

Isaiah 35:1-10 – Advent 3– The Way of Holiness – December 14, 2025

+In Nomine Iesu+

We're doing it again—saving our worst weather for Saturday night into Sunday morning. It snowed again yesterday. And -5 was the forecast for this morning. If you know a way to make it stop—please let me know. I guess we never know what kind of weather we are going to get around here in December. Two years ago, we had 54 degrees on Christmas Day. This year there are blizzards, snow, wind, and cold.

Our weather doesn't sound at all like our Old Testament Reading today from the Prophet Isaiah. God has something else in mind. Now, I really have grown to appreciate the Prophet Isaiah. He is a master wordsmith and poet. And at chapter 35, he is at his highest and best. This is a passage to drink in—to give thought to each word. Our reading is full of joy and hope—at least for those with ears to hear. We get some serious time with Isaiah in the Advent and Christmas seasons.

And Isaiah offers us a picture of transformation. Now, admittedly, the change Isaiah presents is not about deliverance from freezing cold weather. Rather, it is a change away from the hot, arid extremes of the wilderness wanderings and the burning sand. Exodus imagery looms large as God takes His people from the desert to the promised land.

God reverses the curse over the life of the land in which His people live. His original promises are brought to light again. He turns the dry, dead wilderness into a garden. The deserts are blooming. Life-giving water bubbles up in the dry and barren places. And the land blossoms abundantly.

Here is an anticipation of the Day of the Lord—at least for God's people—reversing the old order of things—and making all things new. And the restoration begins symbolically with the plants. Crocus. Grass. Reeds. Rushes. Bougainvillea. Everything points to the tree of life—and the garden of God. He displays His great glory when what appeared to be a barren waste, springs into vibrant color. And with all this, even the land rejoices with great joy.

This is our first Sunday with the poinsettias in church. We are now fully decorated. And they should remind us to rejoice—as we see our sanctuary adorned with these beautiful plants. They reflect the joy prophesied by the Prophet Isaiah—in tangible and concrete ways.

But the prophecy of Isaiah is just that—a prophecy. It is future to his hearers. And this demands something of us as well. The restoration will be physical at the end. But now, it has begun spiritually. You can see this in the details in verses 3-6 and 8.

Those who are discouraged and fearful will be given courage and strength. The promise is for those who have remained faithful while the nation declined into chaos and disorder and rebellion. They have seen evil triumph again and again—and they have wondered if God's Day would ever come. But they stated true to the one true God—regardless of their circumstances.

But here is Isaiah's promise. God will balance the scales of justice. They will see the day when both wickedness and righteousness will receive their true reward. Isaiah says to

those with an anxious heart, “Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.”

But questions for them—and for us—remain. Will you rejoice in something that you can’t yet see? Can you find joy in anticipation of what is still just a promise? Like John the Baptist sitting in prison—like God’s people in exile—can you wait for God to fulfill these prophecies? This is the call of the Prophet Isaiah in our Old Testament reading today.

Our reading begins with rejoicing. And this is most appropriate for this—the 3rd Sunday in Advent. This Sunday is called Gaudete Sunday, and it reflects the Sunday in Advent that is a little more joyful.

On the third Sunday of Advent, the Advent Candle is pink reminding us to rejoice. It is still reflective and contemplative, but it is *thoughtful with a smile*. We know how all of this resolves. And our smile reflects the good news of great joy that will be for all those on whom His favor rests.

But, let’s be a little more specific. Isaiah says that it begins with the glory of the Lord breaking into the arid land. Land that was desert and desolate will be filled with flowers. Waters will break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert. The burning sand, will become pools of living water. The dry land will be glad. The desert shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing.

So what does all that mean? It means the Lord is compassionate and merciful. It means that God can take what is dry and barren, and turn it into something beautiful and vibrant. It is gospel as divine reversal—as God takes what is dead and makes it alive. This is what He does for us in Holy Baptism. And this is a message for us, His Church. Very specifically, as it says in verse 10, it is the “ransomed of the Lord” that shall return and come to Zion with singing.

In verse four, we hear that this message is for people who have an anxious heart. Here the word really means “the hurried of heart.” To be “hurried of heart” means to be nervous about the future, frantic about life—distracted from the truth of God’s Word—having our eyes set on earthly things. It is anxiety—fear about what might or might not happen.

We are fixated on those things that make us worry. This is for us who have allowed the worries and cares of life begin to choke out true joy and to miss what God is doing for us—and what He will do for us.

To people like this, the Prophet Isaiah brings good news. He tells them be strong, for their God will come and save them—He will come and save us. And in the Nativity of Christ, we find that salvation—the first sign of it. We need simply to wait for Christ with patience, with eyes and ears fixed on His Word. And then, we will find great joy in Him and in the Kingdom of Jesus Christ—in His Church.

But many of us who suffer from this *anxious hurried heart* look for joy in other places. Instead of finding our joy in the Son of Mary, we look for it elsewhere. Because life is hard sometimes, we look for joy in escaping from reality staring at a screen. There are some legitimate uses for smartphones, laptops, televisions. I am not anti-technology—except when it doesn’t work right. But, when they monopolize every moment, we have used them to our detriment.

Screens should point us to what we talked about a few weeks back in Philippians chapter 4. It should point us to things that are true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, and excellent. These are the things we should be thinking about.

But when we become addicted. When we take every moment that we should be giving to others—or if we never have a moment of quiet in our lives—we use them to our great harm. This is the wilderness, this is the desert, it is paradise lost, not paradise restored. So, find something better to watch, to read, to hear. Put them away from time to time. We should not find our joy merely in distraction. This isn't joy. And God wants something better for us.

Other times we try to find joy in pushing others down. Scoffing at their imperfections. Mocking their mistakes. Talking about their sin—without seeing our own. It is the arrogance of voicing every thought about other people—no matter how damaging your words. It is the unkind thought given a sharp point as it is sinfully vocalized. Just because you believe something is true—doesn't make it true—and it doesn't mean it needs to be said.

And these sins in which we tear others down, may give a temporary rush—a bit of pleasure—but the sensation only lasts for a moment. This isn't joy. Looking for something redemptive in all the wrong places often will leave us dry, arid, and in danger of the wrath of God.

Even so, Isaiah leaves us with two real places that we can find joy, especially in this Advent season. First we can find joy in the Church. Martin Luther, in his commentary on Isaiah, believed that the image of living water and blossoming flowers in the midst of a desert, is the Church of Jesus in the midst of the world. And I think he has got it right.

Two comings are described in this chapter—the coming of God to His people—and the coming of God's people to His house. Both are necessary. Everything begins with the ministry of Christ on earth. Jesus says He is fulfilling this text as He heals the sick and opens the eyes of the blind. But His work continues in the church—spiritually—until it is physical again on the Last Day.

The world around us is a wilderness of sin, and the Church is there as an oasis—a fertile land with blooming flowers—where there is rejoicing in the grace of God—at least for those with eyes to see—and ears to hear. In the Church, we have a sample of what is to come in Christ's final Advent. We are not just attending, we are receiving. Heaven meets earth in a mystical union. Creation experiences the eternal. We worship with the saints above—with angels and archangels.

Christ has come that we might come to Him. And as we gather around the pure Word of God, and His true Sacraments, Jesus grants to us the forgiveness of sins and regenerated hearts. And it is only this divine restoration which can offer us true joy and peace. With God's work, we begin to see what is to come. And it is in these beginning stages of our salvation that we can hope for the day when He does the stuff we hear about from Isaiah.

As the Church celebrates Jesus' Advent—and His blessed Nativity—we are comforted with joy in this life, and joy in the life to come. Not just simply warm feelings, but the true deep joy that comes from waiting for the final salvation of God. This is the hope that the Church alone gives to those with faith in Jesus Christ.

And secondly, we can find true joy in what Isaiah calls “the way of Holiness.” This is the way that the redeemed of the Lord walk. And here Martin Luther says that there are “internal flowers and delights there, but these are not visible, namely confidence, peace, life, a cheerful conscience, things that are not seen. But it does shine outwardly with obedience, love, humility, etc., which do not seem great in the eyes of the world.”

God has not delivered us from sin so that we can simply sit in our saved condition until the day we die. In our obedience—which is the natural outcome of gratitude—we find great joy. Joy in living lives obedient to the Word of God. Joy in being faithful to His call, to His law, to His standards of living. Joy in serving those God has placed around us.

Isaiah’s message of reversal is promised for those—and only those—*who walk on the way*. *The way of holiness* is the way of Christ, and it is narrow and it is strict. It is as Jesus said, “Blessed is the one who is not offended by me.” Frankly, many will prefer the way of sin. The way of amusing ourselves with sin. The way of putting others down to make ourselves feel better. The way of the world around us. But that is the way back to the desert. Back to the dry ground with dead stumps.

So, these are my questions for you today. Can you hear what the Prophet is saying? Will you walk in the way of holiness? Can you find contentment in the promises of God? Can you live in the wilderness while you await paradise? Can you read Isaiah with a thrill of hope?

When we abandon all of our excuses for why we can’t wait—why we can’t be hopeful—why we can’t be obedient—why we won’t follow Jesus—joy rushes into our hearts. We are comforted by His gracious promises. And we experience the transformation of our gloomy and anxious hearts. The wilderness of our souls blossoms abundantly with His grace and truth.

It is as the Prophet Isaiah says, “And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.” In the name of Jesus. Amen.

+*Soli Deo Gloria*+