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What Are You Looking Forward to?
Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

Isaiah 35:1-10
Romans 8:18-30

Isaiah 35:1-10, "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. Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.' Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. 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. And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away."

Prayer: Lord Jesus send your Holy Spirit upon our preparations for Christmas. We who have so much to do seek quiet spaces to hear your voice each day. We who are anxious over many things look forward to your coming among us. We who are blessed in so many ways long for the complete joy of your kingdom. We whose hearts are heavy seek the joy of your presence. We are your people, walking in darkness, yet seeking the light. To you we say, "Come Lord Jesus!" – Fr. Henri Nouwen

At this time of the year, a lot of us are looking forward to something. What are you looking forward to in the coming weeks? Time off from school, visits from loved ones, concerts, worship services, presents, celebrating the birth of Jesus, Christmas, New Year's Eve—there are many things we look forward to in these last few weeks of the year. Tom Petty was right when he sang, "the waiting is the hardest part." That often feels true whether what we're waiting for is something we're looking forward to with positive anticipation like a child looks forward to Christmas morning or even if we're waiting for something less exciting, like for surgery or physical therapy to be over.

While many of us look forward to something we view positively like Christmas, I don't know anyone who looks forward to suffering. Most people naturally dread suffering, grief, pain, physical problems, loneliness, or worse. Whether because of disease, accident, violence, persecution, or war, suffering is something most people would gladly avoid whenever possible. Yet for some of us and for others of God's children, those things are being faced this morning. Just as Isaiah had a vision of God coming to redeem creation from all kinds of awfulness, Paul declares in *Romans 8* that the future glory and joy we'll share with Christ outweighs any present suffering we may have to endure. These verses from *Romans* are dense with images and meaning; so you have to concentrate as you read or hear them. *Romans 8:18-30*,

"I consider that **the sufferings** of this present time are not worth comparing with the **glory** about to be revealed to us. For **the creation** waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for **the creation** was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in **hope** that **the creation** itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of **the glory** of the children of God. We know that **the whole creation** has been **groaning** in labor pains until now; and not only **the creation**, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, **groan** inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For by **hope** we were saved. **Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes** for what is seen? But if we **hope** for what we do not see, **we wait for it with patience.**

"Likewise, **the Spirit** helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but **that very Spirit** intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of **the Spirit, because the Spirit** intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

"We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified."

Both the passage from *Isaiah 35:1-10* that we heard earlier, and *Romans 8* **speak to people dealing with a difficult present situation by encouraging them to look to a future that God will bring about.** Joy pulses throughout *Isaiah 35*. *Isaiah 35:1-4*, "**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. Strengthen the **weak hands**, and make firm **the feeble knees.** Say to those who are of **a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God.'**"

What difference can it make for us if we believe that God is coming to be with us when our hands and knees are growing weak and fear is trying to get a grip on our heart? When our hearts are aching with grief? When we feel overwhelmed by the troubles of the world? *Isaiah* asserts that God will act to reverse oppression and deliver the people. God "will come and save you" (35:4b). God's arrival brings something more. When God shows up amazing things happen; things we often don't think possible. "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert;" (35:5-6).

Isaiah says there will be a time when God's arrival transforms every inability into ability and every need into miraculous abundance. The coming of the Lord brings the capacity to see and hear to those whose senses are starving for light and sound. Nerves heal and grow and send and receive signals, atrophied muscles grow strong and flexible. What are these capacities for? They're for worship and celebration. They're for expressing joy at what God can do and

what God has done. The man who couldn't walk will have strength in his legs to walk. But he won't walk. He'll jump. He'll leap and bound like a fool for God. The woman who couldn't or wouldn't speak will find herself able to talk. But she won't talk. She'll shout. She'll sing. She'll praise God at the top of her lungs. In *Matthew 11:2-6*, we learn that what Isaiah said would happen when God showed up is taking place through the ministry of Jesus. "When John (the Baptist) heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: **the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.**"

Even now before God's future fully comes, we can experience transformation like this on a smaller scale. Willa Cather writes in one of her books, "Sometimes in the morning, if her feet ached more than usual, Mrs. Harris felt a little low. (Nobody did anything about fallen arches in those days, and the common endurance test of old age was to keep going after every step cost something.) She would hang up her towel with a sigh and go into the kitchen, feeling that it was hard to make a start. But the moment she heard the children running down the uncarpeted back stairs, she forgot to be low. Indeed, she ceased to be an individual, an old woman with aching feet; **she became part of a group, became a relationship.** She was drunk up into their freshness when they burst in upon her, telling her about their dreams, explaining their troubles with buttons and shoelaces and underwear shrunk too small. The tired, solitary, old woman Grandmother that she had been at daybreak vanished. Suddenly the morning seemed as important to her as it did to the children, and the mornings ahead stretched out sunshiny, important."

Being in relationship with God and with other people can be life-giving and transforming when we find ourselves in the wilderness of life. In *Isaiah 35* there's still one more miracle the Lord has in store: **the road home.** There, in the place that once was wilderness, once a place of wandering where it's easy to get lost, there'll be a clear road. There'll be no more wandering (35:8) and no more danger (35:9). The people God has redeemed and ransomed will walk on it, and they'll turn, and they'll come home (35:8-9). As they walk home, upon their head, like a garland, or a crown, will be a joy not bounded by time. Rejoicing and gladness will meet them on the road. Sorrow and sighing will flee (35:10). It's a beautiful vision of the future. Isaiah wrote for a people who needed hope for the future to help them get through the present. Many people today are living fragmented, fearful lives in a fractured world. What do we sigh for, what sorrows have brought us to tears? If we believe that God can come into our lives at any moment, how might that change us if we're in a wilderness time in our life?

At the Brewster Recycling Center, there are several containers filled with bottles and cans as well as some garbage. Today our church Boy Scout Troop will be emptying them and it's a very *Romans 8, Isaiah 35* kind of moment for Troop 77. Something redemptive emerging from what looks like garbage or refuse. Bags and bags of cans and containers of bottles will be redeemed for cash and transformed into a joyful experience for the Boy Scouts like a

campout. I'm sure most people don't look at bins of dirty cans and bottles and see something fun and renewing, but that's what it looks like to a Boy Scout family with eyes to see.

Perhaps one of the things we can work on in our own lives is training ourselves to look for signs of God's presence and activity everywhere we are, not just when we're in worship, praying, listening to Christian music or reading the Bible. Often there is beauty and power right in front of us even when we're in the wilderness that we don't notice because we're so preoccupied that we miss the flowers that God is causing to spring up.

A few years ago, *The Washington Post* (January of 2007) videotaped the reactions of commuters at a Washington D.C. Metro subway stop to the music of a violinist. The overwhelming majority of the 1,000+ commuters were too busy to stop. A few did, briefly, and some of those threw a couple of bills into the violin case of the street performer. No big deal, just an ordinary day on the Metro. Except it wasn't an ordinary day. The violinist wasn't just another street performer; he was Joshua Bell, one of the world's finest concert violinists, playing his multi-million-dollar Stradivarius violin. Three days earlier he had filled Boston's Symphony Hall with people paying \$100/seat or more to hear him play similar pieces. The question the *Post* author, and many others since, have asked is simple: Have we been trained to recognize beauty outside the contexts we expect to encounter beauty? I would ask, are we training ourselves to recognize signs of God breaking into our life and world with grace and beauty and music and joy? It may be present even when we're on the way to work if we open our ears and eyes. When we're in those wilderness and desert moments in our lives when God seems distant, hope is merely a glimmer, and faith is hanging on by a thread, we can come back to *Isaiah 35* with its images of glad lands, blooming deserts, all kinds of redemptive reversals, sighing and sorrow fleeing away, and ransomed people coming home singing.

Isaiah invites us to reflect this Advent season not only on God's coming in Christ, but also on our coming home. The picture is this—God comes. Immanuel is with us and we leap and shout and sing. And together we walk home. It's interesting that many of the most popular Christmas movies end with leaping, shouting, singing, and coming home. *It's a Wonderful Life* ends with everyone shouting with joy in response to Harry calling his big brother George "the richest man in town" and singing *Auld Lang Syne* in the Bayley's living room. *Miracle on 34th Street* closes with little Natalie Wood shouting with joy over her future home. "Is there a swing? There is one, there is one." In *Home Alone* Kevin McCallister's family comes home from France and everyone is glad that little Kevin didn't burn the house down. Ebenezer Scrooge on Christmas morning is overjoyed and shouts "I am as light as a feather, I am as happy as an angel, I am as merry as a school-boy. I am as giddy as a drunken man. A merry Christmas to every-body! A happy New Year to all the world!" Whether they intended to or not, whether they realize it or not, all these stories are tapping into the truth of Isaiah's vision about the joy we experience when God comes into our life and world and transforms and changes us—and we shout and sing all the way home.

Prayer: God of Jesus Christ, in this Advent Season, we give ourselves to you. We offer our hopes and visions and successes to you, and we give to you our despair and blindness and failures. All of us, nothing held back, every part we give to you. Transform us according to your will for the sake of Jesus Christ in whose name we pray, Amen.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. What's one thing you're looking forward to in the coming weeks?
2. How good are you at waiting for something you'd like to have, do or experience?
3. Both *Isaiah 35:1-10* and *Romans 8:18-30* speak to people dealing with a difficult present by encouraging them to look to a future of joy and glory that God will bring about. How does taking a longer view of our situation help us to cope with and endure hardship?
4. The wilderness is a significant place of spiritual growth in the scriptures. Why do you think that's the case?
5. What difference can it make if we believe that God is coming to be with us when we're feeling weak and fear is trying to get a grip on our heart?
6. How can we train ourselves to recognize signs of God breaking into our life and world with grace and beauty and music and joy?