

## Light for our Darkness: Rejoice

### Isaiah 35: 1-10

This text seems like an odd sort of text for this Sunday. It doesn't seem like our usual Advent text. It calls us to rejoice even when the Christ child is not quite here. It calls us to celebrate gifts of joy even when we are not quite to Bethlehem yet. It calls us to experience God's resplendent glory even when we are still awaiting the shimmering light of the angels who announce the birth of Christ to shepherds gathered on a hillside. This text from Isaiah calls us to rejoice, to experience new life, to celebrate with joy right now even when we are still in the wilderness, preparing the way for the coming of the Messiah. This text is an odd sort of text, perfect for this odd sort of Sunday, a Sunday when we are almost to Bethlehem but not quite, a Sunday when we are almost to the fulfilled promise of the Christ child but not quite, a Sunday when we are almost there but not quite, an odd sort of Sunday when we catch a glimpse of the celebration that awaits us in Bethlehem, but know we still have a ways to go on our journey. Today is an odd sort of Sunday, with an odd sort of Scripture reading, with an odd sort of tradition: a call to rejoice in the darkness.

And if this crazy in between Sunday wasn't odd enough already, we as people of faith add the cherry on top by lighting a pink candle. For the last couple

of weeks, it's been purple. One purple, two purple and now, purple, purple, pink! That pink candle throws off the rotation. It breaks the routine. It's out of place and we don't know just what to do with this crazy pink candle sitting in the midst of the purple ones. It stands out. It sticks out. It draws the eyes to it and becomes the focus of our attention. And then we soon realize that this odd sort of Sunday with its odd sort of text, and with its odd sort of pink candle have all become wonderful reminders of how the Kingdom of God breaks through the darkness, breaks through the wilderness, breaks through our everyday routines that distract us, reminders that call us to celebrate now, this day and always, the presence of God in our midst, just like Isaiah's vision did for his community of faith all those years ago.

As we remember from last week, Isaiah's community was hurting but now the stakes were raised. Now the community was being taken into exile, not knowing when they would return or even if they would return. Isaiah's community was being taken from their homeland, ripped away from everything that they had known, and were being forced to leave the familiar and travel to an unknown land, as captives, as hostages, as prisoners. Darkness was no longer just surrounding them. It was overtaking them and drowning them in despair.

And in the midst of this darkness and despair, Isaiah throws out this wonderfully odd vision for his community, a vision where the impossible is made

possible through the presence and power of God. He shares with them that dry barren deserts will burst forth with life. Parched lands will be filled with life sustaining water. The creation that was seemingly dead will now celebrate new life and become a beacon of hope and renewal to welcome them home from exile.

And if Isaiah's vision wasn't odd enough already, he puts the cherry on top when he goes on to share the news that it will not only be creation that is transformed. God's people will be transformed as well. The blind will see, the deaf will hear and the lame will leap like deer. The people will be strengthened and comforted because God is here, right here. God is on the way to make things right. So Isaiah calls his community to celebrate in spite of the darkness, tells his community to keep rejoicing, to keep singing songs of joy, to keep filling the world with shouts of God's goodness because God was there, making all things right!

This is good news for Isaiah's community. This is wonderful news for Isaiah's community. This is liberating life-changing news for the community. No need to despair! God is there! But this transforming news falls on deaf ears. This hopeful news falls on blind eyes. This news falls on limbs weakened by the chains that held them down. Isaiah's community, blind, deaf, and lame in every sense of the words, was not ready to hear this liberating vision. They were not ready to move from the darkness. They did not want to rejoice. All they wanted to was to be

left alone to suffer, left alone to wallow, left alone to drown in the darkness. They were not able to move beyond the pain, the suffering, the hurt to embrace the liberating, the strengthening, the life-giving gift that is the presence of God. They wanted to stay in the darkness. They wanted to stay in exile. They wanted to stay confined in their sadness. At that moment, they could not recognize the presence of God in their midst, and so they stayed confined, chained and broken. They looked at Isaiah like he had lost his mind when he shared this wonderfully odd vision, a vision that celebrated the presence and the promise of God, a vision that would bring them hope, a vision that would bring them joy. But none of that mattered. All their attention, all their focus was concentrated on the darkness threatening to overtake them. There was no room for new life. There was no room for joy. There was no room for transformation. All they could think about was how could Isaiah say this things? How could he rejoice? How could he share this odd sort of vision and expect them to celebrate? They had closed their eyes and shut their ears, blocking out the promises and presence of God in their midst. They had forgotten their God and had let the world hold them captive.

But Isaiah would not forget. He knew the power and promise of God's presence. Isaiah knew that when realized, the presence of God would stand out and shake them from their routines. When realized, it would break in and open their eyes to possibilities beyond their limited imagination. The power and the presence

of God would transform, sustain, and bring forth new life in wonderfully odd and unexpected ways. Isaiah knew that God was determined to restore, heal and bring wholeness to the people of God once more.

So when the community told Isaiah that he had lost his mind, Isaiah didn't really care. Isaiah was okay with the fact that everyone thought he was odd. It didn't matter. He was holding firm to the promises of God, the promise of comfort, the promise of strength, the promise of return, the promise of joy. He had experienced the life giving joy of the presence of God in his life and knew that there would be rejoicing in the land once more. The deserts would bloom, streams would flow and the people of God would be brought home once more, welcomed and showed with God's goodness. Isaiah was able to rejoice in the midst of the darkness because he knew that God had the last word. He knew that God was in control. He knew that he was claimed and named as God's very own! So why not sing and shout? Why not rejoice? God was in control! God had the last word!

Isaiah celebrated that the good news for God's people was, is, and forever will be that even though it may seem like they were in exile, even though they may find themselves in the middle of the wilderness, even though it seemed like the dark will overtake them, the people of God will shout for joy because God will transform things and make it right. We as the people of God have experienced this Good News of God in our lives.

Just like Isaiah's joy served as a reminder for his community, it serves as a reminder today for us as well. God will not leave us alone and in despair. God's presence will make it right. The good news is that we know true joy, a joy we can grab onto, hold onto, and never let go. A joy that is not fleeing nor does it only last for a minute then fade away. Through the wonderful life-giving experience of God's healing presence in our lives, we have come to know true joy! And this restoring, healing, transforming joy stands as a promise, a promise for all times. It is a promise of fulfillment. It is a promise of new life. It is a promise of hope. We have the joy of the Lord down in our hearts and no one can ever take that away!

This life giving vision of Isaiah's sticks out and shakes us out of our routines. It stands out and throws off our rotation of going through the motions. It becomes the focus of our lives, giving us hope, giving us peace, giving us joy.

We have the joy of the Lord down in our hearts and we as children of God will rejoice always! No matter what the world says! We know that God is here! We know that the Kingdom of God is in our midst. We know that our God is coming and will make it right! We know the joy of the presence of God in our lives.

So we sing! So we shout! So we will fill the whole world with our joy, joy that restores, joy that heals, joy that is a gift for all the world hurting, broken, and in desperate need for some celebration. We as joyous people of God are called to

proclaim that God is here. We are called to proclaim that God will make it right!

We are called to rejoice in the midst of the darkness that surrounds us.

And when the world looks at us as if we have lost our minds, when the world looks at us as if we were just a little bit odd, when the world looks at us and doesn't know just what to do with us, we will share the good news that the Kingdom of God is breaking in and disrupting the routine of sorrow and despair. When the world looks at us and asks us why we are rejoicing, we will say that the Kingdom of God is throwing off the usual rotation of pain and hurt. We will say that the Kingdom of God is centering our attention on the presence of God that is already among us.

And when the world tells us that we are fools in our outpouring of joy, we won't care. When the world tells us that we are fool to believe that the blind will see, the deaf will hear, and the lame will leap like deer, it won't matter. We will simply respond to their head shaking and the world's comments about our odd behavior by rejoicing even louder because the good news is, that as odd as it may appear, that as odd as it may seem to this broken and hurting world, that is how the Kingdom of God really works! As people of faith, we hold firm to the promise that when the Kingdom of God is fully realized here on earth, the rich will be made poor, and the poor will be made rich, the weak will be strong and the strong will be made weak. When the Kingdom of God is fully realized here on earth, sorrow and

sighing will cease. When the Kingdom of God is fully realized here on earth, there will be great rejoicing in heaven and on earth.

And we will be transformed, shouting with joy and celebrating the presence of God in our midst. We will be restored and welcomed home, showered with goodness of God.

So this day, and all days May we sing and rejoice, knowing that we have the joy of the Lord down in our hearts, and no one can take it away. Amen.