

Rejoice in the Lord

Isaiah 35:1-10

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I ran cross country in high school. Cross country is a grueling sport, with races ranging from 2-3 miles. Track is also a running sport. In track you run on a uniform surface, an oval loop of 400 meters/quarter mile, and the track is either smooth dirt or even better, an artificial surface that has some springy support built in. Unlike track, cross country takes you on a race that is rarely uniform and never on a smooth surface. One of our dreaded cross-country courses in high school was Mooney Grove, a loop through the Mooney Grove park in Visalia, California. What made Mooney Grove such a harrowing cross-country course was that the final ½ mile of the race was through a long stretch of sand. You all live near the sand, the beach. Have you ever tried to run through sand? I don't mean the hard, packed sand right near the water at low tide. I mean the thick kind of sand you sink into and you have to work just to get your foot out of the sand to take your next stride. Imagine running the last ½ mile of a three-mile race that is through that kind of sand. As if it was not bad enough that we had to run the Mooney Grove course every fall during cross country season, that very course continues to haunt me in my dreams. Countless times I have dreamed I was running, pressing as hard as I can, and I find myself in the sand, just like Mooney Grove. My feet can't move near fast enough. What makes it even worse is it is often not a race in my dream. In my dream I am being chased by someone or something that is intent on causing me harm, if not total destruction, and I flounder as I run through that cursed sand.

Imagine the joy this pastor felt when he opened his bible up to see what the lectionary had in store for us this week, only to find our passage from Isaiah 35 takes place smack dab in the middle of the desert. The desert? Mooney Grove was ½ mile of sand and that caused me fear and trembling, such that even now that sandy track interrupts many a good night sleep. The desert is not just ½ mile. The desert can stretch on and on and on for hundreds of miles. If you are not careful, in the desert you might get turned around and wander for forty years. The desert is the type of place where the devil chases you and tries to get you to give in to all sorts of temptations. Just ask Jesus about that one. The desert is where hardened prophets hang out, guys who aren't afraid of some judgment and wrath, tough talkers like John the Baptist whose message is meant to rattle your nerves as he shouts, "Repent!"

Imagine the joy this pastor felt when he opened his bible up to see that our passage in Isaiah 35 takes place smack dab in the middle of the desert, and the closing verse in this short chapter tells us we will get overtaken in the desert. You cannot outrun things in the desert. It just doesn't happen. Our passage begins in the desert and ends up telling us that we will be overtaken. Surely, I was being sarcastic when I chose as the title of this sermon, "Rejoice in the Lord."

Ah, I hope you know I am not a big fan of sarcasm. The sermon title is sincere. Our passage begins in the desert and ends with being overtaken and yet we experience a pleasant surprise because this is indeed a passage about joy, about great joy, about an abundant joy that overtakes our lives. How can all this happen in the desert?

The imagination of the prophet is amazing here in Isaiah 35. This one, inspired by the Lord, is able to envision a desert, a parched land where there is gladness, a wilderness filled with rejoicing and a wilderness filled with blossoms. Later we hear of waters gushing in the wilderness and streams that appear in the desert. The transformation continues as burning sand becomes a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs, and in the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow. Instead of being lost in the desert, floundering, wandering, facing trials and temptations, a highway will be there. It will not be just any highway. This highway will be called the Way of Holiness. We will be able to walk in this Way. The Way will be safe. No lion or ravenous beast will be on this highway, on the Way. The only ones walking on this Way will be ones who have been redeemed, ones who have been rescued by the Lord.

Did you think I was being sarcastic when I titled a sermon that begins in the desert and ends with being overtaken, "Rejoice in the Lord." Friends, as this highway, as this Way is established in the desert, "The redeemed of the Lord will walk there, and those the Lord has rescued will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away." The passage begins in the desert and ends with being overtaken, but by the time we have journeyed through the ten verses of Isaiah 35 the desert has turned into bubbling springs, the Way of the Lord has appeared for us like a highway in the desert, and when we are indeed overtaken, we are overtaken with gladness and joy. I think I chose just the right title for this passage. "Rejoice in the Lord."

Here is another pleasant surprise about this passage in Isaiah 35, this passage about the desert. Although we might think a desert passage would lend itself to a prophet like John the Baptist, one who appeared in the desert calling on people to repent, this is actually a passage that calls to mind in vivid images the one who came after John the Baptist, the one of whom John said I am not even worthy to untie the sandals of his feet. This passage, set in the desert, calls to mind Jesus. The power of the images of transformation that relate to the desert are matched, if not exceeded, by powerful images of new life for people who have become well acquainted with living in the desert, ones who know intimately the heartbreaking experience of wandering in the wilderness. Did you hear the prophet Isaiah foretelling of a time when the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped, a time when the lame will leap like a deer, and the tongue that is mute will shout for joy? Did you hear those words of the prophet? When you heard those words did you think of John the Baptist? Or did you think of Jesus?

The folks who put together the lectionary passages got it right today. They took the Old Testament passage from Isaiah 35 and they paired it with the gospel passage from Matthew 11. Matthew 11 is a gospel passage that directs our attention to both John the Baptist and Jesus. We are told that when John the Baptist was in prison, he heard about the deeds Jesus was doing, the deeds Jesus was doing as the Messiah, the anointed one, the Savior of Israel. It is hard to read the passage in Matthew 11 without thinking that somehow when John the Baptist heard the deeds Jesus was doing that John was expecting something different from the Messiah, something different from the Savior, something different from Jesus. John, the man of the desert, was he expecting judgment? Listen to the passage from Matthew 11.

“When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to ask him, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?’ Jesus replied, ‘Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.’”
(Matthew 11:2-5)

John came in the desert and his message was prepare for judgment. Jesus came to that same desert and because he was the Messiah, because he was the Savior, because he was the Son of God, his message was “Prepare for life.” John looked for something different, perhaps for judgment, and he asked, “Are you the one?” Jesus came to bring life, so his answer is look at how life is blooming in the desert. The blind see, the deaf hear, the lepers are cleansed, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Jesus calls us to prepare for life. And that Way that is prepared in the desert, that highway that appears in the desert? Jesus said, “I am the Way...I am the Way and the truth and the life...”

This morning I leave you with an image. People are in a desert. In the desert are ones who are blind. There are ones who are deaf. There are ones whose tongues are muted. There are ones whose hearts are broken. There are ones who have been cut off from relationships, pushed to the margins, left behind in the race of life, crushed, bowed down, disappointed, deserted, downcast, lonely, rejected, ones who have been called a failure, ones who hunger, ones who thirst. All this collection of broke down and brokenhearted people are in the desert. And they are trying to run. But you know what it is like to run in the desert. It's Mooney Grove Park all over again. You cannot get the traction you need. Your feet sink and stumble and you work like crazy to go nowhere, and you feel like you are going nowhere fast. You feel stuck. You feel hopeless and helpless. Imagine a huge crowd of people facing the very challenges we all face, running and running and running and we cannot get away from the things we are running from.

And just when we are about to give up hope we look behind us. We look behind ourselves and we see something is gaining on us. Something is coming up behind us rapidly, rushing toward us. And we can't run. We are stuck in the sand and what is behind us is gaining on us fast. We are about to be overtaken...by something good. We are about to be overtaken by something wonderful. We are about to be overtaken by something beautiful, by something filled with hope, by something that will change our lives for the better, and something that will change our lives forever. We are about to be overtaken by gladness and joy. That's what Isaiah tells us will happen in the desert. “Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.”

We are about to be overtaken by something. On this third Sunday of Advent, the Sunday when we light the candle of joy, the promise of God is that we are about to be overtaken with gladness and with joy. And ultimately, it is not just something that overtakes us. Someone overtakes us. John the Baptist, who knew the desert so well, asked Jesus if he was the one. Jesus said, “Tell John the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and good news is proclaimed to the poor.” It’s almost like Jesus is telling us he has spotted us in the desert, hopeless and helpless, stumbling along, stuck with problems we cannot outrun, and he says to us, to all of us, “Hold on. I’m coming. I’m about to overtake you, and when I overtake you get ready, because I’m bringing to you a whole heaping measure of gladness and joy.”

Therefore, the redeemed of the Lord shall return and come with singing unto Zion and everlasting joy shall be upon their head.