

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
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The Way Out

Isaiah 35:1-10

Jill Briscoe tells about a missionary kid, a fifth grader named Heidi, who was at boarding school, far from her home. Heidi wrote home to her parents:

My two first-grade roommates are fine. They gave me the biggest bear hug tonight. But I will explain one of my very hard nights. I'm homesick, Mom. I was woken up by loud laughing. Julie was laughing really hard; she'd flooded the bed. Aunt Janice changed the sheets. I'd just gone to sleep when Esther woke me up.

She was homesick. I got her to sleep finally. Then Julie woke me up, homesick, and I got her to sleep. And drifting off, I heard Julie crying again. She'd thrown up, and Aunt Janice was asleep, so I woke her up, and she had to turn on the light and change the sheets. I finally got to sleep.

Last night somebody woke me up so homesick that I crept into bed, and we held each other. Even though it's a pain sometimes, I like to be known as the comforter.

Briscoe says, "Little Heidi, fifth grader, sang that little girl to sleep. She sang her a song because she knows what it is in fifth grade to wait on the Lord. The great music maker, who can give us a song to sing and the power and the will and the joy to sing it."¹

A song to sing. A song that makes the homesickness bearable. Perhaps a song of joy. We had plenty of that in last Sunday's worship service, particularly during our adult musical. If you arrived last Sunday without a song of joy, I hope that you were given one by the time you left. That's the way it is with joy. It wants to come to expression. And music, particularly singing, is often joy's preferred way of making itself known.

In today's Scripture passage from Isaiah, God's people are promised a song of joy. ". . . and the ransomed of the Lord will return. 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" (v. 10). Notice that the verb tense is future. God's people *will* return, *will* sing, *will* be overtaken by joy.

For the present, however, there's more silence than singing. That's because for God's people Israel, the joy of the Lord is being drowned out by the jeering of their oppressors. The Israelites are still in exile. They've lost their land, their temple, and their sovereignty. They feel and experience the suffering of exile in their very bodies, in the form of "feeble hands," "weak knees," and "fearful hearts" (vv. 3-4). Their despair is deep and dense. There appears to be no way out.

But God has not abandoned them. He confronts their fear with a promise: "Your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you" (v. 4). When God comes to rescue them, things will change, dramatically. For one thing, bodies will be restored. And not only the human part of God's creation, but the non-human part as well. Desert environs will gush with water. Desolate places will be transformed into paradise. "The wilderness will rejoice and blossom . . . ; it will rejoice greatly and bloom"

(vv. 1-2). So the joy of the Lord's coming isn't confined to human beings. The rest of God's creation will join in the music as well.

In C. S. Lewis's book, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, weather and seasons play a critical part in the narrative. As preacher Mark Buchanan has put it:

. . . when the Pevensie children first arrive in Narnia, they discover a curse is on the land. The curse has a very real manifestation: it's always winter and never Christmas. Winter has become the perennial season. The whole land is plunged into a dark night of the soul. But then the children begin to hear this mysterious, thrilling, earth-shaking news: Aslan is on the move. The Great King is back. He's already at work, and what he's planned will change everything. The sign and symbol of that is that winter gives way to spring. The snows melt; the ice breaks; the cold lifts; the trees blossom.²

In Isaiah's poetic description of God's promise, when God moves to rescue and restore his people, the creation itself responds with joy and bursts with new life. The coming of the Lord generates praise and singing.

But the sound of that music is still somewhere out ahead of God's people. Remember that for now, they're still in exile. They're still wandering in a wilderness. A wilderness where there are plenty of trials and sufferings. Physical suffering. Material suffering. Emotional suffering. Mental suffering. Spiritual suffering. Suffering that's experienced both individually and collectively. Suffering one by one. Suffering together. Suffering that makes it hard to imagine the joyful sounds of singing.

Yet God's promise stands. There will come a day when his people will return home, with singing. Theologian J. I. Packer has written, "I've experienced God's presence most powerfully in worship, often during the singing. I suppose because when we sing to him, we are looking hard in his direction."³ Without much to sing about, it was probably hard for the Israelites to look hard in God's direction. But the good news is that God is looking hard in their direction. And coming in their direction. Coming to them. Coming to save them. Coming to restore them.

One of the reasons God has given us this congregation, and our worship gatherings, particularly during this time of the year, is to remember that our God is a God who comes. He has come to us in the past through the life, law, and experience of his people Israel. He has come to us through the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ. He comes to us now through the Word, through the sharing of the bread and cup, through daily experiences, and through other people, particularly the poor and the needy. He has promised to come to us at the end, when Christ returns to complete his work of salvation in our lives and in the world. So we live by faith in the Lord's faithfulness. We look hard in his direction, holding firmly to his promise that one day "gladness and joy will overtake [us], and sorrow and sighing will flee away" (v. 10).

This is what makes Christmas a season of great hope. Not the hope that somehow, someday, someday, we'll be able to make it back to a nostalgic past where life is a perfect, perpetual holiday filled with all the warmth and glow we can imagine. But rather, the hope that's solidly grounded in the life, death, resurrection, and return of Christ. The hope of God's reign, fully revealed and fully realized, on earth as it is in heaven. That's the kind of hope that enables believers to face forward, and live in the direction of God's kingdom.

That's what the Israelites were longing for. That's what Isaiah proclaimed. He proclaimed that the redeeming mercy of God is the only way out of the sin and suffering and death that hold us captive. If we're going to make it back home and into the fullness of God's presence, it will be because God is forgiving toward us, and comes to rescue us from our

waywardness and wandering. That's why Christ was born. He is our way out of the wilderness.

In today's text, God promises his people that there will be a highway they can travel out of exile and back to Zion. On this highway, called the "Way of Holiness" (v. 8), all the usual threats to travelers will be gone. No more desert terrain, wild animals, or human attackers. Plus this route will be straight and clear. There will be no mistaking its purpose. Travel writer and photographer Doug Lansky tells about seeing a yellow, diamond-shaped sign in Mill Valley, California that read, "Not a Through Street." Right below it was a blue circle with a white arrow pointing straight ahead and the words, "Evacuation Route." So which is it? A dead end or a route to safety?

The good news from Isaiah is that God doesn't give us mixed messages about the way out of our wilderness. Though the prevalence of evil, the relentlessness of suffering, and the destructiveness of our own behavior can make it feel like this world, and our lives, are on a road to nowhere, remember that God has acted through the Messiah, descended from his people Israel, to open the way out, so that we may be redeemed and return to where we need to be in relationship with God and with one another.

Some of you may be familiar with the words from Don Moen's song, "God Will Make a Way": "By a roadway in the wilderness, He'll lead me / And rivers in the desert will I see / Heaven and Earth will fade but His word will still remain / And He will do something new today. / Oh, God will make a way / Where there seems to be no way / He works in ways we cannot see / He will make a way for me."

In and through Jesus Christ, God has made a way for us. And I know that within our collective story as God's people in Christ, you have your own personal stories and experiences of being in a wilderness of some sort. A desolate place where all that you see and hear around you, and what you feel within you, tempts you to surrender hope. But authentic hope, by its very nature, enables you to see possibilities beyond your immediate circumstances. I like the way that William Lynch has put it when he defines hope "as the fundamental knowledge and feeling that there is a way out of difficulty."⁴

A way out of whatever wilderness you're wandering in. A way out of anxiety and depression. A way out of chaos in your personal finances. A way out of physical disability or disease. A way out of thinking that your marriage is done for. A way out of the wreckage created by your own behavior. A way out of that rupture in a relationship where reconciliation seems impossible. A way out of addiction to alcohol or drugs. A way out of obsession with personal success and social popularity. A way out of being stuck in the past. A way out of whatever is keeping you from getting on or staying on the route to redemption that God has opened up through Jesus Christ.

I'm not promising that your transformation will be instantaneous, or that you'll be put on the express route to glory. Time in the wilderness can pass incredibly, and often excruciatingly, slowly. But I can reassure you of the good news that a loving God is there in the wilderness with you, and that God is in the business of making a way out, for humankind and for you. And as you cling to his faithfulness and hold onto his promises by faith, you may already be able to hear the joyful singing of the redeemed, and join in.

¹ Jill Briscoe, "Hanging Up Our Faith," Preaching Today, Tape No. 148.

² Mark Buchanan's sermon, "Spring." Preaching Today website < <https://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2008/december/amanforallseasons2.html>>.

³ J. I. Packer, *Leadership* (Vol. 12, No. 3).

⁴ Lynch is quoted in *The Living Pulpit* (January-March 1992) 30.