

“Joy in the Desert”

Advent Series: The Dawn Is Breaking

Texts: Isaiah 35:1–10 • James 5:7–10 • Matthew 11:2–11

Big Idea: *Even in dry and desolate seasons, joy springs up where the King is present.*

WHEN JOY FEELS HARD TO FIND

- Advent’s third week traditionally focuses on **Joy (Gaudete Sunday)**.
- Joy can sound beautiful but feel distant, especially in December.
- For many, the season amplifies:
 - grief
 - loneliness
 - anxiety
 - stress
 - unresolved questions
- Scripture does not offer shallow joy but a **joy strong enough to survive a desert**.

WILDFLOWERS AFTER RAIN

- Deserts appear lifeless for long stretches of time.
- After a rare rain, unexpected **wildflowers bloom**: sudden color and beauty.
- The desert remains, but it is transformed.
- **Isaiah 35 gives this same picture of joy**: life breaking out where it seemed impossible.

I. ISAIAH 35 — JOY THAT BLOOMS WHERE YOU LEAST EXPECT IT

A. The Desert Rejoices

- “The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad...” (Isa 35:1).
- Joy does not wait for circumstances to improve.
- Joy grows **in the very places we assume are lifeless**.

B. The Reason for Rejoicing: God’s Arrival

- “Here is your God... He will come and save you.” (35:4).
- The desert blooms because **God is present**.
- Joy begins not with change but with **God’s nearness**.

C. Signs of New Creation

- Blind see; deaf hear; lame leap; mute sing.
- Streams flow in the wilderness; dry land becomes pools.
- This is **new-creation language**: everything broken begins to mend.
- God does not avoid deserts; **He transforms them**.

II. JAMES 5 — JOY WHILE WE WAIT FOR THE RAIN

A. Patience Is Not a Failure of Faith

- James addresses believers in long, difficult seasons.
- His call: “Be patient... until the coming of the Lord” (5:7).
- Patience is **active trust**, not denial or passivity.

B. The Farmer’s Perspective

- Farmers cannot force rain or speed growth.
- They trust what is happening beneath the soil.
- Joy is rooted in confidence that **God is at work even when unseen**.

C. Strengthen Your Hearts

- “Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near” (5:8).
- Joy is not pretending the desert isn’t real.
- Joy is trusting that **the Lord is near in the desert**.

III. MATTHEW 11 — JOY EVEN WHEN JESUS DOESN’T FIT OUR EXPECTATIONS

A. John the Baptist’s Question

- John is faithful, obedient and imprisoned.
- He asks Jesus: “Are you the one...?” (11:3).
- This is an honest desert question born of unmet expectations.

B. Jesus’ Gentle Response

- Jesus does not rebuke John.
- He points to **evidence**, not explanations:
 - the blind see
 - the lame walk
 - the poor hear good news

- Jesus echoes **Isaiah 35**, showing the Kingdom is breaking in.

C. Recognizing the Signs of the Kingdom

- John remains in prison; circumstances do not change.
- Joy comes from **seeing where God is already at work**, not from immediate rescue.
- Sometimes joy comes when **our sight changes**, not our situation.

IV. WHAT ADVENT JOY REALLY IS

A. Joy as Evidence of God's Renewing Presence

- Joy happens when God arrives, not when deserts disappear.

B. Joy in the "Already / Not Yet"

- Jesus is already King, yet deserts remain.
- Christian joy participates in **resurrection life even now**.

C. Joy as Defiant Hope

- Joy refuses to let the desert define the story.
- It is resistance against despair, **hope with eyes open**.

V. WHERE IS GOD GROWING JOY IN YOUR DESERT?

A. Name the Desert

- Identify where life feels dry:
 - relationships
 - disappointment
 - grief
 - anxiety
 - spiritual weariness
- The desert is real, but **God's presence is more real**.

B. Look for the Wildflowers

- Notice small signs of God's faithfulness:
 - encouragement
 - Scripture
 - strength
 - unexpected joy
- Joy often begins **small and surprising**.

C. Strengthen Someone Else

- “Strengthen weak hands; steady trembling knees” (35:3).
- Joy multiplies when we help others notice God’s nearness.

D. Practice Advent Patience

- Like a farmer, trust God’s timing.
- Where do you need to wait without panic?

E. Reorient Expectations

- Shift the question from:
 - “Why isn’t God changing this?”
 - to “Where is God already at work in this?”
- Joy begins there.

VI. CONCLUSION: THE DESERT IS NOT THE END

- Isaiah promises: **the desert will bloom.**
- James assures: **the rain is coming.**
- Jesus declares: **the kingdom is breaking in.**
- Advent reminds us:
 - joy is not reserved for perfect seasons
 - joy is God’s gift in imperfect ones
- **Where the King is present, joy springs up, even in the desert.**

Final Reflection

Where have you seen signs of God’s Kingdom breaking through in your desert?