

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Third Sunday of Advent
Sunday, December 14, 2025**

**“Shall Rejoice and Blossom”
Isaiah 35:1-10**

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There's a connection between our sense of hope and our sense of future. When we have hope, we believe that better days could yet be on the horizon, that what's broken now could yet be restored, that those wounded now could yet be healed. At the same time, I think the opposite is also true: there's a connection between losing hope and losing our sense of future. Think of how hopelessness is often expressed. 'I'm at the end of my tether.' 'I can't face another day.' 'I don't think I can go on.' In a way, to have hope is to believe in a future—and to be hopeless is to feel, well, futureless.

Our Old Testament Lesson this morning comes from what's called the Exile. Six centuries before the birth of Christ, Babylonian invaders attacked and conquered Jerusalem: they burned the city; they destroyed the temple; they captured Jews in the city as prisoners, taking them far from Jerusalem. And in exile, in this Babylonian captivity, these Jewish captives were cut off: they were cut off geographically, hemmed in by deserts and wilderness; they were cut off politically, having suffered military defeat and the capture of their king; they were cut off religiously, the Temple reduced to smoldering ruins.

In their disorientation and loss and isolation, the exiles were, as one scholar puts it, “cut off from the future” (Birch). In other words, they were, in a real sense, futureless. And our Old Testament Lesson was written for them—for these exiles in captivity (Birch, Roberts). Isaiah had a message for those who were futureless. So what did he tell them? Now, he could've told them to 'accept reality and face the facts.' He could've told them: 'You've got to move toward acceptance, learn to live with your new circumstances.' He could've said, 'Forget Jerusalem and the land God promised; Babylon has its charms, too. Forget the Lord who delivered you from Egypt; serve the Babylonian gods, instead.' That could have been a strategy; after all, why give a futureless people false hope?

But Isaiah won't have it. Instead, he declares that—even in exile, even in captivity, even in this place that seems utterly futureless—even here, God is able to create a new future for the futureless. Isaiah offers the exiles a prophetic promise that even here, in captivity—God is able to bring transformation and joy. Isaiah assures them that—even though they're cut off from their future—God will nonetheless make a way.

The exiles were cut off from their home, not only by the distance—but also by the inhospitable terrain, the deserts that spanned the landscapes around them. And yet, Isaiah promises, in this dream of a new future:

“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” (vv. 1-2).

In Isaiah's vision, the forbidding wilderness and deserts will be transformed, made lush and green to bloom like a garden:

“For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;” he tells the exiles,
“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” (vv. 6-7).

And not only will the wilderness be transformed, but—Isaiah announces—the exiles themselves will be physically transformed, as disabilities will melt away. To modern readers, this could sound ableist—but a question: why would Isaiah focus on this? Why does he speak about the exiles’ bodies transforming?

The historical context is important here: Isaiah is addressing the exiles—who had just lost a war. They’re the survivors who’d suffered violence in battle—and in captivity (Birch). The Babylonians sometimes maimed their captives: they captured the Judean King, Zedekiah, and took him captive to Babylon—but not before they had first gouged out his eyes (2 Kings 25:7). When we remember that the captives bore in the bodies the wounds of war, we hear very differently Isaiah’s promise that these marks of violence will melt away:

“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” (vv. 5-6).

In Isaiah’s prophetic dream, dry wastelands will bloom with flowers, bodies wounded by war will be healed, and then—and then God will make a way home. For the exiles, for the captives, for those who’ve been left futureless, God will make a new way to a new future—and so we hear this promise of the pathway God will create to lead the exiles home:

“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” (vv. 8-9).

To people who had been left futureless, this highway would become their future. In Isaiah’s vision, God will make a way where the captives will walk—but their captors won’t pursue; where no one will get disoriented or lost; where no dangers will threaten them; where the exiles will travel home in safety. No more will be lost, no more will be hurt, but all will return for a celebration of joy.

“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” (v. 10).

As one scholar puts it: “The despair of those [...] cut off from the[ir] future is replaced by the joy of those who see a new and unexpected future become possible” (Birch). And all this—the desert

transformed, their wounded bodies healed, the highway home—all this is Isaiah's prophetic promise that God is able to create a future for the futureless.

And because of this promise, because of this witness to God's capacity to create a future for the futureless, Isaiah invites the exiles not only to be encouraged—but to encourage each other, to lift each other up in hope as they await God's deliverance:

“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’” (vv. 3-4).

Because God is able to create a future for the futureless, Isaiah calls the exiles to strengthen and embolden one another, to give each other courage in the expectation of God's deliverance. And in this way, Isaiah's prophetic dream becomes a contagious source of hope: for those left feeling futureless, cut off from any real sense of future, Isaiah announces the future God will create, and invites the exiles to share the promise that God can make a future for the futureless. As one minister puts it, Isaiah's “promise [...] insist[s] on real consequences in human action and spirit. [His] vision wants an incarnation in lips, hands, knees, and untterrified hearts” (P. Duke). And those exiles, it turned out, were in the end freed from captivity: Isaiah was right to insist that God would find a way to give a future to the futureless...

Today, people experience still the loss of hope that comes with despairing of the future, feeling there is no future, fearing that they are futureless. Today, we know people who are captive to devastating forces—addiction, depression, alienation, loneliness, grief... Today, how many people in all kinds of circumstances are left feeling futureless?

Yet as we hear Isaiah's witness that God is able to make a future for the futureless, we also hear his invitation to bear witness to the hope that God makes possible. Today, on the Sunday of Joy, we hear this promise that God is able to create a new future and a new joy for those who feel futureless. And with this hopeful vision, may we be inspired to speak hope and encouragement to those in our lives who, today, have been left feeling futureless. Even when it seems that there is no future, Isaiah tells us—even then, we may hear this promise:

“The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom” (v. 1).

Thank God! Amen.