed with Christmas warmth. The candles on the Advent wreath were all lit, and the ministers and I had to find our ways carefully to our seats as we navigated around all of the extra decorations.

We truly felt like the joy of Christmas was all around us.

Until the second hymn began.

“In the Bleak Midwinter” by Christina Rossetti is one of my favorite Christmas hymns. I love the poetry of the lyrics,

“What can I give Him,

Poor as I am? —

If I were a Shepherd

I would bring a lamb;

If I were a Wise Man

I would do my part, —

Yet what I can I give Him, —

Give my heart.”

Beautiful lyrics. As we opened our hymnals to sing, I grinned in anticipation of singing my favorite song. But as we began singing, we found ourselves starting to chuckle, and then giggle. Pretty soon we were full-on laughing.

You see, while the first verse begins with,

“In the bleak mid-winter

Frosty wind made moan;

Earth stood hard as iron,

Water like a stone;”

They continue…

“Snow had fallen, snow on snow,

Snow on snow…”

The trouble was, we were singing this beautiful, haunting winter song….in Memphis. It was 75 degrees outside. In our Christmas finery in that sanctuary, with all of those candles burning away, we were hot. We were sweating. The sanctuary that had been practically glowing with Christmas warmth….was actually a giant, stifling room filled with hundreds of people. All of a sudden, the magic and mystery of Advent and Christmas Eve were lost.

’Tis the season.

’Tis the season when we are surrounded by music that encourages us to celebrate in a certain way…to feel a certain way…to build up the magical feelings of Christmas, no matter what.

Have a holly jolly Christmas. It’s the best time of the year. I don’t know if there’ll be snow (especially around here lately.…) But have a cup of cheer.

“Rockin’ around the Christmas tree. Have a happy holiday. Everyone dancing merrily. In the new-old-fashioned way.”

“It’s the most wonderful time of the year. With the kids jingle belling And everyone telling you be of good cheer. It’s the most wonderful time of the year.”

All of these songs are filled with images of children and adults having a great time, enjoying each other’s company. None of these songs mention the frenzy of the season. None of them detail the billions of dollars that will be spent on Christmas presents. None of them describe the intricacies involved in navigating complicated family dynamics.

Oh, man. I’m sounding a little bit like a Grinch right now, aren’t I?

The thing is, sometimes, in the middle of this season, we don’t feel like having a cup of cheer. Or being told that it’s the hap-happiest season of all.

Sometimes, we have a hard time feeling the joy. Sometimes, joy is the last thing we find at Christmastime. Unless we’re looking in the wrong places.

Today’s text from Isaiah is filled with joy in unexpected places.

“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.”

In this text, it isn’t only humans who are filled with joy — it’s all of creation. The wilderness — typically a symbol of trial and loneliness is filled with joy. The dry deserts will be filled with blooms, and all of creation — every living thing — will be filled with abundant joy and will sing God’s praises.

What a beautiful image! If we’ve seen pictures of the super-blooms in the deserts of California, we can imagine that what we saw in those desert pictures are just a foretaste of what Isaiah prophesies.

For those hearing today’s text when it was written, it seems that it would be incredibly reassuring. But as always, context is key. And the context behind these promises for the people hearing them, is important.

For the people hearing today’s text, they are a people in exile. They are in the middle of the Babylonian captivity. They are wanderers, wondering when (if ever!) they might return to the promised land, to Jerusalem, to Zion. They are a people wondering if they will ever be able to worship God again in a Temple that has been destroyed. They are a people wondering how to be the People of God, possibly without a homeland.

This text offers a lot of promise, but it’s a promise to a people who are feeling more than a little hopeless.

Perhaps if Isaiah had told them, “Be of good cheer!” they might have had some choice words for Isaiah. Perhaps, if Isaiah had said in frustration to yet another groan or sigh, “Just be joyful!” the people of Judah might have felt like slapping him.

Some days are harder than others to keep the hope, harder to find joy.

But perhaps we’ve forgotten what joy is about.

Joy is often linked with happiness, but are they the same thing?

Happiness is an emotion that can come and go. But joy, true joy, is something that is deep within all of us. It is possible to be sad, but to still find joy.

And perhaps the joy comes from the fact that we’ve survived something.

“The conditions under which a superbloom can occur are exceptional. Because some [invasive grasses](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Invasive_grasses_of_North_America), such as [bromes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bromus), will compete with native flowers for moisture, the desert must remain dry enough prior to the bloom to keep them from becoming established. The desert must receive rainfall in the autumn, and this rain must penetrate deep into the [soil matrix](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soil#Composition_of_the_solid_phase_(soil_matrix)) in order to reach a majority of the dormant seeds of flowering plants. If subsequent rainfall is excessive or inundating, the young plants may be carried away in [flash floods](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flash_flood); if it is inadequate, the seeds will die from [dehydration](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dehydration).

Next, the ground in which the seeds lie must warm slowly over the several months which follow the first soaking rain, and the desert must have enough [cloud cover](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cloud_cover) both to shield the soil from intense daytime desert heat and to insulate it from overnight freezing temperatures. Finally, once the newly germinated plants have reached the surface of the soil, the desert must remain undisturbed by strong winds which would uproot the plants or damage the young shoots. The rarity of these events is what makes a superbloom such an extraordinary occurrence.”[[1]](#footnote-2)

The joy that is described in Isaiah is made more significant because of the trials that the People of God have been through.

The joy that we find in the birth of the Christ child is made more significant because we know what he has come into the world to do — to give sight to the blind, to make the lame to walk, to cleanse the lepers, to cause the deaf to hear, to raise the dead, to bring good news to the poor. Because we know how broken this world is, the joy we find in the Christ-child has nothing to do with happiness, but has everything to do with survival and promises.

We read texts of promise like Isaiah in Advent, when the night comes earlier each evening, when it feels like we’re spending more time than usual in darkness, because we need these reminders of the promises made to the People of God so long ago that promise us a world-wide super bloom of a joy-filled and healed world.

The thing is, the people of Judah who heard these ancient words first did eventually see the promises God made through Isaiah come true. They were eventually able to return to Jerusalem. But, the return didn’t mean that everything was complete. They were still a people who grumbled among themselves. They still doubted God’s goodness. They still lacked a Savior. Instead, they were a people who had the memory of their time in captivity and the promises made and kept by God. And so even though they were still a stubborn and sinful people, they continued to look forward to an even greater promise made — the one of Immanuel — God with us.

As one commentary writer says, “this [Isaiah] text does what Advent does: it points backward to old promises, which point forward to a fuller, future joy. We still live in the in-between time, as this prophet’s people did. We are asked to take heart. God will come and save; we will find our Holy way toward home, and our mouths will be filled with no more sighing, only song.”[[2]](#footnote-3)

I don’t know about you, but these days, I am full of sighing and longing. We are a world divided by hostility between nations. We are a nation divided by partisan politics. We are a community divided by interpretations of the 2nd amendment. There are many times in which I read the news and say to myself, “Come, Lord Jesus.” Come into this world and restore us.

For me, I sometimes struggle to find happiness in this season. But I can always find joy in the promises made to us, the people of God, so long ago. I can trust that God is doing a new thing each and every Advent, each and every day.

And so, in the middle of the Christmas songs on the radio encouraging you to be happy no matter what, I offer another song, a new one to me, but maybe not to some of you.

It’s called, “Joy” by Tracey Thorn. Her song describes the ways in which we search for joy in this season.

Her song begins with this verse,

“When someone very dear

Calls you with the words

"Everything's all clear"

That's what you want to hear

But you know it might be

Different in the new year

That's why, that's why

We hang the lights so high

Joy, joy, joy, joy”

Thorn does an amazing job of naming the tension of momentary happiness vs. lasting joy. While the news she wants to hear is good news, she knows that the good news might always go away. And so she lives into that fear and trusts that joy will prevail. “That’s why, that’s why, we hang the lights so high.”

She continues in another verse, saying,

“You loved it as a kid

And now you need it

More than you ever did

It's because of the dark

We see the beauty in the spark"

Thorn names the trust that she has that even though the current situation feels unsteady, she will still insist on finding joy in the moment and holding onto it.

That, to me, is what Advent is about. Searching for the joy of the promises we find in Christ in the middle of the darkness of the world around us. It’s because of the dark, that we see a beauty in the spark.

In a few moments, we will sing, “Joy to the World.” While we traditionally think of this as a Christmas song — meaning, one we should never sing in Advent (I see you, liturgical nerds), if we read the note on the bottom of the page in our hymnal, we’ll see that this song was not originally meant to be a Christmas song. Because Christ’s birth is something that happens not just once 2000 years ago, or once a year, but every day. Every day, we can celebrate the birth of Christ, the Incarnation, Immanuel — God with Us — and what it means for creation — all of creation. Every day, we can find joy in the promises of God. Every day, we can see the beauty in the spark.

Joy to the World, the Lord is come. Let Heaven and Nature sing!

All praise be to God. Amen.

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Superbloom [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Feasting on the Word [↑](#footnote-ref-3)