

A Well-Deserved Break
Isaiah 35:1-10

When I was in high school I wasn't exactly the model of self-awareness, so when the opportunity came along to go with my youth group on week-long backpacking trip in the 14K-foot peaks in the Rockies, I jumped on it. It didn't matter that I'd never been backpacking before, or that I didn't own a decent pair of boots, or even that I was a devout couch potato. I was going.

It didn't take me long to find out just how bad an idea that was. I will spare you the graphic details of my very public humiliation, and simply say that I'm pretty sure that at one point on the second day out, I had reached the 8th level of Dante's Inferno. I couldn't have gone one step further even if someone paid me; all I wanted was for someone to put me out of my misery. And someone did. My good Samaritan took my 30lb pack from me, and handed me an orange. An orange! Not a bottle of ice cold mountain water, or a handful of trail mix, but an orange. And it was divine. The most satisfying, refreshing, perfect thing I had ever eaten. I was restored.

This Sunday marks the beginning of the third week of Advent, and its theme of joy comes to us as welcome a relief as my orange break was. The Advent journey is a wearying one, I know that. It's only been two weeks and most of us are already over this business of watching and waiting, and having voices in the wilderness calling us a brood of vipers and telling us we'd better repent; voices telling us that it isn't time to celebrate yet, that we must be solemn and sing mournful hymns in minor keys.

So even though we aren't there yet, even though it is not quite time to celebrate and sing the songs about angels and shepherds, we have arrived at this welcome resting place, the place of joy. It's like an oasis in the middle of Advent's wilderness.

In fact, that is exactly how Isaiah describes it – joy comes to the desert. Life comes to the desert. Everything that was previously dry and desolate bursts into bloom. There are wild and unimaginable splashes of color on the barren landscape. There is leaping and singing and dancing and rejoicing. There is revival, in the truest sense of the word. Everyone, everything, is refreshed and restored and renewed.

Before we get too excited, though, I have a question: is this promise of joy for us?

According to Isaiah there are only two kinds of people out there – the powerful and the poor, the meek and hopeless. Jesus talked the same way – only sheep and goats, the hot and the cold, the blessed and the 'woe-d.' The ones God comes to judge, and the ones God comes to save. That's it.

I saw a cartoon this week with two first century fellows walking along and puzzling over something Jesus said: the meek will inherit the earth, and the rich will have a harder time getting into heaven than a camel would climbing through the eye of a needle, but what about the middle class? They're right. There is no middle class in scripture, is there? No middle ground, no lukewarm, according to Jesus. There's no class of people camped out happily and safely somewhere between the poor and oppressed and broken down, and the rich and powerful who

caused all of the havoc in the lives of the poor and broken down to begin with. There is no 'average, just getting by nicely' category.

So guess what? It looks to me like you and I have a decision to make. You are either one, or you are the other, and frankly, neither choice looks very appealing. You are either in the same camp as the Babylonians and Pharisees and the selfish and unjust, or you are in the same camp as the widows and orphans and homeless and lame and hungry. Tough choices.

One of the stories in the news this week was the death of Elizabeth Edwards, and I've been interested in the ways she has been eulogized. What she has been known for, of course, is her character, her strength, and her determination not to be bested by any of the adversities that have visited her in life; the death of her son, cancer, her husband's infidelity. She has been lifted up and praised for her determination that she will not be broken – as if there is something wrong with being broken. As if being devastated, and suffering, and emerging with a limp are signs of being lesser; inferior; classless.

Peggy Noonan would take exception to that. Ms. Noonan was one of President Reagan's best speech writers, and a few year's ago she wrote a column, *Everybody's Been Shot*. The title was taken from a scene in the movie, *Black Hawk Down*, where a convoy of Humvees is under attack and the Colonel tells a Sergeant to get behind the wheel and get them out of there, and when the Sergeant objects and says he's been shot, the Colonel barks that **everybody's** been shot. Her point, like his, is that we've all been hurt, if not by gunfire, then by illness, by neglectful parents, by infidelity, by poverty, by bullying, by insecurity, by abuse, by bad decisions or other people's bad decisions, by war, by death, by unemployment, or a myriad of different things. We've all been shot.

If we are honest with ourselves we all walk with a bit of a limp. Whether our pride lets us admit it or not, we all live in the same camp as the widows and orphans and homeless and hungry; our wounds just aren't as visible as theirs are. There is no such thing as 'middle class.' Or in Isaiah's language, we are all desert dwellers.

Which is good, because that's where we have to be if we are to be heirs to that promise of joy. The highway of God that Isaiah describes only goes one place: through the desolate land, to the desolate. If that's not where you live, then guess what? You can't get on it. This promise of joy isn't for you. But if that **is** where you live, then here is the good news in this text: even though God's arrival is off in the future, even though the healing and the redemption of all things broken and dead is somewhere down the road, the joy begins now. The celebration begins now. We don't have to wait for it. We don't have to long wistfully for that some distant time and place of reward. We don't even have to settle for comforting ourselves with the thought that there is always someone out there who has it worse than we do. Joy, outright joy, is ours now. While we wait. While we watch. While we live in the dry desert places, with all the other widows and orphans and exiles. It is joy that comes from knowing that someday God will make us and the whole earth whole again, but it is also joy that comes from knowing that God is here with us, even now. God has not forgotten us or left alone.

It is one of the most peculiar ironies of our faith, and there are many of them – for the promise of

joy to mean anything to us, we first have to be honest about ourselves and our surroundings; we have to admit that we are not as well off inside or out as we'd like to think, or more importantly, as we'd like other people to think.

And if that is one of the most peculiar ironies, than one of the most stunning is that there is joy now, in this life, in the midst of the wilderness and all its frailties and dangers. Jesus didn't come to start a religion that was all about the afterlife. Eternal bliss, comfort and joy, whatever you want to call it, are ours for the taking today. Be joyful! God has come to live among us. God will come again to reclaim and redeem God's world.