

**Is There Any Room for Joy?
Isaiah 35:1-10
Third Sunday of Advent
December 15, 2013**

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Oh, everything is out of place!

I don't know about you, but this piano, while wonderful is causing me to re-route my normal pathway. I have to go this way to get to the podium. But when I go this way...there is a tree and an Advent wreath. Everything is out of place!

Oh, nothing is where it should be!

And at home?

Oh, let's don't even talk about home! I have to be careful as I turn around the rocker lest I knock an ornament off the tree—or God forbid, know the whole tree over! I can barely find my Sunday morning coffee mug, the one I drink my coffee from EVERY Sunday morning, because of all the Christmas mugs that are out. There are wires running all over the kitchen and across our doorway—a trial lawyer's dream come true—to make sure all the lights have power! The pictures are all re-arranged.

I can't find anything.

Everything is moved.

Everything is out of place!

Oh, it's the most wonderful time of the year!

And it really is. Even—especially when everything is out of place! We just get used to seeing things in the same place, day in and day out. Sometimes it is the out of place that catches our attention.

Sometimes, it's the things that are out of place that really capture our attention!

I have to confess that as I worked on this sermon I had a series of pictures that I wanted to show. But where? Where was no place to put the projector, a screen! So I will try to share them with you. They are pictures of things that are not where they should be, like parking meters in a cemetery! Sometimes it is the things that are out of place that catch our attention!

That is how it is with our Isaiah passage this morning. Oh, we really can't see it because we just hear a portion. We really don't recognize it because we have been hearing these kinds of prophetic utterances from Isaiah throughout Advent. But when we back up, when we are able to see the surroundings, then this passage looks just a bit...strange!

The passage we heard this morning is out of place chronologically. At least in the series we are going to hear them! When we turn to the Bible and read Isaiah, with our

modern minds we just make some assumptions. We assume that Isaiah wrote it; we assume that it was written over the course of a few months, maybe even a few years.

But that is not at all the case with this book. Scholars now recognize at least 3 different “Isaiahs” found in this one book. There is a prophetic voice warning about the calamity to come—that is what we heard the past 2 weeks—and will hear again next week; there is an Isaiah that wrote from the time the nation was in exile—the passage we heard today, and a third Isaiah which came about after the exile, after people had returned home. And this didn’t take place in a few months, or even a few years. Think a few centuries! So it is obvious that Isaiah isn’t one person. It is a compilation of many people; the work of a wonderful editor who put them all together.

But our passage also stands out in the context in which it is written. It is like a parking lot in a graveyard! It is like a playground in the middle of the street!

We hear these verses full of joy, but hear what comes in the chapter just preceding:

The Lord has a day of vengeance, a year of vindication by Zion’s cause.

And the streams of Edom shall be turned into pitch, and her soil into sulfur; her land shall become burning pitch.

Night and day it shall not be quenched; its smoke shall go up forever. From generation to generation it shall lie waste; no one shall pass through it forever and ever. But the hawk and the hedgehog shall possess it; the owl and the raven shall live in it.

He shall stretch the line of confusion over it, and the plummet of chaos over its nobles.

They shall name it No Kingdom There, and all its princes shall be nothing.

Thorns shall grow over its strongholds, nettles and thistles in its fortresses. It shall be the haunt of jackals, an abode for ostriches. Wildcats shall meet with hyenas, goat-demons shall call to each other;¹

That is the tone, the message that Isaiah has been delivering. He has been proclaiming God’s judgement on the sins of the people, the punishment for the litany of their sins. They are in the middle of nowhere! They are getting what they deserve! So there!

And then....

Suddenly....

We move from streams of burning pitch to blooming deserts. We go from generational wasteland to the glory of the Lord; from demon goats to a lion free highway; from “No Kingdom There” to the Kingdom of God; from judgement to deliverance; from exile to the Holy Way home; from despair to joy!

Into the middle of this desolation and despair we find the word joy no fewer than 3 times in this translation!

¹ Isaiah 34:8-14, NRSV

It is so out of place!

It is out of place in time, in this book, in our lives!

That is the thing about joy. It turns up in the most unexpected places. Frederick Buechner reminds us that *“Happiness turns up more or less where you’d expect it to—a good marriage, a rewarding job, a pleasant vacation. Joy on the other hand, is as notoriously unpredictable as the one who bequeaths it.”*²

Joy turns up where we least expect it—in the middle of a desert, in the middle of a hospital room, in the middle of a funeral—places where no one in their righty mind would expect to discover joy. But there are those moments when we are just surprised by it.

C.S. Lewis is well known to most of us. We have read, or seen, his wonderful story, *The Chronicles of Narnia*. We have been blessed by his theological writing such as *Mere Christianity* and *The Screwtape Letters*. And with that it would be easy to believe that he was a theologian by training. The reality however is that he was a professor of literature and classic philosophy at Oxford. He hung around with J. R.R. Tolkein of *The Fellowship of the Ring* fame. He was a man well acquainted with words—what they mean, how to use them.

So it is interesting, that this man—so well versed in the English language, when it came time to pen his spiritual autobiography, chose to entitle it, *Surprised by Joy*.

Surprised! He wasn’t looking for it; didn't expect to find it, nor God. But he found both—together!

Perhaps it is the unexpectedness of it all that makes it possible. So much of our time we are so consumed with what we are doing, how we are doing, how others perceive how and what we are doing, that we have little room for joy to surprise anyone, let alone us. I am coming to believe that one of the secrets to finding room for joy in our lives is when we give up our selfishness, our self-consumption.

This is a season of joy and children—and the two often go hand in hand. You only have to watch our children. They are so self-unaware! They really are oblivious that they have chocolate on their cheeks, that their dress is pulled up over their head, that there is something important going on! They are just....them! And it is that openness to life, to the world, to joy that makes them so wonderful.

But as we grow up, we learn what isn’t acceptable. We learn that we have to make sure that our zippers are zipped and our faces clean and that we only speak at the appropriate time in an appropriate manner. By the time we are adolescents we are almost consumed with our image, because it is who they are. *“I see the me I think you see.”* That is why they so want to meld into the mass, to not stand out, to be invisible. That is why so many of us adults do the same thing. We are who we think you see! We are so in the way, so terrified, so consumed with who, with what you see. We can’t recognize joy unless it springs up in front of us.

² Frederick Buechner. *Wishful Thinking*. (Harper and Row:New York, 1973,) 47.

It is when we are willing, able to let go, to give ourselves totally to the moment, to what we are doing. Phil Jackson, the legendary NBA coach tells how his sister came by one evening after a game and said to him that as she was watching the game she started crying because *“I realized that this is exactly what you are meant to do.”* Jackson goes on to say, *“That’s when I come alive, on the basketball court. As the game unfolds, time slows down and I experience the blissful feeling of being totally engaged in the action...My mind is completely focused on the goal, but with a sense of openness and joy.”*³

Not on himself, not on how he looks, or even on who is winning. He has a sense of openness—and that opens him to joy. We have to have that openness, which means that sometimes we have to be willing to put away happy to find room for joy. That seems a bit strange because we so often see happy and joy as synonyms. They mean the same thing. Happy-happy-joy-joy!

But they are not the same thing! We often confuse joy with happy; too often we settle for happy. But they are different. The root of happiness is *hap*, meaning chance (as in happenstance or haphazard.) Happiness depends on things going our way, whereas joy is based on the knowledge of the presence of God-with-us at all times, from the very beginning. I love the way that my friend John Ballenger makes the distinction. He says, *“Happiness is rooted in circumstances, but Joy is rooted in transcendence.”* “Happiness is rooted in circumstances, but Joy is rooted in transcendence.”

You see, happy depends on what is going on around you. Happy depends on what is going on around you, but joy—joy is rooted in what you are, in whose you are. Joy is deep. Happy is a pine tree, but joy is an oak. Happy will change with the storms, but joy will endure the storms. Happiness can be manufactured, but joy is gift! Joy is something we can celebrate even when things are not going our way, even in the midst of grief and sadness.

For you see, joy shows up in the most unexpected places—if only we will find some room for it. If we are willing to move our selves, our happiness, our expectations—then we might discover joy—even in our lives.

Anne Sexton writes about that in her poem “Welcome Morning.” She writes,

*There is joy
in all;
in the hair I brush each morning,
in the Cannon towel, newly washed,
that I rub my body with each morning,
in the chapel of eggs I cook
each morning,
in the outcry from the kettle*

³ Phil Jackson. *Sacred Hoops*. (Hyperion:New York, 1995) 202-203.

*that heats my coffee
each morning,
in the spoon and the chair
that cry "hello there, Anne"
each morning
in the godhead of the table
that I set my silver, plate, cup upon
each morning.*

*All this is God
right here in my pea-green house
each morning
and I mean,
though often forget,
to give thanks
to faint down by the kitchen table
in a prayer of rejoicing
as the holy birds at the kitchen window
peck into their marriage of seeds.*

*So while I think of it
let me paint a thank-you on my palm
for this God, this laughter of the morning
lest it go unspoken.*

*The joy that isn't shared, I've heard,
dies young.*

Oh, there is joy all around us—if we have eyes to see! On our kitchen table, in our office, in our car, in our lives. Even in the middle of the desert parts of our lives! It is there, just waiting for room to break forth!

The joy that isn't shared dies young. But the joy that is shared? Can you imagine? A road will be built that even I can't get lost on! William Treadwell said, *"If we can convince people that we are onto something that's full of joy, they'll stampede one another to follow us."*

On that morning long ago, the angels proclaimed, "Behold, I bring you tiding of great joy which shall be to all people." Even to us, even this day!

Is there any room in our lives for that kind of joy? Is that news that we might share?