



**Light a Candle of Joy
Group Curriculum
December 18, 2016
Sermon Passage: Luke 1:46-56
Curriculum Passage: Isaiah 35:1-6, 10**

Introduction

In the December 7, 2016 edition of the BreakPoint Daily blog of the Chuck Colson Center for Christian Worldview, author Eric Metaxas offers insight about the way we engage the Christmas season that is quite different from the normal fare. In a post entitled, “Too Much Christmas, Too Little Advent?” Metaxas addresses the joy of anticipation:

Even before Thanksgiving, Christmas songs blare from our radios; catalogs arrive even earlier. Department store Christmas trees often go up right after Halloween. After weeks of carols and cookies and parties, Bottum notes, Christmas “arrives as an afterthought: not the fulfillment, but only the end, of the long yule season...”

In effect, we are celebrating Christmas every day, just like the little girl in the story. And many of us get just as sick of this daily “Christmas” as she did, although we don’t fling gifts at people, I hope.

Now how on earth did this happen? Well, as Bottum notes, “every secularized holiday tends to lose, in public contexts, the meaning it holds in the religious calendar.”

Advent—the traditional lead-up to Christmas—has vanished, culturally speaking. Its disappearance has left “a hole, from Thanksgiving on, that can be filled only with fiercer, madder, and wilder attempts to anticipate Christmas,” Bottum writes.

Sadly, he’s right. If we want to celebrate Christmas properly—with “disciplined anticipation” as Bottum puts it--perhaps we need to cut back on all the secular celebrations (if we possibly can—they won’t go without a fight), and make the observance of the days of Advent front and center in our celebrations.

Advent “proclaims an advent—a time before, a looking forward—and it lacks meaning without Christmas” at the end of it, Bottum explains. Christmas, “in turn, lacks meaning without the penitential season of advent to go before it.”

This is why Advent celebrations, both at home and in churches, focus on scriptures that anticipate the coming of Christ.

In Micah, we read, “But you, O Bethlehem . . . from you SHALL come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel...”

And in Matthew, Joseph is told that Mary “WILL bear a son, and you SHALL call his name Jesus ...”

In our passage this week, we look at the significance of anticipation in experiencing the joy of Christmas. Our passage is found in **Isaiah 35**.

Biblical Background

As we mentioned in an earlier guide for this series, Isaiah’s prophetic career spanned the reigns of four different kings: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. Each of those kings displayed their own unique path in faithfulness to God. Where Uzziah and Jotham began their reigns with faithfulness and obedience to God, the end of their kingdoms were characterized by arrogant rebellion and idolatry. Ahaz was the most wicked of the four kings, with no regard for God’s statutes. Ahaz replaced an allegiance to God with a determined pursuit of multiple forms of paganism. Hezekiah, on the other hand, was a force for worship reform in Judah, drawing the people back to God and attempting to rid the land of pagan altars.

Our passage for this week occurs during the reign of Hezekiah. The specific kingdom pressure at hand was the threat of Assyrian siege and how Judah would fortify itself against attack. The two primary options were to either trust in the faithful goodness of God to protect His people or to forge an alliance with another earthly kingdom that was a military power – in this case, Egypt. The kings prior to Hezekiah had chosen the earthly, man-managed solution of political alliances. Hezekiah, however, planted his feet and those of the collective kingdom in the soil of relying on God’s sovereign faithfulness.

As a part of Isaiah’s prophecy during this particular historical situation, he speaks repeatedly about the coming judgment of God on Judah for their rebellion against and rejection of God. However, inherent in every proclamation of judgment is the glistening red thread of redemption of the remnant of God’s people that do not reject God and choose faithfulness. In our passage this week, one of those promises for the redemption of the faithful is placed squarely in the context of the joy of the coming Messiah.

The Text

Chapters 34 and 35 in Isaiah actually serve as one unit. The two chapters depict the two options for the final outcome of the world. Chapter 34 details the severity of God’s wrath against the nations, which refers to all of those outside of His covenant people. The nations in chapter 34 are represented by Edom. The overwhelming idea is that the prosperity and success of the nations will be brought to ruins as a result of God’s judgment. With that in mind, chapter 35 serves as a sort of mirror image to that judgment as Isaiah describes the coming days of God’s people.

“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. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God.” (Isaiah 35:1-2)

The wilderness is used throughout Scripture as a metaphor for spiritual lostness, desolation, hopelessness, and an absence of blessing/provision. In a stark contrast to the contents of chapter 34, in which the lavishness of the nations is turned to ruin, Isaiah now remarks that that which is barren and lost is suddenly teeming with blessing. Not only will that which was barren suddenly explode with life and blessing, there will be a response: rejoicing with joy and singing. Because they have the same root word, “rejoice with joy” is a phrase of intentional emphasis and celebration. Isaiah communicates that the abundant joy will be so magnificent and overwhelming that it will transform the lives of God’s faithful remnant. Scholar John Oswalt notes, “We human beings keep thinking we can produce joy on our own. But we never can. Joy is always a by-product of the presence of God in his world. When we, through our lack of trust, hold him at arm’s length, the end result is desolation. It is only when we turn to him, recognizing the uselessness of all other help, that we can perceive his coming to us and find joy in becoming complete with him.”

Isaiah continues to say that God will pour glory on those who are faithful to Him. Notice that glory is received by God’s creation; it is not created by God’s creation for its own selfish purposes. Any sense of glory that the creation creates for itself is a counterfeit. The result of the glory that God gives is the radical transformation from the desert’s barrenness to the likes of Lebanon, with its majestic cedars, and Carmel and Sharon. Carmel refers to the mountain, while Sharon is the fruitful plain that is nestled at its base. These images to Isaiah’s original audience stand as polar opposites of reality. The difference between the two, as Isaiah points out, is the glorious presence of God among His people.

“Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who have 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.’” (Isaiah 35:3-4)

The images of weak, lifeless hands and trembling knees communicate much. The idea is being reduced to powerlessness in the face of an enemy so violently powerful that any perceived hope of victory is impossible. In the face of such overwhelming odds, the natural response is bowing one’s head in defeat. This is the reality of those who exist apart from God. In the nation of Judah’s history at this point, specifically, the immediate application is that the weakened hands and trembling knees are the plight of those who rely on political alliances for protection instead of the faithfulness of God. In a fuller, more eternal sense, however, the meaning is clear: While trials and difficulty exist in this world, God is the avenger of His people in perfect might and limitless wisdom. He makes strong that which is weak, perfects that which is broken, and calms the heart that is ravaged with anxiety and dread.

To all those that are paralyzed with the opposition and hopelessness of this world, God’s promise resonates deeply. “He will come and save you.” It is a short, succinct sentence that is pregnant with redemptive glory. Because we cannot get to Him, He comes to us for the purpose of our salvation. He does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. These words from Isaiah to the panicking Hebrews in Judah, in light of their recognized disobedience under the reform of Hezekiah and the threat of military occupation from without, crystallize both their need for help beyond themselves and the singular source from which

that help can come. It comes from God alone. If only that day of salvation would come! If only that day of salvation were already here! If only the threats before our eyes were already vanquished! Such were the cries of the desperate hearts of the Hebrews.

*“Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy.”
(Isaiah 35: 5-6a)*

In the previous verses, Isaiah notes the promise that God will come to save His people. His words are obviously future-focused, but the duration of time between Isaiah’s words and the fulfillment of the promise was a question for the Hebrews. How long would it be before God would come and save His people? To that end, Isaiah provides some signs by which the people of God would know that God had come for them.

Throughout the prophecy of Isaiah, the conditions of blindness and deafness are used to speak of infirmities of both a physical and a spiritual nature. In the immediate context of Judah, the blind eye opening and the deaf ear being unstopped referred to the realization of trusting God over other alliances. From the spiritual perspective, it also referred to an end of the idolatry that had long plagued the Hebrews, in favor of exclusive, faithful worship of God alone.

The further metaphors of lameness and a muted tongue add to the sense of infirmity of the Hebrews. Such infirmities could limit their participation in the worship of God at the temple, as well as hinder their fellowship with the rest of their Hebrew brothers. The clear implication is that God would restore His people, not just to wholeness, but to abundant living. The lame would not merely walk, they would leap for joy! The mute would not only be able to speak, but they would sing at the top of their lungs, joyfully praising their Healer and their God!

These signs became so significant in the life of the Hebrews from Isaiah’s prophecy onward as they anticipated the coming Messiah, that when John the Baptist sends two of his disciples to inquire whether Jesus was the Messiah or if they should wait for another, Jesus’ response was simply:

“And he answered them, ‘Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.’” (Luke 7:22-23)

The most significant result of God coming to save His people, though, is captured by Isaiah in verse 10.

“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.” (Isaiah 35:10)

The introduction of the name “Zion” raises the significance of the passage from a temporal deliverance to an eternal. Again, John Oswalt poignantly states:

The end of the Holy Way is Zion the Holy City. The result of supernatural protection and provision, but most of all, of redemption, is a gladness which will drive away all sadness forever. This is the apex of the eschatological vision: a day when the people of God can be set free from their own sins and the sins of others, when they can come home to their God and be fully restored to His image, when a lifelong struggle to avoid grief and pain will be ended in their being overwhelmed by gladness and joy. This is the hope of biblical faith. To be sure, there are foretastes in this life, foreshadowings of what is to come. Furthermore, there is a sense in which it is true that virtue is its own reward. But if the faith is shorn of its eschatological promises, what remains is but a shell. If God is God at all, then we may believe all His promises.

What Isaiah 35:10 envisions is Revelation 21. Where death is no more, nor is there any pain, and every tear is wiped away by the One in whom there is power to heal every wound. The people of Judah questioned when their current predicament would be brought to an end by God. God’s concern was infinitely greater, in the defeat of their true enemy, not merely the one on the other side of a sieged wall.

The Text in Life

So this is what the joy of Christmas anticipates. Joy at Christmas is not merely a feeling of giddiness at the appearance of twinkling lights, shimmering wrapping paper, and the warm glow of seasonal candles. The joy of Christmas has in mind both the reason for which joy is so longed for, as well as the fulfilled promise that brought joy into the world. With the birth of Christ, the promise of God to free His people, recorded in so many places including our text, began its fulfillment. Hope became flesh. The bright light in the darkness that had been slowly getting brighter throughout the experience of God’s people in the Old Testament now exploded into a light that the darkness could never again overcome.

When we read the passage from Isaiah, some notable things leap off the page that confirm that our experience as believers today closely resembles that of the Hebrews in Isaiah’s day. First, Isaiah addresses those whose hearts are filled with anxiety. Is that not us, as well? There are so many things that cause us grief and worry in the world around us. We can be dismayed by the rejection of God, degradation of one another, the pervasive sense of hate all around us, that our hearts are filled with dread. This dread takes many forms: relationship problems (or lack of relationship), work problems, conflict that we don’t want to have to resolve, obvious signs of our diminishing health, wondering what kind of world our children will inherit from us, and so on. It drowns us and suffocates us at times. Just like these Hebrews, however, Isaiah says to us, “Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.” We know that He will because of why we celebrate Christmas....Christ CAME!

Second, because Christ came, we know that God has a plan that is underway for our restoration and our eternal blessing. There is nothing in this world that is beyond His reach of healing. There is nothing in our lives that He is not only not aware of, but also not

intimately concerned with. Christ's coming is our joy because it is the tangible proof that God loves us in such a holy way that only He can. If we are believers in Jesus Christ, He has both saved us and is saving us. He has plans not only for our freedom and healing, but for our abundant living. He does not just want us to walk, but to leap! He does not wish for us just to be able to speak, but to sing praises to Him at the top of our lungs!

Third, our healing is predicated on our realizing that everything else we have attempted to employ as a spiritual tourniquet is useless. Just as the alliance with the Egyptians would ultimately only spell doom for the Hebrews, our efforts to fix our own needs and desires with any and everything but God will only destroy us. Healing is predicated on acknowledging the one true Healer. When we turn to Christ for our eternal salvation as well as our daily direction, our transformation begins. We are made new. We are made whole. When we are, we experience the elation of the joy that we previously tried futilely to manufacture for ourselves.

The joy of Christmas is a joy of rescue. It is the relief of heaviness and burden that we cannot carry. Brokenness we cannot repair. Sinfulness we could never atone for. The joy of Christmas comes in the reminder that our God, who promised for centuries that we would be free, finally, in the fullness of His time, pierced our history and became a child that would save His people.

Discussion Questions

1. What does "joy" mean to you? What images or symbols do you associate with joy in the Christmas season?
2. What particular area of your life right now would you most like to experience a decrease in anxiety and an increase in true joy?
3. When was the last time that you felt the weight of your need for joy in Christ?
4. What are some misperceptions about what joy means that you have seen represented this Christmas season? Why do you think that confusion came about?
5. Think about your favorite Christmas songs, or traditions - what do they communicate about joy? How can you make true joy more a part of your own traditions this season?