



**"Even the Desert Will Rejoice"**

**Scripture – Isaiah 35**

**Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones**

**Sunday, December 12, 2021**

When Anne was young, her father would take her hiking. A favorite place was the woods near their home. They trekked up an old dirt road and when they reached the top of the hill, they had a spectacular view of the Minnesota fields and river bluffs.

One year, in late winter, when the snowdrifts were shrinking, she and her dad bundled up in coats and boots and mittens and set off. He told her there would be a surprise for her at the top of the hill. When they reached the summit, her dad gave her a snow picnic. He built a fire and they roasted a few marshmallows and then put Hershey bars on graham crackers to make s'mores. How many love those gooey chocolate messes?

The s'mores were the treat, but not the surprise. After they gobbled their sticky treat, her father led her across some large rocks, to show her something. When they reached the other side of the rocks, Anne caught sight of a splash of purple. Pushing up through the snow wild crocuses blazed bright. It was a sign that spring was on its way.<sup>1</sup>

In today's passage, the prophet Isaiah shares his vision with the Hebrew people. He says, "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing."

In Isaiah's vision, the crocus symbolizes the coming of a new day for people whose spirits were crushed. They were living in a foreign land, family members had been killed, and their homes demolished. To every reasonable person it appeared to be the end of their culture and the demise of their religion. But Isaiah declared that it was *not* the end. He has had a vision. As the blooming of the crocus marks the winding down of winter and the coming of spring, Isaiah envisions the bitter days of exile being replaced by the blossoming of a new season.

To peek through the blinds and provide a glimpse of what is coming, the prophet employs poetry to illustrate the new day. Lodged in the mind of each listener was the story of the Exodus. They knew that, centuries earlier, Moses had liberated the people from Egypt and led them through a harsh wilderness before they reached their destination. Further, they knew that if they were ever able to escape the clutches of Babylon and make their way back home, they would have to traverse a harsh, barren landscape of the wilderness. However, the prophet says that a day is coming that will be so glorious, that the wilderness will flourish and even take part in the celebration.

And that is only part of the story. The weak will be mistaken for weight lifters and the fearful will have the courage of Navy seals. Isaiah says, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. The eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame will leap like deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy." To defeated people who could not see beyond the nightmare they were living, Isaiah divulged a dazzling dream.

But can't you just hear some of the reactions to the prophet's enchanting vision?

"Did you hear Isaiah? That man is delusional! There is no reason to hope."

"Crocus, shmocus! Misery abounds. Never again will we see any signs of spring."

"The weak will become strong and the fearful courageous? Sure they will, Isaiah. And I'll sprout wings and fly!"

Of course, history proved the naysayers wrong. Despite the long odds, those who clung to the vision of hope saw their dream come true. The people were liberated, they returned home, and rebuilt their lives.

Of course, Isaiah's vision is not simply a relic of ancient times. It is a timeless message of hope for us because God always seeks to lead us to a better day. And hope sparks joy.

In our day, if you choose to be a cynic, you can stack up plenty of evidence for despairing about the future and squelching all joy. The coronavirus has mutated again, our political environment is toxic, we are rapidly overheating our planet, depression and anxiety among youth have doubled during the pandemic, social media pass along lies that parade as truth, white supremacy groups are on the rise and the list appears to have no end. What is your darkest concern? Does it even make sense to speak of joy at such a time as this?

It is vital to remember that God neither determines the course of our lives nor the events of the world. We are free to make choices that lead us closer to God's dream or further away from it. God calls, urges, challenges us to lean into a new future whose foundations are compassion, beauty, justice and peace. God whispers of new possibilities for transforming our lives and making much needed changes in our world. As we embrace new possibilities, it increases our hope which escalates our joy.

Don't fall for the idea that joy is reserved for happy times when all is well. "All is well" times are short-lived. Yet, in almost every situation you can find joy. Joy is something deeper than happiness and is not dependent on present circumstances. When a family buries their loved one, they are not happy. They grieve their loss. And yet, in nearly all of the hundreds of memorial services I have officiated, joy is present. There is joy in celebrating the life their loved one lived, there is joy in the love and support individuals give to one another, and there is joy in their faith that physical life on earth is not all there is.

At the Last Supper, Jesus was distressed that he was about to be betrayed and murdered, but he spoke of joy because his bond with God and his bond with his disciples was so deep and so true and so right.

The Apostle Paul was imprisoned in Rome and facing death. Yet, when he wrote his letter to the Philippians from his jail cell, he wrote, "Rejoice in the Lord always." He was not happy about his lot, but throughout his tribulations he maintained a joyful spirit. How? His joy was rooted in his conviction that "Nothing can separate us from God's love."

On Friday night, devastating tornadoes left a path of destruction in their wake. A candle factory in Kentucky was reduced to rubble and many lost their lives. There was a group of women trapped in the rubble. They were not only engulfed in the rubble but in darkness because it was 10 o'clock at night. Women were crying and screaming, but Kyanna Parsons Perez told the women, "We're going to be all right. We'll be rescued. Women continued to cry and all were losing hope, But Kyanna said, "Listen, in two hours it will be Saturday and it's going to be my birthday. I'm turning 40 in a couple of hours and you gotta sing Happy Birthday to me. And she made them sing. It wasn't "A Mighty Fortress is Our God," but it helped them to hang on until they were rescued.

Albert Einstein said, "How many people are trapped in their everyday habits: part numb, part frightened, part indifferent? To have a better life, we must keep choosing how we are living." In a similar vein, Henri Nouwen said, "Joy does not simply happen to us. We have to choose joy and keep choosing it every day."

If you are struggling to find joy, here are some practical things you can do:

- List five things for which you are grateful.
- Pick up your phone and call a friend.
- Go outside and soak in the details of God's creation.
- Remind yourself that you do not live in Afghanistan.
- Listen to beautiful music. Even better, sing music that lifts your soul.

Two weeks ago we returned to congregational singing for the first time in 20 months. Because of my mask, you did not notice, but on one of the hymns, I choked up and could not get some of the words out because the music and the lyrics sparked something joyful within me. I would even dare to say it was a moment when I was aware of God's Spirit flickering within me.

If you are anxious or distressed or despairing, there is a simple formula for increasing your joy. Do something for someone else. One of the reasons that joy has become such an integral part of Christmas is because of the season's emphasis on giving. God gives us the precious gift of Jesus, and to express our thanks, we give to others.

If you give a gift to someone and expect a gift in return, there is only so much joy in that. It's too much like an unspoken contract. I give to you and I anticipate that something will be coming my way. There is definitely joy in affirming our love for one another. However, our joy is far greater when we give to someone who does not expect it.

Bishop Desmond Tutu joked that God must not have a comprehensive understanding of math. According to the laws of mathematics if you give to another, it should subtract from yourself. But in fact, when you give, it adds to yourself. Giving increases your joy.

If you make a financial contribution to the Christmas Offering or Christmas Boxes or Echo Gifts, you can do it as an obligation. But it will put a smile on your face and a glow in your soul if you contemplate the joy you will be giving to the recipients of your generosity – people you will never meet. It will lift *their* spirits to know that there are good people who care. And it will lift *your* spirits to know that you are one of those people.

Back in the day of propeller aircraft, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. flew from New York to London and the flight took 9 hours. However, on the return flight, he was surprised to learn that the flight would take 12 hours. At first, that confused him because he knew the distance from London to New York was the same as the distance from New York to London.

So, early in the flight when the pilot walked through the cabin to greet the passengers, King asked him about this discrepancy. The pilot said, "When we leave New York, the winds are in our favor; we have a strong tail wind. When we return to New York from London, the winds are against us; we have a strong headwind. But there's no need to worry because our four engines are fully capable of battling the winds."

Reflecting on his experience, King said, "At times in our lives the tail winds of joy, triumph, and fulfillment favor us, and at times the head winds of disappointment, sorrow, and tragedy beat unrelentingly against us. We must decide whether we will allow the winds to overwhelm us or whether we will journey across life's mighty Atlantic with our inner spiritual engines equipped to go in spite of the winds. This refusal to be stopped, this determination to go on living 'in spite of,' is the...(determined belief that) no wind of adversity can blow one's hope away."<sup>2</sup>

You cannot have hope and remain dismal. Hope paves the way for joy. Keep your eyes searching for crocuses.

#### NOTES

1. Anne Sutherland Howard, "Where's Your Crocus?" Day1.org, December 12, 2013.
2. Martin Luther King, Jr. "Shattered Dreams," July 1, 1962.