

Manuscript: Joy in a Desert Place

Good evening, it's really good to be with you. We're coming up on Christmas, and out there everybody's talking about joy. Joy in the carols. Joy in the commercials. Joy in the decorations.

But I also know this: being locked up during the holidays can be one of the **most challenging** times of the year.

- You think about family.
- You think about what you've lost.
- You feel the weight of your charges, your record, your regrets.
- You hear "Merry Christmas," and sometimes inside you're like, "*Yeah right.*"

So, let's be honest at the start: Sometimes the word "**joy**" feels fake, especially in a place like this.

Tonight, I want to talk about a different kind of joy. Not the fake smile joy. Not the "pretend everything's fine" joy.

I want to talk about the **Advent of Joy**, the joy that shows up when God comes near, right in the middle of the mess, the desert, and even behind bars.

Advent: A Season of Waiting

In the church, we're in a season called **Advent**. "Advent" just means **arrival** or **coming**.

And really, it is a season of **waiting**:

- Waiting for God to keep his promises.
- Waiting for light when life feels dark.
- Remembering how God's people waited for Jesus the first time, and how we wait for him to come again and make everything right.

So, in this season of waiting, there is a lot of time for reflection... And if we were honest about our pain (that darkness in our past), we can be assured that holding onto hope is the right thing, because God is not finished.

Tonight, we're going to listen to two Old Testament voices:

- **Isaiah 35:1–10 & Zephaniah 3:14–20 (Kiva or Lisa approaches podium).**

Both passages talk about **joy**, but they start in places that feel like **deserts** and **disaster**.

Reading of Isaiah 35:1–10

Reading of Zephaniah 3:14–20

Summary of the Texts (Back to Pastor Paul)

Thank you for reading... Both passages were spoken to people who were **in trouble**:

- God's people had messed up.
- They were facing judgment, chaos, and exile.
- Life felt like a **desert**—dry, lonely, and hopeless.

And right into **that**, God speaks words of **joy**:

- A desert turning into a garden.
- Weak hands strengthened.
- A people coming home on a highway of holiness.
- A God who not only forgives, but **sings over his people with joy**.

Here's the one thing I want us to remember tonight:

In Advent, God comes into our desert places to bring a joy that bars and locks cannot take away.

Let's walk through that in three shorter steps.

God Sees Your Desert

Isaiah starts with the **wilderness** and the **desert**. Some of you hear that and think, "Yeah, that sounds like my life."

Your "desert" might be:

- Regret over what you've done.
- Broken relationships.
- Addiction that keeps dragging you down.
- Fear about your case, your sentence, or what happens when you get out.
- The loneliness of feeling forgotten.

Being locked up during the holidays really can feel like a desert; a place where you're not sure anything good can grow.

Notice: God doesn't pretend it's not a desert. He doesn't say, "Cheer up, it's not that bad."

He **names** it, and then he says:

- "The desert... shall rejoice and blossom."
- "Strengthen the weak hands."
- "Say to those who have an anxious heart, 'Be strong; fear not! Your God will come... He will come and save you.'"

Right now, just quietly in your heart, I want to invite you to name your desert:

- “God, this is the place in me that feels dried up.”
- “This is the place that feels hopeless.”

Advent says: **God sees that place. He has not walked away from it.**

God Comes into the Desert

Advent means **arrival, coming**. Isaiah says, “Your God will come... he will come and save you.” Zephaniah says, “The Lord your God is **in your midst**, a mighty one who will save.”

God could have stayed far away:

- He could have shouted from heaven, “Fix yourself.”
- He could have left us to drown in our guilt.

Instead, he **came close**; first through promises and prophets, and then fully in **Jesus**. Jesus is God stepping into:

- Our poverty, Our rejection, Our shame, Our death.

On the cross, he took our guilt and judgment. In his resurrection, he opened a new future. Zephaniah says:

- “The Lord has taken away the judgments against you.”
- “He will quiet you by his love.”
- “He will rejoice over you with singing.”

I love that picture:

- Some of you were yelled at more than you were loved.
- Some of you only heard, “You’re no good, you’ll never change.”

But God is pictured like a parent singing over a child; not because the child is perfect, but because the child is **theirs**. In Christ:

- You are not just “inmate” or “case number” to God.
- You are someone HE wants to **forgive, restore, and call his own**.

Your record with the state may stay on paper, but your **record with God** can be wiped clean.

That’s Advent: **God comes into the desert, into the jail, into your real story.**

Joy in the Middle, Not Just at the End

Isaiah ends with this picture:

- God's people walking home on a highway,
- Singing,
- Wearing "everlasting joy" like a crown,
- And "sorrow and sighing" running away.

Zephaniah ends with:

- God gathering the broken,
- Turning **shame into honor**,
- Restoring his people.

That's where the story is headed for those who belong to Jesus: a day when there will be **no more prisons, no more tears, no more shame**.

But you're still here. You still go back to a cell. You still have court dates, parole hearings, or years to serve.

So what does **joy** look like **now**?

Joy in the Bible isn't just a good mood when everything goes right.

Joy is a deep, settled **gladness in God** that can live even in hard places.

Here's what that might sound like:

- "My situation hasn't changed, but I know God hasn't left me."
- "I've done wrong, but in Christ I am forgiven."
- "I am not alone in this block; God is in my midst."
- "I may not see the whole way forward, but I know the end of the story—Jesus wins."

Joy is like a river running **underneath** your circumstances.

Let me give you a few **simple practices** to grow this joy, even here:

Turn Toward God Each Day

Turn Toward God Each Day: A short, honest prayer when you wake up: "Jesus, meet me in my desert today." Not fancy. Just real.

Practice Small Gratitude

Each day, name **one thing** you're thankful for:

- A meal,
- A conversation,
- A verse,
- A moment of laughter.

Joy grows when we notice God's gifts, even the small ones.

Hold onto One Line of Scripture

Maybe it's: "Your God will come and save you." Or "The Lord your God is with you, mighty to save."

Repeat it when your mind starts racing at night. Let God "quiet you with his love."

Encourage Each Other

You can help somebody else find joy: Listen, pray together, remind each other: "God hasn't given up on you." Sometimes the joy you give away is the joy that strengthens you.

Closing Invitation

So, let's bring it back: **In Advent, God comes into our desert places to bring a joy that bars and locks cannot take away.**

Your surroundings may not change tonight. But your **heart** can.

- You can let God **see** your desert instead of hiding it.
- You can trust that in Jesus, God has **come near** to forgive and restore you.
- You can ask him to grow a quiet but strong **joy** inside you, even here.

If you've never really trusted Jesus with your life, you can start tonight. If you have, but your heart feels dry, you can ask him to **restore** your joy. I'm going to pray. And if it fits what you want to say to God, you can echo it silently.

Prayer

"Jesus, you see my desert. You know my sins, my shame, my fears. Thank you for coming into this world and into my mess.

I believe you died for my sins and rose again to give me new life. Forgive me. Please give me a new start with you.

Quiet me with your love. Sing your song over me. Grow your joy in me, even here, even now.

I place my life in your hands. Lead me on your highway of holiness, until the day when sorrow and sighing are gone for good.

In your name I pray, Amen."

If you've prayed that, or if you want to talk, I'd be honored to listen and pray with you. Whatever your charges, whatever your past, I want you to hear this: **You are not forgotten. God has not given up on you. And in Jesus, there is a joy no one can take away.**

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Joy of the Redeemed

Isaiah 35:1-10 (NIV)

The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.

Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon; they will see the glory of the LORD, the splendor of our God.

Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you."

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

Then will the **lame** leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.

The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.

And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness; it will be for those who walk on that Way. The unclean will not journey on it; wicked fools will not go about on it.

No lion will be there, nor any ravenous beast; they will not be found there. But only the redeemed will walk there, and those the LORD has rescued 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.

Zephaniah 3:14-20 (NIV)

Sing, Daughter Zion; shout aloud, Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart,

Daughter Jerusalem! The LORD has taken away your punishment; he has turned back your enemy. The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm.

On that day, they will say to Jerusalem, "Do not fear, Zion; do not let your hands hang limp.

The LORD your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing."

"I will remove from you all who mourn over the loss of your appointed festivals, which is a burden and reproach for you.

At that time, I will deal with all who oppressed you. I will rescue the lame; I will gather the exiles. I will give them praise and honor in every land where they have suffered shame.

At that time, I will gather you; at that time I will bring you home. I will give you honor and praise among all the peoples of the earth when I restore your fortunes before your very eyes," says the LORD.