

## Pattern of God's Promise for Joy

### Isaiah 35: 1-10

This text seems like an odd choice for this Sunday. At first glance, it doesn't seem like our normal Advent text. In fact, it calls us to rejoice even before the Christ child is here. It calls us to celebrate gifts of joy before we get to Bethlehem. This out of place piece of Scripture calls us to experience God's resplendent glory even before the angels announce the birth of Christ to some shepherds gathered on a hillside. Like I said, this text is an odd sort of text. However, its oddity makes it the perfect text for this odd sort of Sunday.

Here's why I say this: We are three Sundays into our Advent seasons. We are almost to Bethlehem but not quite. We are almost to the fulfilled promise of the Christ child but not quite. On this third Sunday of Advent, we are almost there but not quite. It is an odd sort of Sunday as we catch a glimpse of the celebration that awaits us in Bethlehem. But we know we still have a ways to go before we reach the stable. Today is an odd sort of Sunday, with an odd sort of Scripture reading. And it includes an odd sort of tradition: a call to rejoice in the darkness by lighting a pink candle!

I know right! The OCD in me kicks in on this Sunday. 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 up the routine. It's out of place. We just don't know what to do with this crazy pink candle sitting in the midst of the purple ones.

Now I'm going to let everyone in on a secret to help us with our need to have everything perfect, to have 2 plus 2 add up to four every time. It doesn't work that way when it comes to the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God defies our logic. It defies our expectations. It shows up in life giving and surprising ways. You see, this crazy odd pink candle is God's way of reminding us just how desperately we need this out place text on this odd sort of Sunday. As people of faith, as we continue to face this hurt and broken world, as we continue to try to be the heart and hands of God here on Earth, we need ways for the Kingdom of God to break through the darkness, to break through the wilderness, to break through our everyday routine. We need ways for the Kingdom of God to find us and remind us of our call to celebrate now, to celebrate this day, to celebrate the ever-abiding presence of God in our midst.

It does this in any number of ways... through this odd pink candle, by calling us to rejoice even though we aren't at Bethlehem yet. But most importantly it breaks through our routine by reminding us to celebrate the pattern of promises given to us by our God, promises for joy, promises for peace, promises for hope. Today and all days, the Kingdom of God breaks through our comfortable routines and reminds us

that no matter how dark it may be, there will always be joy in our hearts. There will always be a reasons to celebrate because our God has never ever left us or forsaken us. And God is not about to start now.

In looking at our text for the day, I'll be the first to admit that it seems out of place. It is almost as if we skipped ahead and read the happy ending while ignoring the hurt and brokenness that surrounds us. But I'm going to let you in on another secret. Even though our Advent journey is not complete, these words of joy from Isaiah are exactly what we need right now. Because when it seems like the darkness is closing in, when it seems like we don't have the strength to carry on, that is exactly the time we need the Kingdom of God to break in and shake us up, to wake us up to the hope, to the peace, to the very joy that has been promised us by our God since the beginning of time. Just like these words did for the people of God all those years ago.

I want to give us all a little background on this text so that we can see that I'm not talking about any ordinary joy. And please hear, I'm certainly not advocating that we grin and bear it even though sometimes it feels like our world is falling apart. The joy I'm talking about in this context is the joy that springs from the very presence of God, a presence that abides with us, a presence that guides us, a presence that tells us time and time again that we are not alone.

As we may remember, Isaiah is writing to a community that was hurting and in need of some hope right now. As the years passed between Isaiah's vision of the

peaceable kingdom and this call to rejoice, the future of the people of God began to look bleaker and bleaker. Then as if they hadn't suffered enough, now the community of Israel found themselves being taken into exile.

They had no idea of when they would return or even if they will return to the land promised to them by their God. At this point in the story, Isaiah's community is being taken from their homeland. They are being ripped away from everything that they had known. They are being forced to leave the familiar and travel to an unknown land, as captives, as hostages, as prisoners. And in the midst of all that despair and darkness, Isaiah shares this wonderfully odd vision for his community. It is a vision where he tells them the impossible is made possible through the presence and power of God. It is a vision where the hard broken seemingly dead ground will burst forth into new life.

Now I don't know about you but if I was the people of Israel, I'm not sure I would have welcomed these words from Isaiah at the moment. They seem flippant and shallow. They seem out of place and yes, I'll say...ignorant. In this odd call to rejoice, Isaiah shares with the people of Israel an almost unbelievable promise... a promise that tells them that dry barren deserts will burst forth with life, that Parched lands will be filled with life sustaining water, that the creation that was seemingly dead will now celebrate new life.

Now you know, this had to be an odd sort of news for the people. They had to be wondering what Isaiah was thinking in sharing this joyful vision. I'm sure it had

to be hurtful in the moment. They wouldn't even hear about their release for at least a few hundred years. And yet here, in the midst of all depressing stuff, Isaiah interrupts their narrative of despair by daring to speak a word of joy, by daring them to embrace a call for rejoicing!

Can you imagine what the people must have been feeling? Like I said, I'm sure the people were thinking Isaiah had lost his mind, wondering if anyone had ever told him to consider appropriate timing for his words. But you see, these words aren't meant to be hurtful or harmful. They aren't meant to be shallow or cold or callous. These are words of faith, a faith that grounded in the presence of God, a faith that has seen God bring God's people out of Egypt. These words are from a faith that has experienced the awe-inspiring love of God and knows, no matter what, the people's sorrow will be turned into dancing.

This call that invites the people to join in with all of creation as it rejoices, this call for all to break forth in new life, cannot and will not wait. It will not wait until things have improved. They will not wait until things are perfect. They will not wait until the world gives them permission to speak. These words that speak to the surprising, amazing, life-change ways in which the Kingdom of God works in our world, works in our lives must be spoken now. Because that is how our God operates. Our God did not wait to come until the world was ready. Our God did not wait until humankind and nations were at peace. God came when the need was great, just like God does for us, for all of creation, each and every day, breaking in,

and reminding us that the light of hope, the light of love will never ever be overcome by the darkness.

Yes, we know it sounds crazy to rejoice in light of the darkness that fills our world. We know it sounds absurd to celebrate when it seems like the whole world is falling apart. I think we as people of faith, would be the first to admit that to sing and shout for joy seems ridiculous when all around us is deep sadness. But you see, we have seen the stone rolled away. We have seen the empty tomb. We have seen the gift of new life when everyone else said there was no hope.

Time and time again, God has shown us that there is a pattern of promises, promises given to us to remind us that we are not alone, a pattern of promises that call us to celebrate despite the darkness that surrounds us, a pattern of promises that tell us that if we reach the end of the story and everything is not okay, then we should know that this is not the end of the story. It is just another new beginning, a new beginning promising hope, promising joy will come in the morning!

So people of God, don't be afraid. Don't despair! Sing songs of great joy because our God is still at work, bringing healing and wholeness to all of God's creation. God is not finished yet! God is continuing to surprise us, to remind us of God's amazing life-giving promises for hope, promises for peace, promises for joy! Our God has not forgotten us or forsaken us. And God isn't about to start now. Darkness and sadness is not how our story ends. This is just a moment in time. This is just a moment in which to turn the page and wait, a moment to wait

for our God to come, a moment to wait and hope. This odd sort of Sunday with its odd text and its odd pink candle is our moment to wait and see what amazing things God has promised to do and will do to welcome us home once more.

Despair and darkness is not how our faith story ends. We have seen the empty tomb. We have seen the stone rolled away. We have experienced hope and joy when everyone else had given up. We know the pattern of promises for joy given to us by our God, promises that will turn our sorrow into dancing.

This past week, I was reminded of these promises on two separate occasions. These experiences range in significance from the unexpected to a very real life from death moment. On Tuesday I checked into Facebook and saw some amazing news that had no explanation other than the grace and healing of God.

A son of a friend had suffered a major heart attack the week before at the age of 22. The doctors had given him a 5 % chance of survival. They told the family later that when their son had first come in their immediate thoughts were What organs can we harvest to save other people? That was on Sunday night.

On Tuesday, this young man had almost completely recovered, mind, body and spirit. On Thursday he was discharged from the hospital with fully functioning heart, lungs and kidneys. And there was much rejoicing among his family and friends.

That's one extreme way the Kingdom of God breaks in and calls us to rejoice. The other example is not so extraordinary. In fact, we would say it is

rather ordinary, just a part of an everyday routine. Another friend of mine shared with me this story this past week. She was telling me about how once a month, her church takes a night at the local homeless shelter. They make dinner and stay overnight at the shelter to make sure everything goes well. Well, this week, she realized she wasn't able to go this week. So she decided to send some leftover carrot cake that she had because come on, at this time of the year, who doesn't have leftover cake.

Anyway, when the crew pulled the carrot cake out for dessert, one of the clients at the shelter said his mother made carrot cake only once a year - on his birthday. And his birthday was that very day!! As my friend was sharing this story with me, she said, "Heather, if the people from my church hadn't been there themselves, I don't think any of us would have believed it. I guess, it just goes to show you that God has a wonderful way of showing up, surprising us and reminding us to celebrate with joy!

The Kingdom of God defies our logic. It defies our expectations. It calls us to rejoice, to celebrate the promises given to us by our God, our God who came long ago to bring healing and wholeness to our world, our God who shows up each and every day, surprising us, reminding us that God is still at work in our work, promises given to us by our God who has promised to come again to make all things new.

In the midst of our sorrow and sighing, joy and gladness comes because our God has never forsaken us nor forgotten us. And God is not about to start now.

Thanks be to God! Amen.