

Promised Joy

Isaiah 35:1-10

Farmville Baptist Church

December 11, 2022

Does anyone else have a commute to work every day?

About how long is your commute? Since I began here at Farmville Baptist, I have my first significant commute since I graduated seminary in 2007. But it's not a bad commute. It's about a 20-25 minute drive in, and it's a straight shot up Rt. 15. I actually enjoy it most days – it gives me time in the morning to get in mind what I need to accomplish that day, and in the evening it gives me time to shift my attention from the church to home. I don't think I'd want a commute that was much longer, but I have come to enjoy my daily commute, at least most of the time.

If you do spend a lot of time in the car each day, how do you use that time? Do you make phone calls? Listen to the radio? Think quietly about your day? Spend a little time in prayer – with eyes open, of course!?

I do all of those sometimes – but I also have found I spend time each day listening to something interesting. Sometimes it's a podcast – does anyone else listen to podcasts on your commute? I have a long list of podcasts I listen to whenever an episode catches my attention, from history podcasts to church podcasts to news podcasts to off-the-wall podcasts; my son and I listened to a funny episode on the invention of the whoopie cushion this week! And I've added the new Farmville Baptist Podcast to my rotation. But sometimes, I've listened to all the episodes that interest me – so I switch over to an audio book. And right now I'm listening to one I've had for a while, but never started. I've been listening, for

about 25 minutes at a time, to *Undaunted Courage*, an account of the expedition of Lewis and Clark.

You remember that the Lewis and Clark journey was an attempt by the two explorers and their Corps of Discovery, authorized by President Thomas Jefferson, to find a water route from the Mississippi River through the unexplored Louisiana Purchase to the Pacific Northwest. Along the way, they traded with Native American tribes, paddled canoes up roaring rivers, and trekked across the Rocky Mountains. They also discovered how much they needed to rely on guides who knew the country better than they did, most notably a young indigenous woman named Sacagawea.

Currently, I'm wintering with the expedition somewhere in the Dakotas, near the territory of the Sioux. And while there is a lot ^{that} ~~of~~ ^{me} interest in the book so far, including the politics of interactions between the Corps of Discovery and

the tribes they have encountered and the internal struggles of managing an expedition hundreds of miles from the

nearest American settlement, what stands out to me is ~~the~~ ^{wonder.}

~~wonder that~~ Lewis, Clark, and their group ~~had~~ ^{experienced great wonder} as they

encountered animals, plants, environments, and natural features that no American had ever seen before. In a journal entry from September 1804, Lewis details a plain beside the river that he and a hunting party explored, covered in “barking squirrel” burrows – prairie dogs. He said, “This scenery already rich pleasing and beautiful was still farther heightened by immense herds of Buffalo deer Elk and antelopes which we saw in every direction feeding on the hills and plains.”¹ The company had a habit of ending each day around the campfire, sharing the strange and wonderful

¹ Meriweather Lewis, quoted in Stephen Ambrose, *Undaunted Courage*, chapter 14. Lewis’ spelling was quite erratic.

new things they encountered each day in what was, to them, the interior wilderness of North America.

I think that the prophet Isaiah would have understood a bit of the joy that Meriweather Lewis, William Clark, and the rest of the Corps of Discovery experienced as they paddled up the Missouri River through the plains of the Dakotas.

After all, Isaiah is looking at a truly desolate wilderness that reflects the despair of the Jewish people and seeing a path through that wilderness that brings hope for God's people and joy in the beauty of God's good earth. You can practically see the plants opening up to full bloom, like some timelapse video from the Nature channel, and you can imagine that this is a land where the deer and the antelope play, just as Lewis and Clark experienced in the American West. Everywhere Isaiah looks, there is new life, restored vegetation, the drip of water and the song of giddy travelers.

This wilderness is no longer a desert. Instead, the land itself rejoices, for it is now a rainforest, an oasis, a lush ecosystem filled with both the bounty of the earth and, as Isaiah says, “the majesty of our God.”²

Just what is this joyous transformation? For Isaiah, it is the “new thing” that God is about to do. This is a text written to people who are in exile, men and women, whole families, who have been taken from all they’ve ever known and relocated against their will to a foreign land. Their government, their religious and social institutions – all destroyed or changed. Some of them may have suffered physical torment and even torture; we know the last king of Judah suffered family trauma and physical pain at the hands of his Babylonian captors. Others among the exiles surely did, as well. And all of the exiles suffered emotional and

² Isaiah 35:2

mental anguish as they were led into captivity, conquered and dejected. Joy was sparse in Babylonian exile – but Isaiah had word that God would bring it about again.

The joy of God was wrapped up in the awareness that God was with his people. In some ways, this was a new understanding for the exiles. For generations, Jews had thought of God as the God of the Promised Land, the God of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. That's where God lived, at least on earth; his home address was the Temple in Jerusalem, and that's where his people would meet him. But God had never been so limited. Isaiah, like many of the other prophets around the time of the exile, began to draw from the earlier stories of God and his people, when the Israelites were slaves in Egypt and needed saving, when God used his mighty hand to shut down the power of the slaver king Pharaoh, when God led his people in the wilderness

with a cloud by day and a fire by night. That sort of God is still who the Jews in exile could count on. That God would still come to their rescue. That God would still hear their cries of pain and unjust suffering. That God would bring his people salvation, bring them relief, bring them healing and hope and a way home.

How could that promise not bring joy?

I don't know about you, but I need joy in my life. I'm not in a particularly bad or painful part of life right now – but I still need joy. I think we all do. The other day, I was talking with some friends about what TV shows we all watch. I don't really do well anymore with shows that don't have some humor, some laughter, some feel-good element. Same thing with the books I read, the music I listen to – it has to have something positive, even if it is dealing with some heavy subject matter. This tendency has increased for me in recent

years, maybe as a result of the increasing anxieties of our world, maybe as I've seen more and more of life and realize how the world will suck all the joy we innately have out of us.

I think those tendencies I have – to seek ~~for~~ entertainment and content to reflect upon with some happiness or joy or contentment – reflects my hunger for joy. We live in a joy-starved world, and our moments of delight in all being right and hopeful and beautiful...well, that can be fleeting.

But it doesn't have to be.

Isaiah speaks to us, as he did to the exiles, with a promise – a promise of joy. Even in the wilderness of modern life, of the limits of age and infirmity, even in the midst of painful realities beyond our control – even in those circumstances which drain us of our innate joy, we hear of the God who is for us, the God who loves us, the God who is

saving us. Whatever we are going through, whatever our world is going through, God is not distant from us. He does not abandon us in a far-off land, cut off from his presence or his blessings. He comes to us. He stands with us and supports us. Sometimes he heals our bodies from our pains and limits. Other times he heals our minds and our hearts from the suffering we feel. He frees us from the chains of self-oppression when we let him and works to free us from the chains of systems of oppression all around us.

If you've ever experienced the joy of God, you might find that Isaiah's language and images ring true. It can seem like flowers blooming in the deserts of our souls. It can be like eyes being opened and new sight being received for the first time. It can feel like springs bubbling up in the dusty ground. It can seem like all of these things because that's how joy, true joy, exists: as the somewhat surprising, deeply

good, and unabashedly life-giving experience of life as it should be, as God intends it, as full of blessing and hope and peace, shalom-kind of peace, a wholeness that goes beyond words. That's the joy of God – and it is the joy he has promised to give to us, just as he did through Isaiah for the Jewish exiles far from home.

But that still doesn't tell us how to get from here to there. It didn't for the exiles, either. Great, Isaiah, I can hear them say. The desert will become a garden and the haunt of jackals will become a verdant oasis. But we're still stuck in Babylon. We're still far from home – and where we're at isn't all that joyful. We're still beset by pain and suffering, uncertainty and despair. How do we tap into that promised joy, even where we are right now? How do we experience your salvation?

There is a highway, Isaiah says. It is called the Way of Holiness, and it is there for those who walk on that way. This is a powerful image in the Bible, the road or path that leads to the promised joys of the Promised Land. We find glimpses of it in the story of Abraham, the wandering nomad seeking the place promised by God. It plays a large part in the story of the Exodus, the foundational narrative of the Jewish people and the central revelation of the character of God and his care for his people in the Hebrew Scriptures. Isaiah is not the only prophet to speak of the Way. And Jesus and the early church adopted the metaphor and transformed it in the New Testament, so much so that Jesus spoke of himself as the Way, and the early church was known as people of the Way.

The Way is a manner of living, a commitment to seeing the world and our lives within it through the eyes of God, a

practice of faith that touches on everything we do and everything we say and everything we experience. It is an all-encompassing way *of life*...and, Isaiah and a chorus of other biblical voices proclaim, it is the way *to* the promised joy.

In college, I took a class on religion and literature. We read all sorts of things, from a Shakespearean play to the modern philosophical novel *The Life of Pi*. But an image from the Flannery O'Connor short story "Revelation" has stuck in my mind since that class. The protagonist of the story, Ruby Turpin, has been jolted out of her self-satisfied, narrow, and frankly racist and prejudiced view of who is blessed by God and able to be saved. She receives a vision – a vision of the way to heaven.

O'Connor writes, "She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling

toward heaven.” This doesn’t surprise Mrs. Turpin – but who those souls were did: black people and white trash, “battalions” of who she characterizes as “freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs.” And there, at the back,

“was a tribe of people whom she recognizes as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.”³

O’Connor depicts the path through the desert, the path on the way to God’s glory – and on that path there is no room

³ Flannery O’Connor, “Revelation,” first published in *The Sewanee Review*, Spring 1964, thesewaneeereview.com/articles/revelation

for prejudice, for judgmentalism, for self-aggrandizement, or for condemnation, of others or of self. There is simply, as the story ends, the sound of “the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah.”

My friends, that is the sort of path to God’s promised joy that we find portrayed in Isaiah’s song today. So if we will heed Isaiah’s invitation – to “strengthen the feeble hands” and “steady the knees that give way” – if we say to those with fearful hearts, “Be strong, do not fear; your God will come,” then we will join that band of pilgrims on the Way of Holiness. And then the final words of the chapter will find a home in our own hearts and lives: “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.”⁴ This is the promised joy of our Lord.

⁴ Isaiah 34:10