

Joy

A sermon on Isaiah 35:1-10 by Jennie Clarke, 14 December 2025

Isaiah 35 is a powerful, poetic word of comfort for the Tribe of Judah exiles, Mourning the loss of their temple, land, and sovereignty.

Isaiah lived and preached long after the book of Joshua that we've been studying was written.

Isaiah describes the exiled people.
Their suffering is displayed in weak hands,
feeble knees,
a fearful heart,
poor vision,
hindered hearing,
broken bodies and silent tongues.

They are utterly overwhelmed by despair
and weariness.
They have little capacity to move.
They are stuck
Stuck in a desert.

Yet...Isaiah paints for them a picture of return
from exile.

And, while the idea of returning home would
have warmed their hearts, what an
impossible challenge that must have felt.
I can almost feel their shoulders slump.

Depending on what route that return took,
the journey was about 800km as the crow flies ...straight across a blazing
desert
30-40 days of walking

...Or up to twice that far if they followed a more northerly route, around the
edge of the desert,
that kept them closer to water and supplies.

No matter what path they chose, it was a daunting journey for even the
strongest,
let alone the weak and the disabled.



The mere prospect of such a walk would give “feeble hands, weak knees, and a fearful heart” to even the most eager pilgrim.

Have you ever felt stuck?
Have you ever been stuck in a desert?
Are you stuck now?

Have you been sick for so long that you can’t remember being well?

Or do you care for someone who’s illness will not end in earthly healing without a divine miracle?
cancer, aging, dementia
as both my parents live with

Are you far from home, alone in a foreign place? wandering in a wilderness?
scarce resources and nowhere to go for help?

A desert.
Unemployment
Housing insecurity
Relationship breakdown

Like Isaiah’s people, “sorrow and sighing are on your heart and on your lips all the time.”

Isaiah 35 may have been written for you...and me.

Isaiah is declaring joy and courage and gladness,
...and for whom?

For those stuck in the wilderness, the dry lands,
For the weak hands, the feeble knees,
the fearful hearts.

Which doesn’t make much sense, really...

Because those are the places and peoples that probably need joy the most,
but they also seem the unlikely to find it,
at least in their current condition.

Usually, we believe that joy is something that comes *after*—
after we have powerful hands and strong knees and courageous hearts,
after we have overcome our fears.
Then we have joy.

But Isaiah here, at least at the beginning, seems to point to something else.

He declares: "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"

It seems to me that Isaiah might be describing the possibility of joy **before** all those things happen,
In advance of those things happening
while his audience are still weak, feeble and fearful.

If that's what he's talking about, then I'm definitely listening—
because weak, feeble and fearful feels a lot more like me
more than strong, powerful and courageous does.

The image of the crocus caught my
attention.
Did it catch yours?

I don't know much about flowers,
most people will tell you I can kill almost
any plant,
I try ...and I'm getting better
But I'm no gardener
But... I do what most people do when
they don't know something...
I turned to Google and asked my other
brain what a crocus is,
and when it blooms.



Apparently, the crocus is a tiny stump of a flower,
just a few inches off the ground,
and it comes in all kinds of colours—
purple, yellow, lavender, white.

It's a ferocious little flower
best known because it blooms when nothing else does.

In colder climates than ours
Before the snow has even melted away,
before the trees show the smallest bud
or the grass hints at green,
you can find crocuses poking their heads out and displaying their colours for
the world to see.

And after autumn has taken its toll,
when leaves have fallen and trees are bare
and the green has leached out of the grass,

the crocus appears again,
defiantly spring-like
with its colourful petals and green stems
amidst the greys and browns of the landscape.

This little fella stands loud and proud.
Resilient in the face of all that life throws at it.

And...here it is in the first part of today's passage.

It's the image of the crocus that speaks to me of joy **before** ...and even
during,
rather than the joy that only comes **after**.

The second half of today's passage speaks of more traditional joy
Of traditional rejoicing.

Of miracles
Of justice
Of a highway that makes our journey easier.

Of course, we rejoice when the blind can see
and the deaf can hear and the lame can walk.

Of course, we rejoice when the drought has ended and the green growth
returns.

When we have security from lions and beasts,
when we are on the right path, straight and smooth

when we land that dream job
or that relationship is reconciled
the doctor gives us a clean bill of health
When we witness justice
When abundance replaces lack
Of course, the sorrow and sighing cease when that happens.

Or...I hope it does!

Pause

The second half of this passage from Isaiah reassures us that the day of
rejoicing will come,

that God's promises are true
and God will make good things happen,
and we will rejoice when they do - someday.

While that is an important reminder,
what's far more compelling to me is that crocus,
...which seems to testify that we don't need to wait for all that good stuff to
happen to be filled with joy.

A joy that, like a crocus, blooms when it is illogical, impossible, inconceivable
—that's the joy I need.

The Apostle Paul seems to have found it.

When he was in prison, Paul wrote letters.
Lots of letters...to lots of people.

Theologians set his letter to the Philippians apart from the other 'jail letters'
because he wrote this book from an even more precarious position than the
others.

In it, he seems to foreshadow his death, he fears for his life, and yet, one of
the major themes of the letter is joy in suffering.

Chapter 4 verses 12 & 13 in the NIV says...

I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have
learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well
fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. ¹³ I can do all this through
him who gives me strength.

When we read this passage in context, we see that Paul isn't saying that God
will help us conceive a child, win Lotto or become healed.

He's not saying that God can't help us do those things, either.

What Paul is saying is that to some degree he has lived out his own "worse
case scenario"...
and has found a way to be content in Christ alone.

His saying that he doesn't have to wait until he has
Christ PLUS physical freedom
Christ PLUS full health
Christ PLUS ...anything, really...to be okay.

The question I have is this,
Is Christ enough for us?

Is it Jesus PLUS happy days that we worship?
Is it Jesus PLUS an easy life that we crave?
Is it Jesus PLUS our perfect plan that we have signed up for?

Is our joy only complete when it has a side order
(or even main course) of what we want?

Or is my joy complete in Christ alone?

Is it possible for a crocus-like joy to bubble up within me,
burst forth from me
and bloom when it is illogical,
impossible or inconceivable?

A joy that doesn't wait for me to get myself together,
That doesn't wait until I have my work/life balance perfectly figured out
Doesn't wait until I've achieved the perfect number on the scales
Or the bank balance
Or the blood test

A joy that comes **before** I'm healed and fixed
and organised and prepared
and reconciled and righteous
and whole and holy.

That kind of **before** joy could only come from God.
That kind of joy is a Fruit of the Holy Spirit.

And Paul seems to have it!

It springs from a deep-seated delight in God that is distinct from fleeting
happiness
and a result of trusting God's promises.

This Holy Spirit fuelled joy provokes a sense of wonder and fulfillment that is
not dependent on external circumstances.

It comes from trusting in God's promises and His goodness - even when facing
hard times.
Even in prison.
Even in the desert.

It is an internal state that can coexist with suffering, because it stems from our deep relationship with God – Father, Son & Spirit.

And, although it is a gift of the Holy Spirit...it can be cultivated and encouraged through our practices

It can grow through actions - like serving others,

It can bloom when we trust God is still working for good, even in difficult situations

It can blossom when we cultivate an attitude of gratitude for God's many gifts - big and small.

It's the season of Advent,
and today our theme is joy.

So how does Isaiah 35 fit with Advent joy, my dear hubby asked.

Well, I have to think that our God of Christmas incarnation is the God of that crocus-like joy.

After all, God did not wait for the world to get its act together **before** sending Christ.

Mary and Joseph didn't have their lives arranged just right to welcome a baby.

They didn't even have a proper place to stay in Bethlehem.

The shepherds were terrified of the good news,
and certainly had not prepared themselves for the holy delivery.

Yet ... God came anyway,
the tiny babe was born,
and everyone rejoiced.

A crocus in the snow,
a spring of water in the desert,
joy **in spite of** fear and doubt and suffering.

Feeble knees and weak hands and fearful hearts, there is joy for you as well.

Flowers bloom ...even in the desert.
Joy is possible ...even amid doubt and fear and struggle.

God comes to us just as we are. Right now.

Thank God, because I don't think I'd find real joy any other way.

At the heart of our passage today is the simple promise of verse 4,
"Your God will come... to save you."

He will make a way for you
He will build your highway home

In fact, He already has...through Jesus.

Safe passage from exile.
Reconciliation of relationship.

That's the message of Advent every year,
and Isaiah 35 gives that promise a particular colour and texture and flavour.

Offering a compelling image of joy.

Joy to the world, the Lord has come.