

SERMON TITLE: "Journey Together with Rejoicing"
SERMON TEXT: Isaiah 35:1-10
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: October 23, 2022, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Wow! Wasn't our Craft Fair a big and exciting event?! Thank you to Linda Gates for coordinating the Fair. And thanks to all of you who volunteered your time and talents for the success of this annual fundraiser. By serving together in this way, we'll now be able to give nice donations to five local human service agencies, in addition to keeping half for use by our own church. I remember that last year's Craft Fair was the first big event we'd had since COVID began, and it was such a happy celebration of life returning to something like normal. We still had to wear masks at the Craft Fair last year, but—even then—it was such a wonderful thing to be able to assemble together. This year, without having to cover our faces or feel so concerned about COVID, coming together with lots of vendors, volunteers, and customers was an even greater cause for rejoicing.

During this month of our stewardship drive, we're focusing our attention on our journey together. On October 9, we talked about Abram and Sarai's journey together with their people, and we thought about the spiritual journey we take together with our people in the church. On October 16, we talked about the 40-year journey together of Moses and the Hebrews, and how—like them—we can journey together with God's guidance. On October 30, when we bring our pledge cards back to church and dedicate them to God, we'll hear about the journey together of Jesus and the disciples, and how we might journey together with purpose.

Today, though, our scripture text is Isaiah 35. Using poetic imagery, the prophet Isaiah described what it would feel like when the Jews would be released from their Babylonian exile and allowed to return back home to Jerusalem. So very different from the horrific march of death, slavery,

and sadness that was forced upon them decades before, this time they would journey together with rejoicing.

1—GUIDED IMAGERY SO WE CAN FEEL THIS REJOICING

In order for us to feel this rejoicing that Isaiah describes, I want to try something with you that I've never done in a sermon before. I hope you will be able to do this with me and that it will be effective. What we're about to do is called "guided imagery." For this to work, you will need to clear your mind, relax, and trust me to guide you. Can you do that? Not sure? Well, let's give it a try and see.

The first thing I need you to do is to adjust yourself in your seat here in your sanctuary pew or at home on your couch. Make yourself comfortable. Set aside anything in your hands and relax your arms by your sides. Of course you can't do that if you're holding a baby, but do try to relax as much as possible. Next, I want you to close your eyes. Try not to fall asleep, but do clear your mind.

Now, keeping your eyes closed, I want you to breathe in deeply. Allow yourself to exhale slowly. As you continue to breathe in and out, think about how your body feels. Notice where there are any aches and pains. If you feel any tightness in your shoulders, give them a gentle shrug, and then relax again.

As you keep your eyes closed, I want you to notice how your skin feels. Is it warm? Is it cold? Is it dry and itchy? Isaiah said that "the wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom." The prophet describes the desert blossoming with crocus. Streams will burst forth in the desert, he says, and grassy fields will become wetlands where reeds and rushes grow.

So I want you to imagine spreading lotion on your dry skin. Feel the relief from irritation. Breathe deeply through your nose. Does it feel dry inside? Imagine the moist air of rain, snow, or a tropical climate. Feel it inside your nostrils. This is what it would feel like for the Jewish exiles. After seven decades of chafing in a foreign land against their will, now they would have the relief of returning to their own country. They would feel the positive change throughout their bodies.

As you continue to keep your eyes closed, think about these questions. Do you have weak hands or feeble knees? Feel them become strong. Do you have trouble with your vision or hearing? Claim Isaiah's promise that the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf will be unstopped. Do you have a fearful heart? In the confidence that God is coming to set things right, feel God's saving strength. As Isaiah describes, the lame will leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless will sing for joy. Imagine yourself walking without pain, without stiffness, without imbalance. Feel the spring in your step. If you sometimes have trouble expressing the words you want to say, now feel the joy of speaking your thoughts plainly and clearly.

The prophet Isaiah was telling his people that the experience of going home was going to be so wonderful that even the landscape around them would be more colorful. Even though your eyes are closed, can you see it? Like when the *Wizard of Oz* movie changes from black and white to bright and vivid hues, the travelers would see the glory and majesty of the Lord. As they journeyed together toward Zion, this anticipation of hope would cause them great gladness. Like in the hymn "We're Marching to Zion," can you hear the former exiles now singing, "Come, we that love the Lord, and let our joys be known"? Can you feel their enthusiasm? Are you able to join in? Are you able to journey together with rejoicing?

2—BACK TO THE SANCTUARY

I invite you now to open your eyes and come back together here in the sanctuary or through your Facebook screen. As we worked our way through Isaiah's poetic imagery, could you feel that change from before and after, from the time of slavery and exile to the time of freedom and beauty? Could you feel how and why his people would journey together with rejoicing? Times of limitation, drought, and weakness come to us human beings and cause real trouble and worry. That's a truth that often can't be avoided. But the good news is that God is always busy turning our despair into gladness.

This joyful good news is most evident when we journey together. If we try to go it alone in Christian faith, it's easy to become discouraged when bad things happen to us. If we become isolated in our own thinking, we can become overwhelmed and depressed, feeling unforgiven, resentful, and burned out. But when we participate in a community of faith, we have other folks walking the spiritual path with us who are interested in us and who offer us words of encouragement and prayers. Those congregational friends take turns bearing the load. Their kind words and actions lift us up from dark places and give us room for hope. Sometimes they might also gently suggest some different perspectives that could challenge our ruts and prejudices and stretch us to a more complete understanding of our own life and the circumstances of other people.

The journey together offers us many possibilities to learn, to develop our capacity for love, and to increase our appreciation for God's vast and various creation. And all those uplifting improvements give us reasons for rejoicing. Water springs up in the desert, and the crocus begin to bloom. Or, to put that in terms of our experience in Utah this past week—the trees and bushes on the mountains have turned into glorious autumn colors, and newly-fallen mountain snow will provide water for us next summer. As we journey together, there are so many reasons for rejoicing.

3—INTERNATIONAL METHODISM

Of course, our journey together isn't for rejoicing with just our friends in our local congregation. As United Methodists, we're part of a very big connection that goes all over the world. For example, when we put our dollars into the offering plate here at Ogden First UMC, we share the joy of our faith with Ukrainian people who have been so adversely affected by Russia's invasion. At a meeting this week, the United Methodist Committee on Relief announced that, through the end of August, they had received \$23.2 million dollars for relief ministries inside the country of Ukraine and in the neighboring countries where Ukrainians have fled. These donations are now helping with housing, food, legal aid, mental and physical health care, and children's educational programs--as well as providing spiritual

resources like worship and prayer. The Ukrainian people who have suffered from incredible displacement and distress are able to find some peace and rejoicing as we journey together with them.

Another example of how our journey together brings rejoicing around the world comes from the United Methodist Africa University in Zimbabwe. An article in Friday's *United Methodist News* told about their new vice chancellor. Rev. Peter Mageto earned his Bachelor of Divinity degree in his home country of Kenya, and then studied for his Master's degree at the United Methodist Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, IL, which we all help support. A district superintendent who knew Peter during that time in Illinois described Peter's "deep faith, . . . intellect, . . . wisdom, [and] . . . passion for justice." He also described this new leader of Africa University as a person who was always "joy-filled. His smile was constant and infectious. He infused his joy, born of his unshakeable faith, into everyone around him."*

When we journey together by pledging our financial support to our ministries here at Ogden First United Methodist Church, we can be confident that we are also supporting these important connectional ministries of compassion for refugees and for the development of faithful and joy-filled leaders. We may not ever travel very far from home, but we can be sure that we are on a journey together that's making rejoicing possible around the world.

CONCLUSION

So, fellow travelers, I invite you to participate with me on this spiritual journey. Let's think carefully and prayerfully about what we can give to God's ministry in 2023. Let's journey together with rejoicing!

*https://www.umnews.org/en/news/new-vice-chancellor-fulfills-calling-at-africa-university?mkt_tok=MDc4LUYUS02NDMAAAGHm20uP8KEqR-Jlpo7QGg2Tv1Fv_Nv6yZfJ1oy_p-FsMtaSOBwsYo5-O7MGv4Q7XdlMyl2ujq182bFnt0gvDibewEmwFJMNes5tWYD_DtLfff42w