

Isaiah 35:1–10

The Return of the Redeemed to Zion

35 The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus **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.

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

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

4 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.”

5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

6 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;

7 the burning sand shall become a pool,

and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,^a
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

8 A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it,^b
but it shall be for God's people;^c
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.

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.

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 joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Luke 1:46–55

Mary's Song of Praise

46 And Mary^f said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,

47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
50 His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
51 He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
53 he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
54 He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

This week we light the joy candle. It is pink because rosy pink is the liturgical color which represents joy. This week we focus on the joy of Christ entering the world.

Joy is a word that is everywhere during this season. Wrapping paper is covered with the word, formed out of everything from candy canes to gumdrops. The word adorns many of the holiday decorations, and it is in nearly every Christmas carol on the radio - Joy to the world, O come all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant, tidings of comfort and joy. Yes, this season is saturated with messages of joy, and yet our culture seems to have little understanding of what joy is.

We live in a culture that highly values happiness. We often hear advice like: do whatever makes you happy. If you are not happy, leave. Your happiness is the most important thing. So long as you are happy. For a country that so highly prizes happiness, one would assume our people are, well, happy. Yet a very recent study by Our World in Data revealed that the US is tied for the second most depressed country in the world, losing the distinction to the Ukraine, whose citizens are navigating life in a literal war zone. Year after year, we sadly observe that once the holidays are done, once the songs are retired for a year and the wrapping paper tossed, once the messages of joy fade into the next holiday, usually an overwhelming sea of pink, white and red for valentine's day, depression and suicide rates dramatically rise. January is known to be the most depressed month, peaking between January 17th to January 24th.

For all the messages of joy over the Christmas season, for all the Scriptures telling us to be joyful, our people are miserable. This sorry state of things begs the question of where are we going wrong?

Our first mistake is not understanding the difference between happiness and joy. I said earlier that our culture prizes happiness, but I wouldn't say that our culture prizes joy. Happiness is fleeting. It is a positive feeling that comes and goes depending on our circumstances. A partner might make us happy when the relationship is fresh and new, but that happiness might fade when they floss their toes with their socks or when their mother not so subtly comments on your housekeeping. Joy is different. It is not fleeting. It is the firm foundation inside that is confident in the promises of God, and the quiet assurance that nothing, neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Joy sometimes will overlap with our happiness, especially when God's presence seems obvious and we feel that the darkness of our world is far from us. Our joy remains, however, after the happiness is swept away, when we are in the dark night of the soul, when God seems far, if there at all.

The second mistake we make is not properly locating the source of our Joy. This time of year, we hear messages that we should take in the sights and sounds of the season, the magical excitement of children, and that will give us joy. The time with family, the good cheer, the Christmas cookies and the presents are said to give us joy. All of these things, though, will fade. If our

joy is located in the Christmas season, we will soon falter and find our joy is gone.

Our joy, however, springs not from the decorations or Santa Claus. Instead, it is located in the incredible gift of God with us. It is magnified by the long story, the longtime of expectation that led us to the moment of the birth of Jesus, the Incarnation, God becoming flesh and dwelling among us. CS Lewis wrote that The Incarnation of Christ is the central miracle asserted by Christians. Indeed, It is in the central moment in all of creation. It is the moment that the God who had endlessly spoken of God's love to us demonstrated that love by the word becoming flesh. The joy of Christmas does not come from its trappings, but from this great miracle, the greatest miracle of all.

Had God not become incarnate we would still be little more than dead men and women walking, trapped in an endless cycle of sin and death. This universe, every blade of grass and every animal would be casualties of the curse we caused. But God did not leave us to that sorry, but well-deserved end.

As all of you probably know by now, I'm old fashioned in my worship style and tastes. My husband can attest that I dislike any of the modern Christmas songs. If it's not in the hymnal and a few hundred years old, I'll probably not like it. There is no rocking around the Christmas tree in my house, no roasting chestnuts over an open fire and definitely no letting it snow. There is one exception to this rule, and that is a song by Francesca Battistelli, which my husband will also attest that I cry to every time I hear it.

It is written from the perspective of a witness to the baby Christ, perhaps Mary, perhaps someone just present. It begins with the words Hold on now, I gotta take a deep breath
/I don't know what to say when I look in your eyes/You made the world before I was born
/Here I am holding you in my arms tonight/Noel Noel, Jesus our Emmanuel.
She goes on to say "I'm staring into the face of my savior, king and creator/ You could've left us on our own, but you're here"

Most of us have probably had the privilege of holding an infant at some point in our lives. If you have, then you know that are tiny and completely helpless, dependent on their caregivers for every single thing they need.

And yet, two thousand years ago, the God who created the universe, who know before the foundation of the world the choices we would make, the all-powerful God whose glory is so great none can look upon it and live, chose to put it all aside and to put on the flesh of God's humble creations. God chose to leave the glory of heaven and become a tiny speck of dust in Mary's womb, that would grow to become a helpless, tiny baby. And all out of love for you and for me. Moreover, if it had been just you, God still would have done the same. That is how deep God's love runs. That is how great the miracle is. And that is where we find our joy. The wonder of this season is not found in cheery decoration or stories or family or even the excitement of children eager for presents. It is found in a God so in love with us that God would become one of us, that God would come down to us so that we all might rise. It is found in the wonder of a helpless infant that would save us all.

And this joy cannot be taken away. It remains when the tree comes down on epiphany, when the friends and family have returned home, when we've all gone back to work and pastors around the world can finally relax.

Friends, this season is passing by so quickly. Let us take a deep breath and look upon the face of our savior, the face of a tiny, helpless infant so in love with you, and there, let us find our true joy, a joy that will last us throughout the year, and into eternity.

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