

“Know: Joy”  
Sermon by Rev. Katherine Raley  
First Christian Church, Colorado Springs, CO  
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**Isaiah 35:1-10**

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. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God. Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you." 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. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. 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.

Everyone's ready for Christmas, right? Everything all done? If you didn't already know, there are now 9, or 10, days left December 25 – 9 if you're one of those who can't wait for Christmas to get here, 10 if you're one who still has a few things to do...

The fact that Christmas is only a little over a week away isn't stressful for anyone *here*, of course. You all are *early* with your shopping, and your trips to the grocery store, and your travel arrangements, and decorating, and Christmas pageant rehearsal...

Well that's certainly not true for me, and probably not for all of you here; but even if you have gotten all of those things done, not to stress you out, but there are *still* preparations to make, for each and every one of us.

This month before Christmas is all about *preparing*. Even in the midst of our preparations of shopping and baking, though, we know that something is missing. For some of you it's something very concrete – you might be missing money with which to buy presents or a tree; missing a home in which to put a Christmas tree; you might be missing people who have died or whom you simply can't see when you want to. For others of you, it is more of a feeling that you want more. You want more fulfillment, more satisfaction, more *justice*...something isn't right, even though everything might

*seem* to be going fine in your individual world, with the money to buy what you need and a culturally-successful life. But there's still that feeling that something isn't right.

Maybe, it might seem like there are too many clouds in the world and not enough sun.

Here's a story about someone else who thought so, a little bird named Firebird. If you'll look at the screen, we'll hear Firebird's story.

“Once upon a time, there lived a little baby Oriole named Firebird. His mama named him that on account of his brilliantly beautiful orange feathers. Firebird just *lived* for the sunshine. On those glorious sunny days, he would fly way up high, to the highest branch he could find, throw back his little head, and bask in the glow of the sun. But, oh, when the rains came, little Firebird would whine and complain. ‘Why, Mama?’ he’d ask. ‘Why does God let the storm take the sun away?’ Mama would just smile and say, ‘You’ll know someday, baby.’ Then she’d get that faraway look, as if she were looking straight up to the sun. ‘You’ll know, when you take a walk on the clouds.’ Now, over and over again the rains would come, and over and over again Firebird would complain to his mama. Until one day, a huge storm rolled in, and Mama had a different answer. ‘Firebird,’ Mama said with a nod toward the clouds, ‘the answers are up there waitin’ for you. But you’re gonna have to fly on up there and see it for yourself.’ Little Firebird was so scared. He hadn’t used his wings much at all! And now they trembled at the sight of the storm clouds above. Still, he just had to find out for himself. He had to know why God let the storm take the sun away. So up, up, up he went, up into the great unknown. But instead of answers, poor little Firebird only found thunder, lightning and a fierce howling wind. He feared it would rip him apart! He was just about to turn back, when it happened. Firebird broke through the clouds. And there it was. In that one moment, it all became clear. All alone, in the midst of the darkest storm, Firebird saw the sun, shining more brightly than ever. And then he knew: God never let the storm take the sun away. It was as constant as his mother’s love, waiting there, just above the clouds. Little Firebird never forgot that moment, even after he was a big Firebird. He still loved to bask in the sunshine. But more importantly, knowing the sun was always there, Firebird had learned to rejoice in the rain.”

For Firebird, life should have been good. But, every once in a while there was an annoyance in his life – a break in his happiness. It kept raining, taking away his sun! He complained, and refused to enjoy it. But then one day, he learned:

God never lets the storm take the sun away. No matter what happens in our lives, in our world, God's love is always there.

I like reading this story of Firebird alongside the passage in Isaiah that's our scripture text today. Isaiah's text describes a desperately *dry* land that *needs water* to make it bloom. And in the day of the Lord, that blossoming of the desert shall happen, Isaiah says. The desert that separates the exiled Israelites living in Babylon from their homeland of Zion, or Jerusalem, shall be safe for them to walk through. For, Isaiah says, *waters* shall break forth in the wilderness. *Abundance* in the midst of the desert, just waiting for enough water to reveal it. It is always there, always possible, just like the sun above the clouds in Firebird's story.

Advent, this month before Christmas, is a season of waiting, supposedly. Waiting for something greater to happen in the world – waiting for the annual celebration of Christ's birth; and also waiting for the time we have been promised when Christ will come again, and God's love and justice will be fully real in our world, like the image in Isaiah.

But what about *now*? What about the **joy** of the pre-Christmas season? We *are* joyful, now. Why is this season the season of *joy* more than any other? It's not just a vague concept; there are things about this season that physically, on a brain-wave level, affect people and bring about a certain cheeriness. We're not just waiting, we're experiencing something here and now.

We feel joy because we are practicing the experience of God's love. The joy of the Christmas season is in the fact that God loves us, and that we know that love. Without God's love, we would not have beautiful music that stirs our souls. If not for God's love we would not be able to not only meet our basic needs but also give gifts to others. If not for God's love, there would be no hope for any happiness at all. Not only happiness, but no hope for any kind of joy.

Our preparation this season is to prepare our hearts for the goodness of God – to open more and more with each passing day so that on *Christmas*, and after, we can sing Alleluia with all our might and *believe* it to the depths of our souls.

Our preparation is in learning about the goodness that God *is* and that God shares with the world, so that on the day we have chosen to celebrate the birth of the child who became the man Jesus Christ, we can be fully aware of things that led us to that moment, fully aware of the people with whom God has joined us on the earth.

If you feel like something is missing this season, remember that you are in a season of *great* preparation. Yes, some of that preparation is buying gifts, making food for potlucks, spending time at Christmas parties. Maybe you are studying for exams. Maybe you are preparing in the midst of trying to brace yourself against the pain that you know Christmas will bring to you, pain because of loss, loneliness, the inability to celebrate the way you want to.

Whatever this season looks like for you, your job *right now* is to prepare in other ways, too, because only by *practicing* something can we make it the best thing possible for the big event. There are three ways especially that want you to prepare right now, which you may or may not normally associate with church... **1) Prepare, using the symbols of Christmas in our culture; 2) Prepare, using the example of Santa Claus; and 3) Prepare, using the stress and pain that exists alongside the joy of Christmas.**

**1) First** - Don't let anyone trick you into thinking that the commercial aspects of Christmas are getting in the way of your Christian preparation. *Use* these commercial aspects; use these cultural symbols around us. If someone wishes you Happy Holidays, say, "Thank you so much!" Respond with Happy Holidays, or Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year, whatever you might like. Part of the joy of the season is in people *acknowledging* one another, with eye contact and a smile. It's easier to do when the normal barriers are broken down. Don't take that for granted, even if you wanted to hear "Merry Christmas" instead of "Happy Holidays." The most important thing, more important than the words, is the smile. Use the opportunity to smile and show God's love. There are all kinds of things we use now that weren't originally associated with Christ, like the Christmas Tree. The Christmas Tree was first something not associated with

Christ at all – it was first associated with any joy of new life in the winter season; *then* it was a symbol of the paradise tree in the story of the Garden of Eden, which used to be celebrated alongside Christmas; and finally it was appropriated for Christmas. It is now a symbol of the everlasting Christ, a Christ who lights the world with love and grace. God’s love is in everything; focus on that love instead of the details of the words.

**2) Second**, don’t think that Santa Claus takes away from the celebration of Christ. Santa Claus is the spirit of Gift giving (as Saint Nicholas, the originator of Santa Claus, has been teaching us). So take that spirit and shop for others. Give gifts to other people. Also use the spirit of Santa Claus to remember to ask for help. And at the same time, *give* help. Your problems, though real and serious, should not be the center of your world. Make sure you’re surrounding yourself by other people – people who will help you, people who you can help. That’s the spirit of Saint Nicholas and Santa Claus, first taught by Christ.

**3) Third** – don’t believe that the sickness, or pain, or unemployment, or loneliness are blocking out the possibilities of God’s joys, as if clouds are blocking out the sun. Remember Firebird, and know that you can’t do it on your own. Use encouragement and reminders from others that the sun is always there – God’s love and joy are always in the world; they are the *very basis* of the world. God is always there, in the clouds providing shade and rain, in the sun above the clouds waiting until it is the right time. God’s love is never obstructed, never blocked – a wall cannot stop God’s love, and neither can a desert. Neither can clouds, neither can pain.

All of these three things are things that *you* can use to prepare – indeed, that *God* can use in your life to help you open yourself to that great and awesome goodness and joy. The best way to prepare is to *practice*. A musical piece is *prepared* by practicing it over and over; a test is studied for by practicing the subject material; a recipe might be practiced before using it to serve to all the guests; anything that is prepared well has *practice* in the preparation. You also have to practice love. Practice joy. Practice peace and hope. God can make it even better if you have practiced it.

We are in a season of preparation. Joy is possible from preparing your hearts *right now* – looking forward to the glory of that beautiful vision of Isaiah, that ecstatic

announcement that Christ is born, that overflowing love that will result in no one being mistreated, no one going hungry, no one being marked as undeserving. We have the vision before us; we have the promise of God's never-ending love within us. *Use them*, and prepare by making that *love* the focus of *everything* in your life this season.  
Amen.