

**Isaiah 35:1-10** (CEB)

The desert and the dry land will be glad;  
the wilderness will rejoice and blossom like the crocus.

2

They will burst into bloom,  
and rejoice with joy and singing.

They will receive the glory of Lebanon,  
the splendor of Carmel and Sharon.

They will see the Lord’s glory,  
the splendor of our God.

3

Strengthen the weak hands,  
and support the unsteady knees.

4

Say to those who are panicking:

“Be strong! Don’t fear!

Here’s your God,

coming with vengeance;

with divine retribution

God will come to save you.”

5

Then the eyes of the blind will be opened,  
and the ears of the deaf will be cleared.

6

Then the lame will leap like the deer,  
and the tongue of the speechless will sing.

Waters will spring up in the desert,  
and streams in the wilderness.

7

The burning sand will become a pool,  
and the thirsty ground, fountains of water.

The jackals’ habitat, a pasture;<sup>[a]</sup>

grass will become reeds and rushes.

8

A highway will be there.

It will be called The Holy Way.

The unclean won’t travel on it,

but it will be for those walking on that way.<sup>[b]</sup>

Even fools won’t get lost on it;

9

no lion will be there,

and no predator will go up on it.

None of these will be there;

only the redeemed will walk on it.

10

The Lord’s ransomed ones will return and enter Zion with singing,  
with everlasting joy upon their heads.  
Happiness and joy will overwhelm them;  
grief and groaning will flee away.

**Luke 1:46b-55** (*The Message*)

And Mary said, I’m bursting with God-news;  
I’m dancing the song of my Savior God.  
God took one good look at me, and look what happened—  
I’m the most fortunate woman on earth!  
What God has done for me will never be forgotten,  
the God whose very name is holy, set apart from all others.  
His mercy flows in wave after wave  
on those who are in awe before him.  
He bared his arm and showed his strength,  
scattered the bluffing braggarts.  
He knocked tyrants off their high horses,  
pulled victims out of the mud.  
The starving poor sat down to a banquet;  
the callous rich were left out in the cold.  
He embraced his chosen child, Israel;  
he remembered and piled on the mercies, piled them high.  
It’s exactly what he promised,  
beginning with Abraham and right up to now.

***Unabashed Joy***

For many years, Chuck Campbell taught preaching at Columbia Seminary in Decatur, Georgia. He required students in one of his classes to lead worship and preach at the Open Door Shelter for homeless folks in downtown Atlanta. But one day **he** was leading worship in front of the shelter, amid the noise of rush-hour traffic. After the Call to Worship and a song, Chuck’s plans were interrupted. He writes, “I noticed one homeless man waving to me and pointing to himself. I was surprised when I saw him, [becuase] this man could neither hear nor speak and was normally very reserved. But there he was, eager to do something. He stepped into the middle of the circle [of those gathered], bowed his head in silence, and began to sign a hymn for us. It was beautiful, like a dance....In that moment our notions of ‘abled’ and ‘disabled’ were turned upside down.

**“Make the Blessings Known: Unabashed Joy”**

December 15, 2019 ~ Third Sunday of Advent

Rev. Beckie Sweet

The rest of us had been shouting to be heard, but the noise was no problem for our friend.” The speechless were singing and signing for joy!

Last week, as we shared about “Loving Joy,” I asked what our refrain will be during this Advent season, knowing that repetition builds attitudes and belief. Today, as we try to shake off our inhibitions and live fully into “Unabashed Joy,” I ask, “How will we multiply and magnify our song expressing the news of God’s activity in our world?” The need for joy and love in our world today is intense and urgent. Considering how we are to sing an Advent song in such a time as this may seem daunting. How do we lift our voices, our words, our bodies, in praise and thanksgiving when so much of our lives and society seem worthy of lament? The scriptures for this morning show us the way.

The prophet’s words found in Isaiah 35 speak of **comfort and promise** in the midst of war and desolation. The previous chapter offered a terrifying vision of God’s wrath against the nations. And the chapter following describes threats toward Jerusalem. But in between the wrath and threats, Isaiah writes about a chorus of creation saying to one another, “Be strong. Do not fear. Here is your God to save you!” Isaiah refuses to wait until things improved. He speaks with “**anticipatory joy**,” in the faith that God desires good for all of creation -- even the rebellious human family. This is “Unabashed JOY!”

Then, in Luke’s passage, the Song of Mary, strikes a similar tone. Mary is in a world of trouble: pregnant, unmarried, destined to bring shame to her family, the family of her betrothed, and to their community. Anyone in her position could understandably shrink in the face of fear, insecurity, shame, and blame. And yet, Mary sings out in “Unabashed Joy”: God is great; God has done great things; Holy is our God!

In Mary’s culture, “Blessed” signified living a life of privilege and comfort. For the blessed, everything was going well and all seemed right in their corner of the world. The blessed were immuned to want, sadness, violence, and struggle. The blessedness that Mary celebrates stands in stark contrast to the culture’s attitude. Mary is a peasant girl from a small village. Her friends will see her as a disgrace. And yet, she sings, because she believes, that all generations will call her blessed. Perceiving God’s action in her life and in altering the course of history, Mary knows that the Mighty One’s agenda differs radically from the plans of human rulers. Mary sings with “anticipatory joy” as she forseees God bringing down the powerful and lifting up the powerless.

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Mary sings about the God who saves not just souls, but embodied people. The God she celebrates is not content merely to point people toward heaven; God’s redemptive work begins here on earth. God fills the hungry not only with hope, but with food. Rather than being satisfied with comforting the lowly, Mary’s Lord lifts them up, granting them dignity and honor, a seat at the table and a voice in the conversation. At the same time, God shows strength by disrupting the world’s power structures, dethroning rulers, and humbling the mighty. By emptying and humbling the rich and powerful, God is saving them. For when they turn their gaze from themselves and their own accomplishments, when their awe is directed to God -- then there is mercy for them, too.

So, God is not destroying some and raising up others. God is really “leveling the playing field” so that all experience a humble worthiness, and know themselves as recipients of God’s blessing and care, establishing a deep and abiding joy worthy of song. In both Mary’s song and Jesus’ ministry we see the God who loves us as we are, but does not leave us as we are. God desires for all to have access to enough of the world’s resources, so that no one has too much or too little. And each person is treated with dignity and respect with no one using power to do harm. Mary’s song magnifies the Savior who loves the whole world with a love that makes creation whole.

Is it any wonder that Mary could not keep from singing with “Unabashed JOY?” So, why are we so politely reserved when we sing of God’s love and joy for and in the world? Why do we not dance our way into an expression of how amazing this God is who loves us so completely despite our flaws and failures? During this season, especially during this season of Advent, let’s shake off the conventions that stifle joy, and show our love for the Christ sent to give us LIFE. Here is an example -- be sure to watch the man with the tambourine!

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0-G8y9eNQnQ>

Thanks be to God for “Unabashed Joy!” Amen.