

Joy in Finding Home
Isaiah 35:1-10
Dec 15, 2019

I've been reading a book by Henri Nouwen, **Following Jesus**, with a subtitle, *Finding our Way Home in an Age of Anxiety*. I was reading a comment on a line in Isaiah that directed me to Nouwen's book. The line goes like this: *Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. (Isaiah 35:4)* The writer went on to say that a better translation of the Hebrew would go like this: *ones whose hearts are racing*. In other words, the prophet is addressing people whose hearts are frightened, burdened with anxiety. Perhaps we today are among those whose hearts are racing and who are burdened by the weight of worry, grief, uncertainty and loss. Surely, we live in an age of anxiety and find it hard sometimes to feel hope, peace and joy that Advent promises.

Nouwen speaks about joy as the promise Jesus left with his followers: *I said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.*

Nouwen goes on to remind us that as we look around at our fellow travelers, we see people with serious, somewhat glum faces. Nouwen claims that there is a resistance to joy, a fear within us that makes us cling to the familiar and settled rather than the new and life-affirming. Fear makes us cling to security and the more we do that the harder it is to be joyful. Jesus is rooted in his relationship with God and hence is filled with joy. He has found home!

Israel is far from home. The prophet seeks to paint some extraordinary pictures through his poetry to get his message across. In Isaiah chapter 34 we have a grim portrait of life without God. He says: *The streams of Edom shall be turned to pitch and her soil into sulfur; the land shall become burning pitch... (Isaiah 34:9)* Edom is singled out as representative of those who turn away from God. It is a dire warning of life under judgement. The land is dead and dried up.

But something miraculous happens at the opening of chapter 35. A transformation of nature has occurred. The prophet envisions a new world

order in which the future of Israel is secure and prosperous and joyful. Listen again to the words of the prophet: *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*

Not only nature is transformed, but also the human population of Israel: *Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.*

This chapter is reminiscent of the second book of Isaiah that begins at chapter 40 through 55. In these chapters we discover some of the loveliest, promise-filled words of the bible. So here in chapter 35 we have a foretaste of that joy-filled language to come.

Israel is presently under threat from Assyria who will bring them under their yoke by 701 BC. But around the corner the prophet anticipates an even greater calamity, namely Babylon. In 586 BC Babylon will attack and destroy Jerusalem and take into captivity thousands of the inhabitants of Judah. So the prophet here envisions and describes a new world order, the future of Judah as secure, prosperous, and joyful. The vision culminates in God's people coming back to the land. They can come directly across the desert, as the typical dangers of travel (wild animals, lack of water, hostile enemies) will not threaten them. It is reminiscent of the exodus, in which the people travel through the desert to their promised land. The future is now imagined as a new exodus, of God's people returning:

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

Israel will find home again! How about us?

When I left Scotland as a young man of 18, the only home I had known, I arrived in a what seems like a strange new land. I had left all the comfort

and security of family, friends, work, culture, and place. The new country seemed strange, unknown, and somewhat disorienting. It was not yet home. Looking back those were anxious times for me a teenager. Where would I find home in this new land? Well, I found home in the least likely place, at least to me as a committed non-Christian. I found home in a church community where I discovered God in Christ. Or should I say, God found me, an anxious, young teen in a strange land and far from the security of home.

John the Baptist stands with two of his disciples and Jesus passes by. John says, Look, there is the lamb of God. Hearing this the two of John's disciples turned and started to follow Jesus. He turned and asked, what do you want? They asked, where do you live? He responded: Come and See. This is how John's Gospel describes the meeting of Jesus and two of his future disciples.

John was a pretty strange man-a wild man of the wilderness who preached repentance. But John and Andrew are curious about this Jesus that John has identified as the Lamb of God. But they don't ask, Lord please take away our sins. No, they ask, where do you live? Jesus doesn't say, come and be my disciples, or take up your cross, or do what I tell you. No, rather he simply says, Come and See! And so they did. They spend the rest of the day with him in his home. He invited them in just to look around.

We too are invited in. We too can find home, regardless of our anxiety about the future, our fears about our sins and past, our restlessness and emptiness. We are invited in. We can find home in God's love and grace and gentleness. Here we can be safe. Here we feel at home. Here we find refuge. In a sometimes dangerous, uncertain world we live in, and all the anxiety that engenders, Jesus invites us into a joy that the world cannot give or take away.

Now John is in prison and facing a certain death. He is troubled and anxious. He had been confident that Jesus was indeed the lamb of God. But now he is uncertain. All accounts of his ministry seem different from what Israel had hoped the Messiah would do. Jesus is just an itinerant preacher going around Galilee, but not gathering an army to defeat the Romans. So, he sends his disciples to Jesus to ask the question: *Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?*

Jesus responds: *Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me*

My guess is that John was comforted by these words. He too had found home in God's love and grace.

Isaiah has set out a clear way home. It is a highway from Babylon back to Jerusalem. It is way that is clearly set out across what could be difficult terrain. All kinds of difficulties could attend any such journey: robbers, wild animals, inhospitable terrain. Instead God has set out a way that is clear and uncomplicated that even the simplest can follow home. Isaiah sings:

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

My question for us this morning is this: have we found home? Is all the anxiety that often imprisons us, swallowed up by God's promise of love and joy? Have we found home? Are our lives marked by joy?

Robert Frost line comes to mind: *Two roads diverged in a wood and I - I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference. Or perhaps T.S. Elliot: We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.*

Finding our home in Jesus is to arrive at the place of joy.

Amen

