

I think the Omaha zoo is one of the best zoos in the world. And my favorite part of the zoo is something called a desert dome. It is a massive habitat with a huge clear dome on top. It is the world's largest indoor desert. It is 84,000 ft.² or about 7800 m². It has three different desert climates inside of it. An African, Australian, and American desert. It creates a strange experience because you can go to the zoo in the middle of winter with feet of snow on the ground bundled up and then walk inside the desert dome and you need to take off all of your stuff because it's hot. Because the uniqueness of the dome allows there to be a desert even in the frozen Nebraska winters.

Just as the desert dome allows there to be a certain geographical desert where there should not be one so God through the Holy Spirit allows us to have joy where there shouldn't be and where it does not make any sense.

We have been lighting our advent candle each week as we inch closer to Christmas. This morning we lit the candle of joy. It reminds us that we are waiting and looking forward to the joy that Jesus brings. Each Sunday we have talked and looked through the Scriptures about each theme and how they tell us part of the story of Christmas. I've enjoyed looking through these different passages and Isaiah but honestly this is the one I was the most nervous about, you see I am not what most people would describe as a joyous person. Sometimes I can get described as aloof, cynical, a complainer, standoffish, or a little gloomy. So to me when I think about joy, I think about it as something that I don't always experience. It's as natural to me as a desert in Nebraska winter. Some of you are very joyful and you exude it every time that I see you, but I just don't. And so there's this temptation that I can face to think that joy is something that other people do. Joy is something that other people have, but I'm just not wired that way and God's naturally given me other things but the Bible does it describe joy as a personality trait. It's not a trait that just some people might have a greater measure than others. Joy is one of the fruits of the spirit, and it is some thing that should mark every single follower of Jesus and so the question that I have and maybe you have it as well when I

read passages like we will this morning, and Isaiah chapter 35 is this, how can I have joy even if I'm not a joyful person? Turn with me to Isaiah 35 and let's find out together.

We can have joy in the desert (v. 1-4).

It is entirely possible for you to have real lasting joy even in a desolate place.

If we can build deserts in Nebraska, God can build joy in our hearts.

It is possible for us to have joy even when we're in the desert.

Even when it feels like your life is falling apart.

Even when your life really is falling apart.

Even when you are in a place that joy makes no sense.

Even when you were a person like me for whom joy does not come naturally.

You can have joy even in the desert.

God makes it possible for there to be a life where it seems there can be no life.

Verse 1, **"The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus;"**

Here we see that the wilderness, the dry land, and the desert,

Three desolate places.

Three places where death reigns.

Where it is dangerous to be.

Places that you would not expect to find joy.

In those places they are glad.

In those places there is rejoicing.

And in those places there is life.

But you might notice it is not the people in those places that are rejoicing.

It is the desert itself cries out with joy.

Now if a place that is not alive.

If the desert itself with no voice no mouth and only sand can exclaim with joy, how much more should we human beings be able to have a joy even when we're in the desert?

You see Isaiah is saying that when you and me find ourselves in places like the desert we can still have joy.

There is still hope.

All is not lost.

No how can there be joy in this place?

Because look at the end of the first it shall blossom like the crocus.

Now scholars aren't exactly sure what the crocus is.

Most likely it is one of the flowers that you might find in the desert that makes the place beautiful.

But there can be joy not just because there was a small tiny sliver of beauty but because God is bringing the life.

Look at verse two.

Verse 2, **"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."**

The desert is going to be a place of abundance.

There will not just be one flower hidden in the shade of a rock somewhere.

All throughout the wilderness and the drylands the flowers will bloom like the bluebonnets in Texas.

Or like the wildflowers throughout the plains.

And this abundance in this new life to Jesus brings in the midst of the place of death will lead to rejoicing with joy in with singing.

There can be joy in the desert

because God still does His work even in desolate places.

And the glory of Lebanon, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon is mentioned because those are places that are beautiful and abundant.

Lebanon is known for its forest of cedar trees and the rich plane of Sharon at the bottom of the mountain.

I want you to imagine God turning the Sahara desert into the Amazon rainforest.

Imagine God taking an empty field with nothing but sand and dirt and turning it into a beautiful garden.

This is what God can do and does in our lives and for us.

"They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God."

Here in the desert you can see God's glory.

Here at the lowest circumstances of your life.

Here in the darkness you can behold the majesty of God.

It is beholding this God they can give us joy.

As Israel wandered through the wilderness for 40 years the daily got to see God's glory.

Those who wander through the desert in through our own circumstances we too can see God's Majesty if we would only look.

I have always loved the plains.

I grew up in Nebraska and with many people called a boring flyover State.

You drive around and you can see for miles and miles usually just corn.

But when you grow up in a place you learn to recognize its singular beauty.

And so in a place that most people find boring I find it beautiful.

Because I've learned to see it and to behold God's glory in it.

In a similar way we can find joy if we are willing to look we are Gods glory is even in the midst of our circumstances.

Because God does not abandon us.

He is with us even to the end of the age.

And when you find yourself in horrible sometimes downright awful circumstances.

God's glory in His majesty in His presence and His beauty is still there.

But you have to look for it.

Sometimes it will not be blinding but might be hidden.

But if you were willing to look you can see the beauty of God.
And you can have joy even when others don't understand it.

Verse 3, **"Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees."**

There are those of us who his hands are weak and his knees are feeble.
There are those of us who are stumbling and bumbling through this
Christmas advent season.

God wants us to find strength.

God wants us to know that we can stand firm.

I even when you feel weak there is strength.

Even when you do not feel joyful there is one who can provide the joy for
you.

Verse 4, **"Say to those who have an anxious heart, "Be strong; fear
not!"**

Do you notice this is not just that we are to pick ourselves up by your
bootstraps and try harder ourselves.

But we are to strengthen each other.

We are to encourage those who are stumbling.

We as fellow pilgrims towards the heavenly city should remind each other
of the good news of Jesus.

We should tell each other to be strong and that we do not have to be
afraid.

I don't know about you but if you left me in the desert I would be afraid.

I will be freaking out the first moment I got thirsty.

Hope in the desert.

We instead or to encourage those who are anxious that there is nothing to
fear.

Not only is there nothing to fear there is reason to be joyous and full of
celebration.

Why? Because of the rest of verse 4.

"Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you."

We can have joy in the desert because God is coming.

Our God is going to come.

The hope and the beauty and the wonder of Christmas is the fact that Jesus has come.

Jesus has kept His promises.

Jesus came down to us.

And one day He will come with a vengeance.

The Scriptures tell us not to take vengeance in your own hands because one day Jesus will do it for us.

And He will come with the recompense of God.

On a second advent he will get rid of all those who are oppress and harm.

He will heal us of all disease.

So when you find yourself in the desert.

And some of you are there right now,

Do not be anxious.

Do not fear.

Because Jesus is coming.

And this is our hope in advent.

Because Advent begins in the dark.

We light candles because we live in a dark world and we are desperate for light.

We long for Jesus to come because we need Him.

And it is possible for us in the midst of the darkness in the midst of the desert to have joy because we know that Jesus has come in because we know that Jesus will come again.

And when Jesus comes again it will not just be to bring vengeance and recompense it will be even better.

Because Jesus will restore us (v. 5-7).

Jesus' coming is not just about destroying and crushing and judging the wicked

Jesus' coming is about making the world right.

Jesus' coming is not about making our time in the desert a little bit better,

Jesus' coming will transform it into something else.

Jesus will take the places of our lives that were dead and long gone and give them new and eternal life.

Verse 5, **"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."**

The promise is that on this day Jesus will heal those who need it.

That those who are blind will have their eyes open to see.

Those who are deaf.

Those who have to ask you to speak up speak up I can't hear you.

Those who can't hear the sound of birds are their loved ones voice anymore will have their ears opened.

And those who are lame and unable to walk will be healed.

They will be able not only to stand and walk but to dance to run and to jump.

And those who are mute.

Who cannot make a sound to speak normally talk but will sing praises to God.

And they will sing with joy.

And this is what Jesus did when He came.

He spent His time everywhere He went

Hours upon hours upon hours of healing those who needed it.

We've read in the gospel of Luke every village that He comes to everyone comes to Him with their needs.

Those with diseases no doctor can cure they all ran to Jesus.

Some even cut the roofs out of the houses to bring their friends to be healed.

Jesus not only healed the people who came to Him

He also went and found them.

He went out of His way to find the people trapped in desperate places to bring them healing.

He sought out the unclean and the leper and the widow.

He interrupted funerals to bring the dead back to life.

And they can have joy because Jesus will restore them.

We can have joy even in the desert not just because Jesus is there now

Not just because God loves us

but because Jesus will restore us.

Our joy is not just that Jesus is present in terrible times.

Our joy is found not just in recognizing where He is.

Our joy is found because Jesus is right now in the process of restoration.

Then goes back to the metaphor of the desert in the rest of the verse.

"For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert;"

I Jesus brings life where there was no life.

Water begins to flow in the wilderness.

In the desert, there begins to flow a stream.

The main characteristic of deserts is that there's no water.

It is nothing but sand as far as the eye can see.

Now there may be small pools or a little oasis.

But most of the place there's nothing.

You don't get rain storms you get sand storms.

And so the image that Isaiah gives us is radical.

Picture it. Close your eyes if you have to.

Picture of nomad who has lived and traveled through the wilderness in the desert for generations.

They made their peace with having to live in such a harsh place and they know the only safe ways through.

And as they are going through climbing over the sand dune they see something that they've never seen before.

They almost think it's a Mirage at first or a trick.

Because the water is not just in a pool it is living and moving.

The water it has broken forth from somewhere and has no signs of stopping.

Verse 7, **"The burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; in the haunt of jackals where they lie down, the grass shall become reeds and rushes."**

That stream isn't just gonna stop and be a tiny thing.

It will take what used to be burning sand and make it a pool.

The hot sand is something I always struggle with at the beach.

I don't like the way hot sand feels on my feet.

But here it is the image of that saying that once was hot not just becoming cool or cold, but becoming something so full of water that you can swim in it.

And the ground that once was so thirsty.

That if you accidentally dropped even a small drop of water it would disappear in the sandwich drink it up.

That thirsty ground will bring forth springs.

Not just one small place hidden in a corner that you gotta know about to be able to find.

The whole place will be filled with springs in cool water.

The haunt of the jackals is the places in the wilderness where the predators live.

You can picture the nooks and crannies under rocks or caves.

The only place you might normally think you could find some shelter but they're inhabited by desperate creatures who will kill any food they can find.

That place that was once dangerous instead become filled with grass and reeds and rushes.

God will take it was uninhabitable and make it just not livable but beautiful and abundant.

God will restore the dark places of the world to what they were always meant to be.

And what they look like once in Eden.

In a similar Way, Jesus will do that with us.

Every miracle that Jesus worked is foreshadowing what was to come.

The world is a desert in Jesus began to bring the rain in the stream is starting to trickle its way through.

Water restoration and life is coming.

And indeed it is already here.

You are free and invited to come in to drink from the water of everlasting life.

And those who drink if it will never ever thirst again.

This is what Jesus has done.

This is what Jesus is still doing.

This is what Jesus Will do.

And this is why we can have joy.

Because we know that our God restores.

And even if it does not feel like it.

God is in the midst of restoring you if you're following Him.

And if you're not that restorations available to you if you would come to Jesus.

Our final point. This is the best reason we can have joy even in the desert.

And He will bring everlasting joy (v. 8-10).

Jesus does not just give us the ability to have a joy and small moments and difficult times.

Jesus does not just come to get us back to square one and then we gotta try again.

Jesus will bring us ever lasting joy.

He will bring us joy that will never ever ever end.

I've already mentioned that I'm not the best at joy.
It doesn't come naturally to me.
It doesn't just always flow out of me.
But I can have moments of joy.
I can have real moments where I am looking to Jesus and I see Him and I'm focusing on Him and He's giving me joy even in the midst of hard times.
But if you're anything like me it doesn't last.
The joy works for a while but then the next thing comes.
Or the next challenge.
Or I sleep and now it is a new day.
But the joy that we are promised in Isaiah 35 in Jesus is a joy never fades.
It is a joy that doesn't diminish or get smaller.
It is not a joy that waxes and wanes.

Picture the most joyous and happiest you have ever been.
Maybe at the birth of a child,
Your wedding day,
Or when you got the best news ever.
The funniest joke you ever heard.
Remember what that felt like in your whole body and spirit?
That is the kind of joy Jesus is bringing.
And that joy we will feel every moment of every day forever.

Let's see where he says this, let's look at verse 8.

Verse 8, **"And a highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Way of Holiness;"**

We take for granted what an insane invention the highway is.
It makes travel easy and safe, mostly.
Now we are able to travel all across our huge country roads.
Isaiah's day that didn't have a lot of roads at all.
The road is just a path most people walked on.
Most of the time it wasn't safe.
Jesus is promising highway called the way of holiness.

This isn't a literal highway but a place that those who walk with Jesus and live holy lives will see and walk on.

It is describing the life of believers and followers of God.

"The unclean shall not pass over it. It shall belong to those who walk on the way; even if they are fools, they shall not go astray."

Says those who are unclean because they have not yet been cleansed by the blood of Jesus.

Those who are still dead in their sins, who have not put their faith in their trust in Jesus for forgiveness won't be here.

Because this place that God is making belongs to those who follow Jesus on the way.

Phrase about the **"fools not going astray"** has two meanings.

And I think it means both of these things.

It means that those who are foolish in the sense that they are not believers and followers of God will not find the path.

They won't accidentally stumble in.

They will not come and ruin it for the rest of us.

But it also means that those of us who follow Jesus and are fools.

And if we are honest we're all kind of fools.

Those of us who do a lot of stumbling and failing.

We try to follow Jesus the best that we can but we keep tripping over our own feet and sinning again and again and again.

On this day on this path we won't go astray anymore.

We will no longer wander off.

With Jesus will be the guard rails and keeps us safe in the place of everlasting joy.

I find this comforting that even when I act like a fool Jesus will keep me from going astray.

Verse 9, **"No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there."**

This will be a place of everlasting joy because here nothing can harm us.

There will be no more lions.

No more creatures of the night or things that would eat us and harm us.

In the place of everlasting joy there will be no demons.

There will be no enemies and no opposition.

There would be no creature plant hazard or person who could ever harm or oppose us again

Because this is the place that those who have been redeemed and bought by the blood of Jesus on the cross walk freely.

This is the place He will prepare for us.

And we should get a walk and live without fear or anxiety or worry.

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."**

This is the image of the exiles returning to their land.

They finally return to their homeland after decades in captivity.

And so they come back with song.

And on this day we will have everlasting joy.

On the day Jesus comes and all the righteous are gathered up to sing in one joyous song.

On this day we will obtain gladness and joy.

For some of you, gladness has been out of reach.

You have not been able to get your fingers around it.

But on this day you will.

On this day sorrow will flee.

Sighing and groaning will be a thing of the past.

On this day you will feel only joy.

There will be no more sorrow and sighing.
There will be no more pain and suffering.
No more moments where the tears find you.
No more times you cry and you don't even know why.

The image I have of sighing is the moments when grief finds you.
When you just sigh because you are surprised and overwhelmed by the suffering.
Those days will no longer come.
No longer will you be sad at all.
We will feel only joy forever.

One of the sad things is that when and I describe this eternal joy that we will have in the new heavens and the new earth Jesus is making, is that it doesn't always sound great.
Some people think it sounds boring.
Eternal pleasure sounds like that could get old.
Suffering and pain isn't fun but at least it makes life exciting and worth living.
And so the way that heaven or life with Jesus is described makes people think that it doesn't sound really that great at all.
The problem is that skin is so warped or sense of what is good and beautiful that when we see in here of what we were meant and designed to experience it can make us shrug our shoulders.
We have forgotten what children know.

One of the things that continually amazes me with very young children is their endless capacity for joy.
See most of us we find something that we enjoy and we like it.
And I might seem really cool the first time and we enjoy it in the future
We might keep coming back and doing it again but nothing compares the first time.
There's so many movies and books that I wish I could erase my memory and go back and experience them for the first time again.

Little kids don't have that problem.

They seem to enjoy things the 75th time as much as the first.

There are so many games we play at my house where I hear again again
Daddy.

And after the 100th time I am exhausted and starting to get frustrated but
they are laughing just as hard as they did the very first time.

I don't know I don't like this game cause I'm starting to hate the game but
they haven't even yet begun to enjoy it to its fullest.

Their capacity for Joy is unending.

They can enjoy the same thing just as much over and over and over again.

And somewhere along the way as we age we lose that capacity for joy.

We lose the ability to be amazed at the beauty of a flower.

Or to find something funny for hours.

But one day when Jesus comes again we'll get that capacity back.

There will be a day when our joy is unending.

There will be a day where we will all run and giggle with the children as we
watch a bird catch a worm.

There will be a day where we will all fall on the ground with uncontrollable
laughter for hours because somebody did something silly.

There will be a day where we don't get bored of beauty.

There will be a day when our joy doesn't fade because the worries and
heaviness of Life comes back.

There will be a day when we will just get to be filled with joy.

Sorrow exhaustion and boredom will pass away like a distant memory.

And all that will be left is a joy that never gets old.

The joy that makes every day better than the last.

The joy that experiences every moment as God intended.

The Everlasting joy that only comes through Jesus.

Where have we been this morning? You can have joy in the desert because
Jesus will restore us and bring everlasting joy.

Have joy today and this Advent. Not because of your circumstances and
what you are doing, But because of what Jesus is doing in your life.