

**“All creation smiles and jumps for joy”
Isaiah 35:1-10
Brentwood First Presbyterian
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Introduction

For many, Christmas is an annual ritual of sights and sounds that turns the deepest ordinary-time frowns into Christmas-time smiles. And which prompts a yearning and a longing within each of us. What are those sights and sounds? Radio stations play music of love and peace. Malls and shops pullout their red, white, and green. Homes pull out strings of outdoor lights and figurines. Cards and news come in the mail. Homeless shelters and food banks receive more donations than other times of the year. But even before the sun sets on Christmas Day, most of the magic is gone, and sometimes those smiles turn back into frowns. Credit card bills come. The trash can fills up with paper, followed by toys that do not survive the week. Students return to school. Employees return to work. We return to our regular schedule and old habits. Our emptiness returns. And our seeking resumes. The search for God, for meaning, for hope, for anything beyond what we know. So it seems that sometimes during Christmas we are looking for God in all the wrong places. But if the red, white, and green of the malls are not the sights of a Christmas that permanently satisfy, and “Jingle Bell Rock” and “Blue Christmas” are not the sounds of a Christmas which permanently fulfills, what are the sights and sounds of a Christmas that do? What are the sights and sounds which do permanently satisfy and fulfill? Isaiah has the answers to this question.

Isaiah 35:1-10

Movement 1: We need rescue

Global warming has been in the news a lot lately. The distressed environment, plagued by drought, deforestation, and pollution yearns for rescue, and is unable to save itself. Unable to save itself from deforestation and green house gasses which lead to creation of deserts. Most of you know that pollution and deforestation, and the drought and global warming they cause, are not industrial age inventions. Even before the discovery of oil as an energy source, humankind has always been about chopping down trees and turning them into green house gasses. Have you ever pondered why deserts surround the so called oases of civilization near the Nile, Tigris, and Euphrates rivers? They have not always been surrounded by desert. And have you ever pondered why clean water is an issue not just in industrialized countries, but also in developing countries? If we could personify our environment, we would say humankind makes our environment frown.

Our environment is not the only thing which is broken and needs rescue. It is not the only thing which cannot rescue itself. And it is not the only thing which frowns. We frown also, don't we?

We find that American presidents do not belong on pedestals. And churches also are not perfect. An Episcopalian priest I know was recently dismissed by his congregation for alleged unfaithfulness. We wage war on each other, both on large and small scales. And even within our own hearts, we find both wolf and lamb. We frown. We have fearful, frowning hearts.

We hope for and anticipate not just the end of global warming, but also the end of OUR brokenness. We want desperately for a reason to smile.

But we fear those we do not understand. We fear those who disagree with us. We fear our past will catch up with us. We fear loss of job, loss of family, loss of life. We fear an uncertain future. We fear.

We fear because we have
Physically or spiritually weak hands
Physically or spiritually feeble knees

We fear because we are
Physically or spiritually blind
Physically or spiritually deaf
Physically or spiritually lame

We fear because we have
No physical or spiritual voice

And we are not just plagued by fear and physical infirmity. Humanity is not just plagued by empty stomachs. We are also plagued by spiritual emptiness. So we frown.

In today's scripture, Isaiah tells us God comes to rescue those overwhelmed by fear, vulnerability, gastric and spiritual emptiness, and anything else that prevents living effectively and joyously.

But God's Word and presence bring something to both desecrated creation and disabled humanity, bring something to that which was lost. Bring something to the church's grim despair and the modern sense that no newness is

possible. We need rescue. And we cannot rescue ourselves. We need someone to rescue us from our brokenness.

Movement 2: Creation and humanity flourish in the journey

December is full of modern day trips. We get on commercial jets or into cars to go see people we love for Christmas or New Year's. Even when work or illness prevent us from our annual pilgrimages to family and friends, we have these destinations in our thoughts. We hum "I'll be home for Christmas, if only in my dreams."

Christmas has become a family time. Of course, this has its downside. The notion of a family Christmas causes some people pain and depression during December. Some mourn the families they have lost to death or broken relationship. Some grieve the families they have never known. For many, the idea of a family Christmas is what they don't like about the season, because it reminds them of exactly what they do not have. A place where they belong, where they are loved and accepted unconditionally. A place of smiles and laughter.

Advent and Christmas tell us several stories about traveling long ago. Mary and Joseph take that first Christmas trip when they travel to Bethlehem. We hear about the shepherds and sheep running from a nearby field to a barnyard. We read about astronomers making a two year trip from present day Iran to visit Jesus. And in Isaiah today we read about God's people making their way home after 70 years in captivity.

For those with ears to hear and eyes to see, Isaiah describes more than a holiday vacation. Isaiah describes a life journey, a way to our true home in God. A place of unconditional acceptance and love. A love which makes the broken whole. And God is not just at the end of our journey. God is also at the beginning and the middle. God is all along the way. A journey accompanied by joy and smiles and laughter.

We are rescued by God's love from brokenness into wholeness. God's Word and presence bring wholeness to both creation and disabled humanity, bringing hope and life to that which is lost. God invites us out of our numbed endurance and our tamed expectations to affirm that God does what the world thinks is not possible. Advent is getting ready for that impossibility which will permit us to dance and sing and eat and drink, in short, to live not just in the destination but also in the journey.

When God's Word and presence are announced, the impact is immediate. The physically and spiritually blind see, the physically and spiritually deaf hear, the physically and spiritually lame walk, the physically and spiritually unable to speak, shall sing. Those who frown shall smile. God's Word and presence restores humanity's joy.

When God's coming is announced, the rain comes, and the distressed wilderness, which we call the desert, smiles with flowering plants. We hear laughing streams of water where there had once been silent cracked earth and dry river beds. Because springs well up in the middle of the desolate hot sand. A new creation emerges because of God's love. God's Word and presence

restores not just destination but also journey. Causing both destination, and the path to that destination, to flourish. God is present in the beginning, the middle, and the end. And the new creation responds! For we are rescued by God's love from brokenness into wholeness. We are rescued from our frowns into smiles.

Movement 3: We respond to the newness wrought by God

A pilgrimage is a long journey that has great spiritual significance. People of all religions share an idea of the holy pilgrimage where devoted followers journey to sacred sites or places of special significance to their faith. Buddhists recognize sacred sites related to Buddha's life and teachings. Muslims are taught to make at least one pilgrimage to Mecca during their lifetime. In first century Judaism, Jews were required to make three trips to Jerusalem a year. Christians many centuries ago were encouraged to make at least one trip to Rome during their life. Debbie and I learned a few years ago that two pilgrimages to David's cathedral in Wales were considered as good as one trip to Rome.

But today's scripture in Isaiah tells of a different kind of pilgrimage. A pilgrimage from Babylon, where their captors took them almost 600 years before Christ, back to Jerusalem about 70 years later. Not from home to sacred destinations on foreign soil, but from foreign soil to a sacred destination back home. And what a homecoming! Their first exodus from Egypt was fraught with hunger, thirst, wrong turns, and 40 years in the desert. This exodus from Babylon to Jerusalem is a wide, straight highway adorned with flowers, pools of water, and springs of life!

Isaiah encourages captive Israel to go on a journey from Babylon to freedom in God's kingdom. All God's children, all God's creation, are rescued by God from that which enslaves. The blind, the deaf, those who cannot speak, the lame, those with fearful hearts, yes, but also the crocuses, the grass, and the jackals. All have in common the new gift of life. And how does Isaiah say the rescued respond? All of creation, human and otherwise, gather on the road to God, gather with thanksgiving and singing and rejoicing. All come with joy and gladness and smiles. Because it is said that a smile is the shortest distance between two people, and between a human being and God.

Turn now to hymn number 254 in your hymnal. I am going to read, not sing, the words which are NOT in bold, and I want you to read the words which ARE in bold. After you find hymn 254, I want you to close your eyes for a moment before we read this psalm together, for an exercise in imaging.

Try to imagine, while you are reciting the words of this psalm, that you are leaping and dancing and singing with the children of Israel as they travel the highway through the desert from Babylon to Jerusalem. A highway to heaven now edged with streams of water and blooming cactus like we see on the front of the bulletin. Imagine leaping and dancing and singing with the shepherds and the sheep, the astronomers and the camels, as they travel to see baby Jesus in Bethlehem. Imagine sharing the gift of your smile with the person sitting next to you right now. Imagine dancing and singing as you experience Jesus at the Somerville nursing home this afternoon at 3PM. Imagine leaping and dancing with joy as you experience Jesus when you contemplate feeding 150 homeless

this Wednesday at Downtown Presbyterian Church. Imagine leaping and dancing with joy as you invite your friend, your neighbor, or your coworker to hear Jesus in the youth praise band worship next Sunday, and in our Christmas Carol and candlelight worship service on Christmas Eve. Now open your eyes.

After each response in our reading, read with me the response at the top: "I will praise my God all the days of my life." Let us read: ...

Conclusion

The sights and sounds of the coming of God's kingdom are more than red, white, green, and Jingle Bell Rock. Yes, God opens our blind eyes and stopped ears so we can see and hear Jesus in the small blessings, the tiny smiles, and the little words of encouragement. "For love is not found in extravagant gestures, but in a quiet word and gentle smile." And God strengthens our hands and firms our knees, so we can feed the homeless at Downtown Presbyterian this Wednesday. God opens our muted mouths so we can sing to the residents of Somerville Nursing Home this afternoon. God ends our silence so we can finally invite that neighbor, that friend, and that co-worker to worship with us this season. And God turns up the corners of our mouths, into that universal sign of welcome, the smile.

Lord we lift Your Name on High,
Lord we love to sing Your praises,
We're so glad You're in our lives,
We're so glad You came to save us.
You came from Heaven to Earth,

To show The Way,

Lord we lift Your Name on High!

And like the children of Israel 2500 years ago, and like those shepherds and astronomers of 2000 years ago, our response to God's coming in Jesus is to ourselves come to God with singing and leaping for joy. God comes first, and we respond.

All glory be to God, Hallelujah, and all God's children say ...