



Finding Real Joy

Isaiah 35:1-10

Our society is enamored with the idea of joy, happiness, and celebration. Our entertainment desires fuel a multi-billion dollar industry. We entertain ourselves with shopping, television, movies, dining, sports, theatre, gaming, and online networks, yet the more entertainment opportunities we employ, the more we seem to crave. Many find themselves in the pits of despair at the end of attempts to flee reality through more deviant forms of entertainment through substance abuse and illicit sexual expression. Amid the hangovers and symptoms of withdrawal, there is a void of pain, distress, and depression left unassuaged. Where and how can we find real joy that is lasting and heals the hungers that drive this economic expression of our need?

Isaiah spoke to a people yearning for relief. It was in the midst of threat from exile and the military expansion of a foreign power. The nation sought respite, relief, and news of a return to the glorified life of that gilded age of glory. Many believe the words from this portion of Isaiah reflect a people already living the experience of exile. The words hearken back to a time of peace and tranquility in ancient Israel under the peace of Solomon's reign. They recall a time under David when the nation found itself in the midst of the presence of Yahweh's blessing. They look forward to a return, not to the normalcy before exile, but of an idyllic time of restoration to God's full measure of blessing.

These were words of joy and yearning. They were words of celebration of what might have been and what could once again become the reality for the people of Yahweh, returned from exile to the land of God's promise and blessing. This blessing would come to the nation, not out of things they might do for themselves, but out of what only God could and would accomplish. It was out of God's action of reversal that true joy would spring forth as the blooming of desert flowers after an unexpected rain.

In the meantime, Israel languished in exile, yearning for the familiar, the comfortable, the days of long ago and far away when life had held meaning, possibility, and security. Back in the land of promise, they had been able to plan for the future, to expect God's blessing, and to dream of an even better tomorrow. The despair of living in exile sapped their energy, their expectations, and their hope of celebration. They could cry with longing, but they found it difficult to hope with anything other than a painful longing.

Isaiah's words were filled with something wholly different. He spoke with a confidence lacking among the exiled community in Babylon. His words declared a hope to overcome the doom and gloom of oppression in a foreign land. He spoke of the creative power of the One who had called the worlds into being with the simple expression of divine will: "Let there be light!" "Let there be life!"

Isaiah trusted this God who had spoken to the primal chaos to create a space for life to create new possibilities for the people languishing in exile. This Creator had once demonstrated mastery and authority over disaster, ruin, and chaos. Isaiah confided in Yahweh for a new beginning, a fresh start, a new lease on life for a people uprooted and carried off in service to a pagan king in an idolatrous land.

The people were tired, dispirited, weak, and timid in such a setting. They walked around as defeated, seeking to forget their woes and drown their sorrows. They wanted to forget reality, but Isaiah called them not to forget, but to see with new eyes and a perspective arising from faith in Yahweh. He called them to hope, for in that hope there was joy, even amid the pain and chaos of a life in exile. From the fear that waged war with their emotions, Isaiah called them to confident, vibrant faith—a faith to celebrate with joy!

What was there to celebrate? How could they rejoice when they lived in oppression and despair? Life was not easy. There was little chance to make much of themselves in exile. They were essentially slaves to the imperial power and living at the mercy of their overlords. It was so hard to celebrate when life held so many opportunities for tears and so little room for delight. The oppression of exile blinded them to the possibilities for rejoicing in the presence and creative action of God's presence.

Oh, they could sing the songs of longing for home. They could sing the melancholy airs of yearning for days long past and an unforeseeable return to their homeland. What they could not do was trust in the reality behind all the yearning. They could not see God's rescue and redemption, returning their children to the land promised to Abraham so many long years gone by. They could yearn, but they could not rest and rejoice in the ethereal visions of glory that seemed so far from their reach.

Isaiah would not let them remain in their despair. He spoke words of hope that turned to rejoicing. Even amid the gloom of doubt, despair, and trouble, he spoke words of comfort that would turn their grief into happiness and songs of laughter. He called them to leave behind their cries of yearning to embrace a future of delight in God's re-creation, the renewal of covenant and return to the land that held so much meaning to the descendants of Abraham.

The God who had spoken the world into order would one day call them back to the blessing promised to their forefathers. Their turning from God would be forgiven as they were called back to the covenant promises and responsibilities. Their lack of vision would turn to sight. The tables would be turned on those who now oppressed them. Their seeming inadequate strength would be replaced with vigor and their ears turned deaf to God's will would listen with renewed intensity. Their tongue-tied despondency would become shouts and songs of laughter and joy. Joy would pour forth from Yahweh's reversal!

Isaiah was not content to wait for this reversal. He was patient enough to allow God to work in God's own time, but he would not sit by and wait to see the release and restoration quietly. He was unwilling to suffer in silence and despair. He called the rest of his people to join him, not simply in patient prayer and intercession, but in joy over what God was sure to accomplish among the exiled nation. He called them to rejoice, not after the fact of God's redemption, but before God had yet lifted a finger!

He did not need to wait to see God's salvation come to fruition. He was ready to rejoice while the people were still wallowing in their plight of oppression, despair, and shame. Reality was not the experience of depression in their years of exile. Reality, he declared, was what Yahweh had in store for them, a future bright with possibility and unhindered by the claims of power in the halls of politics and military arsenals. The reality in which he rejoiced was not what Israel might do for itself to overcome its political rivals, but what Yahweh would do to recreate an order of life, promise, and fulfillment.

This was no word for a distant future. This was a call to rejoicing in anticipation. Israel would again see Yahweh create a way for life in the wilderness, a path amid the waters, streams in a parched land. New life would spring forth for, around, and within Israel as Yahweh brought about new opportunities and life.

They may still have been in exile. Exile may only have begun. It was still time to rejoice, for their circumstances held no sway over the possibilities for Yahweh's creative work. In the midst of it all, Isaiah called them to joy because of what God had yet to accomplish. Are we ready to put aside our own concerns, to rejoice in God's creative plans? What God has in store does not vanish or come back to haunt us with a hangover. It is victory in the very face of defeat, a stream in the desert, laughter in the face of danger.

—*Christopher B. Harbin*