

Joy that Makes Sorrow and Sighing Flee

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Good morning. My name is Brian and my family and I are part of the Alameda Community Group.

Today's Old Testament lesson is a reading from the book of Isaiah. The desert and the parched land will be glad. The wilderness will rejoice and blossom.

Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom. It will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it. The splendor of Carmel and Sharon.

They will see the glory of the Lord. The splendor of our God. Strengthen the feeble hands. Steady the knees that give way. Say to those with fearful hearts, Be strong.

[1 : 10] Do not fear. Your God will come. He will come with vengeance. With divine retribution, he will come to save you. Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

Then will the lame leap like a deer and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.

The burning sand will become a pool. The thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, Grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.

And a highway will be there. It will be called the way of holiness. It will be for those who walk on that way. The unclean will not journey on it.

Wicked fools will not go about on it. No lion will be there, nor any ravenous beast. They will not be found there. But only the redeemed will walk there.

[2 : 12] And those the Lord has rescued will return. They will enter Zion with singing. Everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them.

And sorrow and sighing will flee away. The grass withers and the flowers fade. But the word of our God stands forever. Good morning, Christ Church.

We hope that you've been learning so far that there are two prophets during the Advent season. And there's the prophet Isaiah and the prophet John the Baptist.

You're going to hear a little bit from both today. Both of these prophets are focused on the coming Messiah. Their job is to prepare the way, to get people ready for his arrival through leading us in a searching and fearless inventory of our lives.

To lead us in a process of repentance, a process of spiritual transformation, so that when God's coming King arrives, his people will be ready to welcome him and to receive him.

[3 : 23] But unlike Isaiah and unlike John, we're not preparing ourselves for the first Advent of Jesus when he came in humility as the Savior. We're getting ourselves ready for the second Advent of Jesus when he'll come in glory as the judge of the whole world.

And this emphasis on the second Advent, the second coming of Jesus, really is the chief and central focus of the season. And it's what we're inviting you to meditate on a little bit more this time of year.

And just a word about reading the prophet Isaiah. We've given you so far in this series bookends of Isaiah's great work. We gave you Isaiah 64, oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down. That's the end of the book. We gave you Isaiah 2, that the Lord would teach us his ways so that we would beat our swords into plowshares. This is the great sandwich of Isaiah, beginning and end.

So what do we put kind of in the middle of that sandwich? There's so many places we've taken you before. There's Isaiah 9, for to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders.

[4 : 35] We could have gone to Isaiah 11, a shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse, and from his roots a branch will bear fruit. We could have gone to that great text of Isaiah 40, comfort, comfort my people, proclaim to her that her warfare is ended and that her iniquity is pardoned.

These are some of the great classic texts of this Advent season that are worthy of your meditation. So if you have not yet taken the time to sit with these passages, let me encourage you to do that today.

But we acknowledge that the book of Isaiah is filled with prophecies about this future messianic age that will be brought by this future messianic king who will come and put all things right.

And Christians, of course, believe that this messianic king was Jesus himself. And so we're focusing not only on the one who was born in the manger on Christmas Day, but we're focusing on the one who when he comes as the judge of the world, he will renew this sad old world and he'll make everything new.

And so that's why we've chosen our text today, Isaiah 35. And I want to encourage you, if you pull out your pew Bibles, to turn to page 582. Page 582.

[6 : 00] And I think it's important to see the text there because it's written in poetry, not prose. And a poet is somebody who gives us not so much a story, they give us pictures, they give us images.

And Isaiah is giving us these three images of what is gonna happen when God's Messiah comes to establish the kingdom of God on the earth as it is in heaven.

And what I want to walk us through is how he goes from sorrow to blossoming joy. That's the first image we're gonna look at. And then he goes from fear to whole life salvation.

That's the second image. And then the third image is he moves from exile to the highway home. Okay? So I know like two of you take notes on a Sunday morning, but I'm gonna say it again for those of you who take notes.

From sorrow to blossoming joy, from fear to whole life salvation, and from exile to the highway home. And I want to start with this movement from sorrow to blossoming joy.

[7 : 09] It says in verse one, the desert and the parched land will be glad and the wilderness will blossom, will rejoice and blossom like the crocus. It will burst into bloom. It will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.

The interior spiritual landscape of the exiled people of God who are the first people reading this text, their interior spiritual landscape matches the exterior physical landscape of this desert with no water.

This parched land, this wilderness of burning sand and thirsty ground, the lives of the people of God feel dry. They feel arid.

They feel withered and barren. Full of sorrow and sighing. In a word, their lives are joyless.

Anybody ever feel joyless? The extreme conditions in the desert are hostile to life, right?

There's no water. There's no green. There's no flowers. There's no fragrance. There's no beauty.

We can't enjoy any of these things. And verses seven and verse nine say that the desert is actually the haunt of jackals, that lions and ravenous beasts live there.

[8 : 27] And maybe you feel like that sometimes. You feel like, man, I live among predators and everywhere I turn, there's a hard circumstance.

There's a difficult person to love. There's a threatening situation. And that's how the people of God felt as they were living in exile. Literally, they had been exiled from their homes in Israel and taken off to Egypt and Assyria and Babylon.

And so Isaiah gives them this word, this vision that when God's Messiah comes, parched and barren places of sorrow and sighing will become fruitful places of joy and gladness.

Now each year, everyone that lived in this part of the world knew that each year the winter rain would come and it would cause a springtime of some sparse growth of grasses and flowers here and there in the desert.

You'd have to go and search for them pretty hard to find them. And what Isaiah is describing is this supernaturally enhanced spring that's intensified many folds so that the desert, he says, is bursting into bloom.

[9 : 43] So that you have these natural scrub bushes and acacias and wildflowers like the crocus that are blooming. But even more than that, he says there are forests and there are woods that are springing up in this barren place.

He says in verse 2, the glory of Lebanon will be given to it and the splendor of Carmel and Sharon. That's like saying the glory of the Muir Woods and the splendor of Napa Valley and Yosemite Valley will be given to it.

Can you imagine a bloom in the desert of giant redwoods and sequoias, of cedars and pines, of olive trees and grapevines that are just bursting into life.

Isaiah says it's as if the landscape will break into a smile of joy. Rejoice greatly, shout for joy, he says, because the creator God is going to send his Messiah to this barren, hard, cracked, thirsty, lifeless place.

and he's going to turn this great Salt Lake desert into the central valley of fertility and fruitfulness. Anybody been to the Mojave Desert?

[10 : 57] He's going to turn the Mojave Desert into Sonoma Valley with wine and feasting and beauty and joy.

God, when he sends his Messiah, is going to turn the whole world into the Garden of Eden, into a new creation because that's what he made us for.

We were made to walk with God in the cool of the day, in an orchard of trees, in a vineyard of fine wine. And so why does the Lord give his sorrowful people a vision in the midst of this world that's currently barren and bleak?

In the midst of a world that for them is bombed out and in ruins? A world that's been scorched and scarred by human pride and violence? Why does he give them a vision for this world being changed into a beautiful and life-giving garden of rest and of peace?

Because he wants us to know that a day is coming when your heart will be satisfied with joy. This vision of a transformed world speaks to the end of sin and death.

[12 : 17] It speaks to the reversal of the curse that sits heavy on this world. It speaks to the end of a creation being released from its bondage and its groaning and its decay.

It speaks of a day when we will fully enjoy the Lord. And that's what he means in verse 2 when he says they will see the glory of the Lord and the splendor of our God.

The Lord is creating this life-giving transformation in the most barren place and in the most unexpected way not so that we can experience and enjoy the glory and splendor of this beautiful landscape.

He does not want us to merely enjoy the natural fertility of Lebanon or the ordered cultivation of Carmel or the innate attractiveness of Sharon which is all wonderful and good but no what he really wants for us is to be awestruck by a vision of his own glory and his own splendor.

The majesty and the beauty of God from which all other things derive their loveliness and their attractiveness because Isaiah says when you see the glory of Yahweh when you see the glory of I am who I am when you see the splendor of Elohim when you see the splendor of almighty God your parched and barren heart will burst into bloom and you will begin to blossom with joy and he will vivify you and he will fill you with the life of heaven he will put the life of God in your soul and he will turn you into a new creation that's what Isaiah is saying and Isaiah goes on and he says the reason that nothing is blossoming here is because there is no life giving water in verse six he says water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert the burning sand will become a pool the thirsty ground bubbling springs in the haunts where jackals once lay grass and reeds and papyrus will grow when the

[14 : 34] Messiah comes springs of water will supernaturally well up from deep and hidden places and they will gush forth and all those places that have been ravaged all those places that have been ruined will begin to grow up into an oasis and into a paradise Isaiah knows that we're not made to live east of Eden we're not made to live in this world of withering and aging we're not made to live in a world of disease and death but we're made for this world where God himself will come and give us new life and new creation where he will give us the water and the green growth where we least expect it so that we who were burning sand spiritually and we who were thirsty ground existentially we will be changed into bubbling springs and this is why Isaiah the prophet is filling our heads with these poetic images of blossoming joy because he can see what's going on in the life of the people the exiled people of

God look at verse 3 he says strengthen the feeble hands steady the knees that give way say to those fearful hearts be strong do not fear your God will come he will come to save you you see without a vision without a messianic vision of the future without a vision of this future messianic king who's coming the people of God are perishing they have feeble hands that will not serve God they have weak and wobbly knees that will not walk with God they have fearful and anxious hearts that will not trust God and so this prophetic vision of the Messiah this prophetic vision of his coming is meant to be medicine for the people of God it's meant to be like a cordial that we drink and as it goes down it gives us strength and stability and conviction to the people of God so that it steals our nerves so that it stiffens our resolve to live as a counter cultural people in this barren world you see if the

Lord can give his people a fresh vision of his own glory and his own splendor and the way in which we will share in his glory and in his splendor when his Messiah comes then he knows that that vision will strengthen our feeble hands and it will steady our weak and wobbly knees and it will put resolve and courage into our fearful hearts you guys with me Isaiah is writing to people who are discouraged he's writing to people whose lives are collapsing he's writing to people who have their heads in their hands and they're afraid and they're anxious they're depressed and they're lonely they're tired and they're despairing they feel barren they feel like their life is going from fear to fear and they're ready to give up because they feel like their future is just one of endless joy joy and Isaiah says to them the Lord wants to lift that heavy burden from your shoulders the Lord wants to replace your fear with confidence he wants to replace your despair with hope he wants to replace your fatigue with energy he wants to replace your sadness and your misery with his own joy and the way he intends to do that is by revealing himself to you showing you more of his own glory and his own splendor encouraging you that he's coming and that when he comes he will come to save so how do we apply this to our lives this advent well two things quickly if you're here today and you're feeling dry your life feels like that parched desert that waterless wilderness your soul feels like that burning sand and that thirsty ground

I want to remind you that in the first advent of Jesus he came and he gave us just a glimpse of the glory and the splendor of the Lord and when we saw him we heard him say this in John 4 he said whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst indeed the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life he says something similar in John the gospel of John chapter 7 he says let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink whoever believes in me as scripture has said rivers of living water will flow from within them and by this he meant the Holy Spirit so friends do not allow yourself to stay dry do not allow yourself to stay parched and thirsty and burning go today go this month to the one that God sent to save you and he will refresh you he will satisfy you with living water from a place you know not which it comes the water of the Holy [20 : 17] Spirit and he will turn you into a bubbling spring he says he will turn you into a person who is not only refreshed and satisfied he will turn you into someone who refreshes and satisfies other people the second application is this that Isaiah 35 I think is what C.S.

Lewis is getting at in his Narnia Chronicles when he talks about living in a world that's always winter but never Christmas and yet knowing in the midst of that world that Aslan is somehow on the move he says wrong will be right when Aslan comes in sight at the sound of his roar sorrows will be no more when he bears his teeth winter meets its death and when he shakes his mane we shall have spring again or if you had a British accent again if we can remember how Aslan came the first time and how when he came he kind of shook his mane a little bit and if we can know in our hearts that he's on the move even now even though we can't see him then we can live through the winter of this world knowing that we shall have spring again we can live even with an anticipatory joy before our circumstances even change one iota because we have a sure and a certain hope that when Aslan comes again and when

Aslan shakes his mane one final and ferocious time all the deserts of this world will spring into bloom they'll burst for joy so friends let us put our eyes on this one who has come and is coming who says that if we come to him he'll strengthen our feeble hands he'll steady our weak and wobbly knees he'll give courage to our fearful hearts this is what I think Isaiah is talking about when he talks about moving from sorrow to blossoming joy the second image I want to walk us through is from fear to whole life salvation from fear to whole life salvation again verse 4 he says say to those with fearful hearts be strong do not fear your God will come he will come with vengeance with divine retribution he will come to save you yikes that's kind of intense right we heard

Isaiah 2 last week he talked about the fearful presence of the Lord when he comes with the splendor of his majesty and he rises up from his throne he will shake the earth and the humble will be exalted and the exalted will be humbled the prophets don't mess around and that word vengeance is hard for us because we can only really imagine human vengeance right a human kind of vengeance that's dark that is full of self that's full of malice vengeance but what Isaiah is talking about is divine vengeance and that word means justice it's a word that means liberation for the oppressed!

And what he's talking about is the divine judge who in his justice sees the wrongs that are being done to his people that are suffering and that he will come to make all those things right that word retribution means that the Lord sees all the injustices that are being done against his people and it assures them that in his pure and perfect justice he will come and he will cause all of those things to be settled once and for all and this must have been a huge relief and a huge comfort to these suffering exiles in Egypt and Assyria and Babylon who literally had been torn from their homes who had been alienated who had been mistreated who had been abused right these broken families with poor widows and orphans women literally pregnant women had been torn open literally their babies had been dashed against the rocks their fathers had been cut down with swords and spears no wonder they were full of sorrow and sighing no wonder their hands were feeble and their knees were weak and their hearts were afraid what a relief what a comfort it must have been to know that the judge of all justice is coming to put an end to the darkness and this is what

[25 : 14] Isaiah says Messiah when God's Messiah comes he's going to right all wrongs and he's going to heal all wounds and his redemption and his rescue will not merely be for our souls they'll be for our bodies verse five he says then will the eyes of the blind be open and the ears of the deaf unstopped then will the lame leap like a deer and the mute tongues shout for joy Isaiah is describing a community of people that are disabled and who are suffering these are blind people who cannot see the sunrise they can't see a smiling!

face they can't see the glory of God these are blind people who cannot hear a child laugh they cannot hear the voice of a loved one they cannot hear the truth of God these are lame people who cannot walk they cannot dance they cannot serve God these are mute people who cannot talk or sing or declare the praises of God they lost much of their humanity how would you feel if you lost these faculties and these abilities but Isaiah says when God himself comes to save when he sends his Messiah and he arrives he's going to transform inability to ability and lack into abundance and when the Messiah shows up nerves are going to start to heal and grow and they're going to send signals and receive signals so that blind eyes will see this God who saves and so that deaf ears will hear the word of this

God and so that lame legs will leap in the presence of God and mute tongues will begin to sing for joy in the worship of God all of these capacities are used to celebrate with joy what God can do and what God has done these people when Messiah comes they're not just going to walk and begin to get strength back in their legs and just totter around he says no they're going to jump they're going to leap they're going to bound they're going to dance for God he says these are people who cannot speak they're not just going to be able to get the ability to mumble a few things no he says they're not just going to talk they're going to shout they're going to praise God at the top of their lungs they're going to be human again when the Messiah comes friends do you see what happens when the

Messiah comes it's a vision and it's a promise that divine justice will put wrongs right divine compassion will heal suffering souls and divine power will restore disabled bodies now if you're exploring the Christian faith my question for you this morning is have you taken Jesus seriously when he says that he's come to be the fulfillment of the prophets that he's come to fulfill Israel's scriptures that he's come to be the one God sent to save us I'd encourage you to look at Matthew chapter 11 later today it's a great story of John the Baptist who was the last of the Old Testament prophets and his job was to point to God's coming Messiah his job was to show everybody that here comes the Lord prepare the way of the Lord get ready repent turn to the Lord but later on John finds himself languishing in a prison cell and he's there because of his commitment to his message because of his commitment to the authority of God's word but in his prison cell John's realizing that the kingdom of God is not exactly coming in all the ways that he imagined it would and so he's discouraged again he's another one of God's people who's discouraged and he begins to wonder if Jesus really is who John had claimed him to be he's

wondering to himself where is all the divine vengeance and retribution that was promised against our enemies where's all the thunder and the lightning where is where's God when people are vandalizing shalom and violating the image of God where is the Lord when when the people who are ruling this world are

[30 : 04] Pontius Pilate and the oppressive Romans where's the Lord when those who are governing over the people of God are herod and corrupt religious leaders what is going on John says and so he sends his disciples to Jesus with this question he says are you the one who was to come or should we expect someone else and Jesus replied this in Matthew 11 4 he says go back and report to John what the blind receive sight the lame walk those who have leprosy are cleansed the deaf hear the dead are raised and the good news is proclaimed to the poor blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me see John is steeped in scripture and he would know exactly what Jesus is saying that Jesus is quoting and paraphrasing Isaiah 35 along with other echoes of the book of

Isaiah and Jesus is basically saying this John this is it the messianic age has broken in to this space time matter continuum and heaven is coming down on the earth as you can see from the things that I begun to do people are being healed people are being delivered people are being liberated and set free I am the one who's come to save look John at all the grace look at all the new life of God that's being poured out through me it's obvious that I've come to make my blessings flow as far as the curse is found but I've just not come to do it in the timeline that you expected or in the way that you would have preferred so John strengthen your feeble hands steady your weak knees take courage in your fearful and discouraged heart because what

I'm partially fulfilling for a small number of blind deaf lame and mute people now I plan to completely fulfill one day for all my people I'm going to save you body and soul John even though you're in prison even though your head is going to be cut off I'm coming back to save you at every level spiritually emotionally relationally and physically and in fact when I come again I'm going to take the whole sad world and I'm going to turn it into a paradise that's blossoming with joy but you gotta wait and blessed is anyone who's not tripped up by me John blessed is anybody who's not put off by the way I'm doing things friends do you see Jesus intentionally yet partially fulfilling this scripture and do you understand yourself to be living between the first advent of

Jesus and the second advent of Jesus do you know that your life is bound up in the already of his kingdom that he's fulfilled and in the not yet of his kingdom that he will one day come to complete and does his future coming again fill you with a kind of comfort and joy that's beyond you and as we wait for that second advent of Jesus when he comes to completely fulfill Isaiah 35 what will we pray I suggest a great prayer as the one we sang earlier come thou long expected Jesus born to set thy people free from our fears and our sins release us now as we're waiting for you let us find our rest in thee the last picture we've moved from sorrow to blossoming joy from fear to whole life salvation and

I'll end briefly talking about this move from exile to the highway home from exile to the highway home he says in verse 8 a highway will be there it will be called the way of holiness it will be for those who walk on that way the unclean will not journey on it wicked fools will not go about on it no lion will be there nor any ravenous beast they will not be found there but only the redeemed will walk there and those the Lord has rescued will return they will enter Zion with singing everlasting joy will crown their heads gladness and sorrow will overtake them gladness and joy will overtake them and sorrow and sorrow is living very far away from home we're spiritually homeless like those exiles we're living far from our true home in

[35 : 50] God but Isaiah says that God will provide a way God will in fact provide a highway that will take us home and he says that path to get home is called the highway of holiness he says not everybody can travel on the sacred!

unclean the wicked the foolish are not allowed to journey on it only those who've been granted access only those who've been given a passport and a visa can go on this road Isaiah says only the people that the Lord has redeemed only the people the Lord has rescued can walk in this way and how does this work how do we get home on this way well all the pages of the Old Testament are wrestling with the promise that one day the Messiah will come and when he comes he'll take us home he'll redeem us he'll rescue us and he'll enable us to return to our true home in God and Jesus having read every single one of those promises he comes along and he makes the most outrageous claim in John 14 and he says I am the way I am the way and no one comes to the father

no one gets home except!

through me! Jesus says I'm the highway of holiness back to your true home and the amazing thing that we celebrate at Christmas time is that Jesus left his home he left his home in the glory of heaven he left his true home in the eternal God head and he became an exile like us he became spiritually and cosmically homeless like us in order to come and get us home and Jesus when he grew up he went to that place called Gethsemane and we're told that there he was overcome with sorrow and was sighing to the point of death in our place so that we didn't have to go there and we're told that on the next day he was thrown out of Zion with cursing he was thrown out of Zion with a crown of thorns and everlasting shame on his head so that we could enter into Zion with singing so that we could be crowned with everlasting joy on our heads and that on Good Friday Jesus on that cross he lost the very presence of God he received and absorbed and absorbed into himself that divine justice that divine retribution that caused him to cry out my God my God why have you forsaken me and he did that to bring us all the way home to the presence and the glory of God and of course on Easter Sunday Jesus rose up from the grave and he walked out of the tomb he walked and took his first steps into that new creation of new life so that we could follow right behind him on that highway of holiness with gladness and with joy in his first coming Jesus became homeless at Christmas so that he could bring us home and in his second coming he's going to return and make this world a true home where we can fully blossom with joy and when we come home when we enter

Zion what does it say we're going to be doing it says we're going to be singing we're going to be singing joyous songs about our redeemer and our rescuer we're going to be singing joyous songs about the fact that we're finally home and how wonderful this place is we're going to be singing songs that are absolutely purified of sorrow and of sighing we're going to be singing all sorts of songs about how he's made everything absolutely everything new and friends when we sing those songs of Zion we're going to have no regrets for every step of faith we took in this life on the Lord's highway of holiness we will have no regrets about every little sacrifice we had to make in order to leave that old sad life behind we will have no regrets about all the ways that our

[40 : 33] Holy Father and his Holy Son Jesus and his Holy Spirit use the Holy Scriptures and Holy Baptism and Holy Communion and his Holy Saints in the Holy Church to bring us on that highway of holiness all the way back to our holy home with God I'll close with these final words from the last book in the Narnia Chronicles it says this the new Narnia was a deeper country every rock and flower and blade of grass looked as if it meant more I can't describe it any better than that if you ever get there you'll know what I mean it was the unicorn who summed up what everyone was feeling he stamped his right forehoof on the ground and neighed and then he cried I've come home at last this is my real country I belong here this is the land

I've been looking for all my life though I never knew it till now the reason why we love the old Narnia is that it sometimes looked a little bit like this so come further up and further in in the name of the Father Son and Holy Spirit we pray amen you you