

Isaiah 35:1-10 (New International Version)  
New International Version (NIV)

Joy of the Redeemed

- 1 The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.  
Like the crocus,  
2 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.  
3 Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way;  
4 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."  
5 Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped.  
6 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.  
7 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.  
  
8 And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness.  
The unclean will not journey on it; it will be for those who walk in that Way;  
wicked fools will not go about on it. [a]  
  
9 No lion will be there, nor will any ferocious beast get up on it; they will not be found  
there. But only the redeemed will walk there,  
  
10 and the ransomed of the LORD 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.

Luke 1:46-55 (New International Version)  
New International Version (NIV)

Mary Visits Elizabeth

46 And Mary said:

- "My soul glorifies the Lord 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
48 for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.  
From now on all generations will call me blessed,  
49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name.  
50 His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.  
51 He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in  
their inmost thoughts.  
52 He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.  
53 He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.  
54 He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful  
55 to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers."  
56 Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

Matthew 11:2-11 (New International Version)

New International Version (NIV)

2 When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples  
3 to ask him, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"

4 Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see:

5 The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy<sup>[a]</sup> are cured, the deaf  
hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.

6 Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me."

7 As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What  
did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind?

8 If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear  
fine clothes are in kings' palaces.

9 Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.

10 This is the one about whom it is written:

" I will send my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way before you."<sup>[b]</sup>

11 I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater  
than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

“ARE YOU THE ONE?”

I find these verses read for you beautiful and comforting in the story and imagery that they evoke. They describe great promise and commitment on the part of the Lord and what God, and Jesus are able to do for us. Another proposed reading in the lectionary for today from Psalms carries on this theme:

**Psalm 146**

**5 Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob,  
whose hope is in the LORD his God,**

**6 the Maker of heaven and earth,  
the sea, and everything in them—  
the LORD, who remains faithful forever.**

**7 He upholds the cause of the oppressed  
and gives food to the hungry.  
The LORD sets prisoners free,**

**8 the LORD gives sight to the blind,  
the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down,  
the LORD loves the righteous.**

**9 The LORD watches over the alien  
and sustains the fatherless and the widow,  
but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.**

**10 The LORD reigns forever,  
your God, O Zion, for all generations.  
Praise the LORD.**

I don't know about you but I'm not sure I buy it. I have been listening for some time to politicians - men and women – I reluctantly confess I fall into this category myself – who promise things they cannot produce. I have to say as I look at the long stretch of history I find these proclamations in Isaiah and Psalms promises that fall short of what I have experienced.

I have seen sorrow, suffering and loss and at my age expect to see much more. I see the poor neglected and the rich indifferent, uneven distribution of the Lords great gifts, . . . greed, cruelty, pride and hatred. I see power in the hands of the powerful continuing to propel our world toward destruction, they make war and they mete out the horror of war on the poor, defenseless, and the lost and in anger the lost strike back with the same kind of violence.

In all of this I find myself asking where is the Lord. Where is the commitment to rescue us to save us from cruelty and destruction? But this is not new. John the Baptist reportedly held in such high esteem by Jesus lost his head and was silenced by the power of the high court his God could not save him. Even the Son of Man whom we celebrate every year with a great amount of gift giving was ground down and put on the cross.

Something is wrong with this picture. Dare I say if the Lord stood for re-election every two years we might find it difficult to endorse his platform just because he failed to deliver on his promises.

Another lectionary verse recommended for today but not included in today's reading is James 5:7-10

### **Patience in Suffering**

**7 Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. 8 You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. 9 Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!**

Sound familiar? I love that imagery of the farm. Sure you may be suffering now but just hang in there and God will rescue you. You might be wondering where I am going with this rather cynical reading of these beautiful verses. Perhaps it comes from reading political advice from political psychologists who lament the inability of their candidates to put into practice the rhetoric they know will work on the electorate. They say it's emotion over reason that elects candidates. If liberals ever hope to capture the white house they need to learn how to speak to the emotional longings of the electorate like conservatives and give up on logical rhetoric and the cogent arguments of the enlightenment.

I've been to the desert and seen it come to life, I have seen the tiny stunning blossoms burst open on the mountain top, I know the stirring effect these images can have on the emotions and the intellect. It gives us hope in the barrenness and suffering we live in that things can get better. We look to the future to - what can be - if we strive for it - and we know will never be - if we can't believe in it.

This must be the sentiment that Isaiah was writing to overcome when he wrote, **“Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, Be strong, do not fear; your God will come . . . 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.”**

I work with students on a daily basis, (when I am not in St. Paul serving at the legislature) who see very little beyond the hour they exist in. Some days I fear they are immune to hope and lost to despair. They wonder how can they escape the painful world and find some pleasure. I know many of them will experience no Christmas or perhaps more profoundly they will experience its absence. I have to say many days I fail them – my imagination fails them when I can’t see the possibility for them and communicate that to them. I wish I had Isaiah’s skill.

All too often my colleagues focus on the student’s behavior and think, if only they wouldn’t do the things they do they might be just fine. I learned long ago – probably from my own experience escaping pain and suffering that in despair you lose perspective of your self and the things you do in relation to others. This is why responding to their destructive noxious behavior with punishment or promise of reward for their changing the way they behave rarely ever works or has a lasting effect. They are unaware that their behavior affects you, they know only what you do or chose not to do to them.

I have adopted over the years a different tact I try two strategies that I find help some when I am able to apply them to get at the problem. Unfortunately, they are tools I often don’t have ready at my grasp. The first is to expect that they can do what I challenge them to do and when they say, “I can’t, do that I have an attention deficit disorder and I can’t concentrate.” Or what ever the reason may be. “How can you expect me to do this?” I say, “I have to believe you can do it. It is the only way you will learn any measure of this skill and you must come to grips with it one way or the other even if you only manage a little control over yourself. I have to believe that you can blossom in the dessert. Well I don’t use that poetry but that is what I mean.

The second strategy is that I try to see them for who they are. This is my reading of what Bishop Berkeley meant when he said, “to be is to be perceived.” I must be able to see who they are if they are going to become manifest. This means I must look beyond the behavior and to understand what it is that this behavior is preparing them for. What unseen future do they possess that this behavior is reaching to prepare them to be able to do. This may seem strange to you but as I look back at my own life and the lives that have crossed my path this is a truism. The philosopher said life can only be understood backwards – too bad it must be lived in the opposite direction. There are things in my life that I will experience that I could have in no way prepared myself for without having done things that at the time seemed completely wrong and out of place.

This after all is what most of the fairy tales reveal. Jack is a thief, or Askelad is a ne'er-do-well. These traits are what save them in the story. Is this what is meant by faith – the notion that we can believe we are meant for something greater than we are, that a part of us knows our destiny better than we can ever know it.

Mary when she visits Elizabeth feels this - her destiny is filled with such promise, such joy. Perhaps the way any young mother feels when she feels expectant with new life that only she can give birth to.

The world is a complex thing it is beyond our understanding. The future is equally difficult to hold in our imagination. There is no straight line to where we are headed. It is difficult to find agreement on how to proceed.

I have experienced loss and disappointment through out my life. Many of you know my brother passed away this fall, my father died when I was 16, I never knew either of my grandfathers, they both died young. I sometimes wonder at their lives and find myself trying to imagine what the experience of life and its passing must have been like for them. I look at the long open plains of wheat in southern Minnesota where my father's father chased the wind on the horse drawn reaper dreaming of a future far away from the farm. He followed the teachings of the evangelists to China to make a difference in his own way. In China he road on horseback from school to school trying to teach teachers to learn from their experience and improve their teaching always hoping to make things better -- an experience that informed him when he worked to lift the academic standards at St. Olaf.

My mother's father survived World War 1 returning on a steamer hoping to turn his despair to building a life, a home in the rocky soil of New England. He single handedly built a home but the effort killed him leaving my mother and sister to look after their troubled mother.

My father struggled to see something possible in the agony of a hospital bed holding to life against a childhood disease. He lived his life always hoping to make a difference.

When I was a boy we would occasionally be visited by my great aunt Stella and I remember she often commented on breakdowns of childhood temper or disappointment by repeating the phrase, 'taint easy'. I often wondered at that phrase that was so simple yet at every age I heard it - seemed at once sentimental and profound. I had no clue of her life and why she might say it with that wry smile. I learned many years later of the death of a child in China, a child with the hopeful name of Grace. Stella, I heard was almost completely undone by this loss but these words sustained her. They came from a great ache in her of the promise of this child that was lost.

It is painful to wait anguishing, but then there are moments of hope we hold on to because we believe - we expect it to be. Like the prisoner ever hopeful for the day when we will be set free - we wait.

For some, life is like this - my great aunt Petra prayed every night for the Lord to take her, as she knew her mind was failing. She was strong willed but she could not will her body to give up and it hung on long after her mind seemed even aware of the life around her.

I sat in Roosevelt hospital this summer holding my brother's limp hand as he struggled with brain cancer. He smiled and tried to talk when other visitors came to the room but I was glad he could let go with me. When we were little I often felt he tolerated my presence being that bothersome younger brother but now he wanted me there. Not one to show despair or pain he would confess to being tired. He needed help to go to the bathroom and I walked with him when he finished he couldn't wash his hands because one arm was paralyzed so I let him use my hand - for that moment hand in hand the water streaming down, the squish of the soap we were one or almost one.

I helped him back to the bed and I tried to cheer him as I could see he was depressed. He looked at me, and then away saying, "Dave, do you think it would have been better if I'd died?"

"No, Richard," I said, "I am here to help you get back your life as best I can. You remember how you went out ahead of me when we climbed the Great Wall together and you kept coming back to pull me along. I must help you now, find your way back to the life you lost. He tried to be hopeful for my sake. But in the end after the blood clot perhaps he knew the wait would be too long, the prison his body had become too unbearable. I hope like my Aunt Petra in the end he did not know he was there while his strong heart beat on.

We are complex in nature and simple on the surface. I am continuously disappointed in the failures I see about me, my own failures included and overwhelmingly surprised by goodness and kindness that appears in the most surprising unexpected ways.

These are the blossoms in the desert. The promise of what can be if we can only believe in it. Even though my believing in something is no guarantee that it will come to be not to believe seems to suggest that it can never be. By belief I don't mean to believe in some abstract idea like God I mean to believe in the goodness and love we sometimes think of as God. This goodness can only bloom if we are able to see it. The goodness and love that can be spoken when we gather together in our own way to say we love each other even if only one day of the year.

Where is this goodness to be found? Where is the Lord if not in these words - these promises? Where is God if not in the kindness we offer each other? Where is this promise if not in you? Should we expect someone else? Where does God abide? Are you the one we are waiting for? Has the time of judgment come? Has the promise been fulfilled? Perhaps it is all around us if we only see it - we need the darkness to see the slender candle and the desert to see the blooming.

**When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"**

**Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see:**

**The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.**

**Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me."**

**As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind?**

**If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces.**

**Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.**

**This is the one about whom it is written:**

**" 'I will send my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way before you.'**

**I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.**