

Isaiah 35:1-10

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Date: 14 December 2025

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[0 : 0 0] Let's pray. Heavenly Father, give us wisdom to understand your word. We long to come home to you one day and see you face to face. Help us wait for your coming with joy. Amen.

Home is naturally a priority for many families, especially with Vancouver being such a multicultural city. Many people make plans months ahead so that they can head home and spend Christmas with their family.

For those of us already living with our family, Christmas might not make the experience of going home extra special. But deep down, we know and should appreciate that going home is a privilege not to be taken for granted.

But what if there's no home to return to? Yes, home is where the heart is, as the saying goes. But that longing for a safe and permanent shelter, that's a built-in feature we all have.

It's not hard to get in touch without yearning if international news is on your radar. How homes are crushed around the world due to wars or natural disasters is simply heartbreaking.

[1 : 3 6] Now using the same lens for empathy, let's travel back in time to around 550 years before Jesus was born. For the intended readers of today's passage from Isaiah 35, they were longing to go home in a way not many of us can imagine.

They wanted to return to their homeland that no longer existed. Judah had been taken captive and sent to exile in Babylon when Isaiah wrote up his vision of both the judgment and the redemption of God that would come one day.

By unpacking Isaiah's prophecies to the people of Judah under such circumstances, let us uncover three reasons to be hopeful or even joyful for the season.

Namely, God is faithful, God is able, and God is present and coming. Let me repeat. First, we'll look at how Isaiah was inviting Judah, though in the midst of suffering, to anticipate what coming home would look like.

Verses 1 and 2 give vivid descriptions of some stunning imagery. The lifeless wilderness, dry land, desert, are all coming to life.

[3 : 1 3] They shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy in singing, a sign of God's blessings and presence with his people. Towards the end of the passage in verses 8 to 10, Isaiah further described how the redeemed shall come home on the way of holiness.

A highly guarded with God's protection and guidance. No one, not being clean, not lions, not beasts, would be able to stop God's people from returning home.

And once you're on it, it's a direct flight, and you can't even get lost. So the ransom shall return singing with everlasting joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Now, try and recall the last time when such visualizations brought about some healing magic. A long-awaited dream vacation is up ahead.

Your stress level is through the roof as you hustle through multiple projects at work. Yet, you still find time to Google places that you plan to visit, food you want to eat in your trip.

[4 : 30] Because it's what's coming that can really get you going. However, if you can't guarantee 100% that this trip can take place, it is all just daydreaming.

What makes the prophecy of Isaiah truly a source of joy is the faithful God who gave Isaiah the vision. The faithful God who had never failed to keep his covenant with his people.

Judah knew it all too well. The concept of exile was never foreign to Judah. From Adam and Eve getting kicked out of the Garden of Eden, to Joseph being sold to Egypt, and the Israelites living under oppression for hundreds of years.

God had been faithful and had brought his people to the Promised Land. Even as history kept repeating itself, and Israel found themselves in the cycle of trying, then failing to be faithful to God.

Time and again, God had always been faithful and redeemed their nation. The faithfulness of God was what kept Judah standing in such times of triumph.

[5 : 50] Apart from God's faithfulness, another good reason Isaiah had for Judah to be joyful in waiting was that God is able.

Verses 5 to 7 list out numerous signs of restorations and reversals, which are all possible, only in the hands of the Almighty God.

The blind shall see, the deaf shall hear, the lame shall leap, and the mute shall sing. Brokenness is fixed and transformed into wholeness.

The wilderness and dry land, burning sand and thirsty ground, are all renewed and replaced by streams and pools, springs and swamps, none of which can be done by works of man, not even in modern times.

The power and ability of God further assured those in exile that even though going home might be unthinkable and unimaginable at the moment, God is able to bring his people home.

[7 : 02] In fact, this promise of redemption was fulfilled, not only when the exiled Jews were allowed to return to Zion after 70 years of captivity.

Hundreds of years later, when Jesus answered those sent by John the Baptist if he was the expected one, Jesus said in Matthew 11, verses 4 to 5, which we read in today's Gospel, Go and tell John what you hear and see.

The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the dead hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.

Jesus quoted from Isaiah to declare that he is the one who is able to save his people, including you and me, and bring us all home to our Heavenly Father, fulfilling once again Isaiah's prophecy and God's plan of salvation.

We can be joyful because he is able to fix our brokenness and restore our wrongs. So far, Isaiah has given us two reasons why we can be joyful, even when we find ourselves away from home, in exile.

[8 : 18] One, God had always proven himself faithful, and so we can be certain that he will keep his promise of bringing us home. Two, God is able and will restore what appears to us now to be irreversible.

But being joyful can still be a challenge when you are waiting. Just as Judah might mistakenly think, not because Solomon's temple was torn down, the nation was gone, and God's presence was no longer with him.

We might also be tempted to doubt his presence just because we don't see him working. It would be fair if Judah had the same question that you and I might have as we wait for the exile to come to an end.

God, are you there? The good news is, Isaiah is not shy to disclose some behind the scenes of God's work in his good tidings to Judah.

According to verses 3 and 4, strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who have an anxious heart, be strong, fear not.

[9 : 33] Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with recompense of God. He will come and save you. God is present and coming.

God does not only show up when he starts delivering us from exile. As we wait and hang on, he's present and at work, giving us the strength and courage that we need.

My 11-year-old son, Levi, can testify to a similar experience as he's often the first person to arrive home from school. He understands that he's mostly completely safe staying at home by himself for an hour or two, but he gets easily distracted by random thoughts, becoming anxious as he waits for the next person to come home.

Now, I'm usually the one who would then get a call from him. Sometimes, I try to stay online and he's easily assured, oh, mom's coming back. But sometimes, I have my hands full and I need to hang up after a brief chat.

Even though I'm no longer online, it does not change the fact that mom's still making her way back. Undeniably, today, we all are still in exile.

[10 : 52] We might be captive in various forms of suffering or hardship, or we might just be longing for Jesus' coming so that he can bring us home to our heavenly Father, to see his glory restored and have him right all wrongs.

Isaiah's prophecy is reminding us today, on the third Sunday of Advent, that we can wait for Jesus' coming with joy. Because joy never comes from external circumstances which are ever-changing.

We have joy because of what the never-changing God has done, faithfully keeping his promises. We have joy because of what the never-changing God is able to do, restoring brokenness and renewing hearts.

we have joy because of what the never-changing God is doing. He is Emmanuel. He's present with us and he's coming back.

Amen.