12.17.2023: **Snapshots of Joy**

This season, the event, the moment in time we are celebrating- is an unquestionable **moment of Joy.** It’s the human joy of **a baby’s birth**, yes. All of us can grasp that. Most of us here have felt the joy of a newborn child whether regular or grand or great-grand. The general emotion is **Joy.**

But the physical reality of this birth we’re celebrating is also a historical marker declaring in the birth that **“God loves the Kosmos.”**  And most of us likely know, or can remember **the Joy of realizing someone loves you.** *My wife, in our youth saw herself as a perpetual loner; but at the right time, when I told her I loved her and wanted to be with her wherever she went - her descriptions of her feelings following that are* ***nothing less than JOY****. To have thought herself “alone” and then to KNOW she was loved and could generously love in return brought Joy and deep contentment. [I have the “SCM’s” to prove it.]*

The birth of God into our world as an ordinary infant is a resounding declaration that God loves you and wants to be with you- no matter what. To know we are loved that much…by God, no less, **we can’t help but respond with Joy!** No surprise then when that mighty angel on the hillside promised **good news of Great Joy for All People.**

But Death in all its greater and lesser forms- hideous or deceptively beautiful, foolish or excessively practical- *doesn’t want you to know or feel Joy.* Death wants you to feel **rushed, pressed, empty, tired, hopeless, and despairing**- so it parades all sorts of ugliness, hatred, futility, violence, and duplicitous chicanery before your eyes. It slinks around the dark corners of our minds, stealing hope and peace and Joy, baiting us with a reminder that our lives have an expiration date, hoping to smother any spark of Joy that might flare up.

So what are the **“counter-measures?”**  What can disintegrate death and empower Joy? Lot’s of things, of course. God’s arsenal of Joy is quite significant.

But for today, the answer is found in the words God gave to the prophet Isaiah.

Along with snapshots of **Hope, and Peace,** I tell you there’s **Joy in the frame of nearly every snapshot Isaiah has given.**

I’m going to share with you **three snapshots of Joy** from Isaiah - three promises of God about the JOY he promises His faithful people- in hopes of inoculating you against the lesser forms of death that so often crop up in this season (busyness, loss, depression, fear, etc.).

The first is this:God promises **JOY LIKE A HOLY HIKE THROUGH A BLOOMING WILDERNESS**

**Many** **of you like to set forth into the Olympics in June or early July to see unfolding fields of wildflowers**: the reds and purples and golds and whites-whole fields of blooming Joy. In **2003,** Logan and I were up in Thousand Acre Meadows and in one place **fields of avalanche lilies** went on and on, separated only by cold, clear, **rushing streams**. What a Joy to see it.

**Isaiah 35 describes a hike of a very special sort… An ascent of epic proportions!**

Is. 35:1 The wilderness and the desert will be glad, And the Arabah will rejoice and blossom; Like the crocus 2 It will blossom profusely and rejoice with rejoicing and shout of joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, The majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They will see the glory of the LORD, The majesty of our God.

3 Encourage the exhausted, and strengthen the feeble. 4 Say to those with anxious heart, “Take courage, fear not. Behold, your God will come *with* vengeance; The recompense of God will come, But He will save you.” 5 Then the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf will be unstopped.

6 Then the lame will leap like a deer, And the tongue of the mute will shout for joy. For waters will break forth in the wilderness and streams in the Arabah. 7 The scorched land will become a pool and the thirsty ground springs of water; In the haunt of jackals, its resting place, Grass *becomes* reeds and rushes.

8 A highway will be there, a roadway, And it will be called the Highway of Holiness. The unclean will not travel on it, But it *will* be for him who walks *that* way, And fools will not wander *on it*.

9 No lion will be there, Nor will any vicious beast go up on it; These will not be found there.

But the redeemed will walk *there*, 10 And the ransomed of the LORD will return

And come with joyful shouting to Zion, With everlasting joy upon their heads.

They will find gladness and joy, And sorrow and sighing will flee away.

**See the snapshot Isaiah has given? Imagine setting out on a hike through a barren wilderness-** a barren waste like Mt St. Helens in the year following it’s eruption- hot and dry and ashes in your mouth. No trees or vegetation so no shade or moisture. *The walk is hard and some are exhausted and others who were strong are losing strength,**becoming feeble. The trail’s old name was “****Futility Ascent.”*** But then some invisible boundary is crossed. And now, with every step the land changes -

**-** becomes moist, lush. -  Before your eyes the blasted landscape begins to blossom.

Every step you take, trees green and grasses and flowering plants shoot up and bloom. Like a holy time-lapse nature film, with every step the plants and trees all extend welcoming arms to you. Every growing thing reacts to your coming with JOY. ***They are welcoming you, celebrating you as the children of Yahweh Elohim, the Lord God.*** [Remember Rom 8 telling us that ALL Creation eagerly awaits the revealing of the sons and daughters of God, because our full redemption means ALL CREATION is also set free (Rom 8:19-23).]

And from somewhere a voice speaks this promise**: God will save you!**

And then the trail takes a turn.**Its new name is “Holiness.”** No form of death (greater or lesser) is allowed here- nothing unclean, nothing foolish or wasteful, nothing to fear, nothing that can harm. No famines, no shootings, no addiction, no disease, lonliness or despair.

**Death is too feeble to climb this trail**. It’s been left behind and *the lushness of abundant life* flows out to the hikers at every step. And suddenly all weakness ] and exhaustion are gone the **lame** leap up the trail like deer, the **deaf** hear the rushing of water and the trills of songbirds, and those who could not **speak or sing** are shouting for the joy of it all: Look over there! Lord it’s beautiful! Did you see that? God be praised!.

And now the trail rises again as it climbs up to **Zion- the holy city of God.**  But on this trail no one is tired. Their lungs are filled and the singing starts. The redeemed, those ransomed by the Lord make the climb singing and shouting. Sorrow and sighing- all the death-bred troubles of life- are gone. They reach the top to find they are **enveloped by gladness and Joy**. So much so **that Everlasting Joy rides on their heads like a crown.**

**God has promised you this:** As his kingdom comes in you, your dry and lifeless places will blossom with life. Sorrow and sighing [our response to the many forms of Death] can and will end because Death will end. And Joy will ride atop our existence like crowns on the heads of the kings children. This first snapshot of Joy from Isaiah promises it will be so.

The Second is this : God promises: **JOY LIKE GOING HOME FOR A FAMILY REUNION**

At Thanksgiving we had the pleasure of having **ALL six of the kids** home. The **Stantons** had a family Christmas party just yesterday. There’s a lot of comedy mileage at the expense of Family gatherings- how terrible they are, etc. *But that’s not my experience or the Incredible Mrs. Cadorette’s.*

Twenty years ago we **drove to southern Illinois** for a **family reunion** with Rebekah’s family. We saw **Rebekah’s birthplace**: Metropolis (home of Superman-of course). We saw the home where a young **Sue Phillips** shot out the street light with a bb gun and taught her nephew how to smoke. We saw the Ohio river just before it joins up with the Mississippi.

But the most important thing wasn’t the sights or the amusing family history.

**It was the people:** brothers and sisters with their children and grandchildren coming home for the **single purpose of doing nothing but being family together**:

Talking, sharing, listening, laughing and enjoying each other.

Is 49 opens with God speaking to his Servant-Messiah, who will gather Israel back to him. God says: 6 “It is too small a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will **ALSO** make you a light of the nations so that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

Here God is the Father doling out chores and discovering that his Son is only restoring Israel. That’s nothing. That won’t take you twenty minutes, so do this too: take my salvation, and **haul it out to the ends of the earth**. Yes, you’re the **Jewish** messiah. but even so **you are exactly what the gentiles need**…what the whole world needs.

Then **Father God** turns to talk to **the city of Jerusalem**. The prophet portrays **Jerusalem as the mother** who is despairing because her children are lost.

**But the Father promises her a reunion with her children that exceeds her**

**wildest expectations.**

**49: 8-12** describes the journey that brings her children home. It’s another version of the Holy Hike through the blooming wilderness.

Then God- the Father- looks out the screen door and says **Get happy Mama Jerusalem!** Look who’s here! **It’s your children!** *And you will wear each of them as a bride wears jewels on her wedding day.*

Is. 49:18 “Lift up your eyes and look around; All of them gather together, they come to you. As I live,” declares the LORD, “You will surely put on all of them as jewels and bind them on as a bride. 19 “For your waste and desolate places and your destroyed land— Surely now you will be too cramped for the inhabitants, and those who swallowed you will be far away. 20 “The children of whom you were bereaved will yet say in your ears, ‘The place is too cramped for me; make room for me that I may live *here*.’

21 “Then you will say in your heart, ‘Who has begotten these for me, since I have been bereaved of my children And am barren, an exile and a wanderer? And who has reared these? Behold, I was left alone; From where did these come?’”

22 Thus says the Lord GOD, “Behold, I will lift up My hand to the nations and set up My standard to the peoples; And they will bring your sons in *their* bosom, And your daughters will be carried on *their* shoulders.

23 “Kings will be your guardians, And their princesses your nurses. They will bow down to you with their faces to the earth And lick the dust of your feet; And *you* will know that I am the LORD; Those who hopefully wait for Me will not be put to shame.

Mama Jerusalem looks up and sees all these children and grand children and great grand children. It’s like they’re coming **home for the holidays!** They keep pouring in carrying all their stuff and hugging and kissing mom and each other. *I hope my room is ready! It’s so good to be home! The tree looks great, Mom! You got a room for me Mom right? I’ll just take the couch over here!*

Her children are everywhere. And the Father prepares her: “There will be so many of your sons and daughters the house will feel cramped.” She can’t make sense of it all. She thought her children were lost. She sees the crowds coming from all the nations and **she knows they are hers** and she cries out: *Where did all of these beautiful sons and daughters come from?* **I don’t remember having all these kids!** And still they come!

The children of God -redeemed by the work of the Servant-Messiah who took Gods salvation to the ends of the earth- are joyously brought HOME carried on the shoulders of kings and cradled by princesses who serve and care for the children of God from all the nations.

**God has promised YOU this:** Joy like **a homecoming and a family reunion** combined, overwhelming delight at the gathering of the children of God in the Kingdom of God. This is a promise for now and for the future

And 3rd, and finally...God promises]: **JOY LIKE A FEAST, LIKE THE BEST PARTY EVER**

Food, celebration and Joy go hand in hand. The God we worship is the God who made it LAW that multiple times throughout the year people would, with God at the center, stop their work, come together to enjoy God, and each other in singing, food, dance and play.

Matthew & Luke tell us God’s son had a reputation as **a glutton and a drunkard.**

Had Jesus been a party-pooper or a stuck-up twit at parties He wouldn’t have gotten this reputation. So Jesus was a man who **celebrated joyfully** with his friends and family. And if you have seen Him, you’ve seen the Father.

**The Son reflects the Father’s will.**

In **2Chron 30** [during Isaiah’s time] we’re told of a Passover celebration week that was so good all the people decided to **keep the party going another week.**

King, **Hezekiah**, donated thousands of head of livestock to the party. *Twice we’re told they celebrated joyfully and God blessed them for it.* In this snapshot of Joy**, King Hezekiah** is a picture of God throwing a lavish party for his people.**Perhaps it was during this very celebration that Isaiah stood up and declared:**

 Is. 25:6 The LORD of hosts will prepare a lavish banquet for all peoples on this mountain; A banquet of aged wine, choice pieces with marrow, *And* refined, aged wine. 7 And on this mountain He will swallow up the covering which is over all peoples, Even the veil which is stretched over all nations. 8 He will swallow up death for all time, And the Lord GOD will wipe tears away from all faces, And He will remove the reproach of His people from all the earth; For the LORD has spoken. 9 And it will be said in that day, “Behold, this is our God for whom we have waited that He might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; Let us rejoice and be glad in His salvation.”

*Imagine that! The creator God, of whom one glimpse would be more than this mortal body could handle promises to serve your favorite meal… and pour the wine- or beverage of your choice*!

The Son of God mentions this in Luke 12:37 He says “blessed are hose whom the Master will find on the alert when he comes. Make no mistake, He, the master, God, will put on his work clothes and sit you down at the table and wait on you, himself.” That’s crazy! Scandalous! But God the Father and God the son say it is so.

God’s desire for our uninterrupted, unhindered Joy is such that **He promises that as the finale of this epic celebration of all good things** God, himself, will swallow up the veil of death - that covers all nations. God will swallow death up in all its greater and lesser forms and **it will be no more.**

In so doing He will wipe tears away from ALL faces.

*All tears, from all faces, wiped away.*

In this snapshot of Joy, I picture a moment of silence, of realization that everything is finally new, that the kingdom has finally come in all its completeness. A moment of astounded realization. And then there’s a shout and the sound of a million, billion voices cry out: ***This is the Lord for whom we have waited!! Let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation!!***

And I will be there! And you will be there! And we will see with our OWN EYES God’s great project of redemption, renewal, restoration come to pass.

**Then the party really gets going.**

This is what God has promised you: **JOY LIKE A FEAST, LIKE THE BEST PARTY EVER**

So what do we do till then? **What do we do with Death in all its forms, greater and lesser, prowling about seeking to replace our Joy with despair.**

**We remember** Jesus, executed, dead as a door-nail, laid in the tomb and Death, Hell, and the grave thinking “We won!” And **then we remember** that “death could not hold him, and the grave could not keep him from rising again- *resurrected to an eternal, bodily, life after death.*

**We remember** the picture of the **temple veil torn in two** revealing our un-hindered access to God. **We remember** God’s promise that the **veil of death will be ripped away** and swallowed up forever so that we too, will be *resurrected to an eternal, bodily, life after death.* **We remember** that Death itself, now has an **indelible expiration date**.

Death is not the end. But Death will come to an end.

So for right now we live in the words of Psalm 30:5: Weeping may go on through the night but Joy comes in the morning! Yes we weep. But with all God has done, the only way the veil of death can smother our Joy is if we surrender to it. The Joy God promised: **joy like a holy hike through a blooming wilderness**, **joy like a homecoming and a family reunion combined**, **joy like the best party the Kosmos has ever seen** with God as chef and host…

This Joy is ours now and will be ours forever **because of Jesus.**

The Angel said: I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all the people: for there is born to you this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.

And we respond [say it with me]:

Isaiah 25:9 …This is the Lord for whom we have waited;

Let us rejoice and be glad in His salvation.