

Welcome

[Image] These are members of the Kiowa Nation, preparing to participate in their annual Gourd Dance.

And you may not know it, but this picture is a miracle.

The Kiowa are part of the Sioux people, nomads who originally lived in Montana and South Dakota before migrating South. In the years following the Civil War, the US army waged a campaign of extermination against the Sioux and other Native nations. Even after the Native peoples surrendered and were forced onto reservations, the US government took measures to destroy Native cultures. They established Indian Boarding Schools, forcing parents to send their kids to them. The kids were abused, forced to dress as Europeans and speaking any language other than English was forbidden.

On the reservations, the US outlawed Native religions and practices, which included the Kiowa Gourd Dance.

The Gourd Dance was, at that point, over a century old. It originated when a brave returning from battle got lost and wandered until he was rescued by a red wolf. According to legend, the wolf taught him the Gourd Dance and sent him back to his people, and every year, the men of the Kiowa nation performed the dance to welcome home warriors who defended them. They ended each dance with a wolf's howl.

The US Government outlawed the Gourd Dance in the 1890s, as part of a larger effort to eradicate Native cultures.

Which is why I said this picture is a miracle. Because it was 60 years later, in 1957 the US government finally recognized the Kiowa as an official nation, allowing them to *be* Kiowa in public.

One of the Kiowa officials moved quickly. He tracked down a handful of men who were old enough to have learned the Gourd Dance. It turned out they had kept the tradition alive in secret, singing the songs in their (illegal) native language.

So in 1957, the Kiowa Nation held their first official, public Gourd Dance in over half a century. They dance every year now, passing on the dance, the songs, the culture to their children and grandchildren.

But they no longer dance for returning warriors. Now they dance for every man, woman and child who fights to preserve the Kiowa Nation.

The Gourd Dance is a dance of celebration. And for the embattled Kiowa Nation, to celebrate is to resist. To dance is to insist they're still here. That they won't be silenced.

The Kiowa teach us that sometimes the bravest thing you can do is celebrate.

As we're approaching Christmas, the whole culture around us is in a frenzy of holiday cheer.

And since we're ten days from Christmas, this can be the time the weight of holiday expectations starts to become crushing. A lot of us feel embattled right now, for all kinds of different reasons.

So today, we're going to take a lesson from our Kiowa neighbors: what does it look like to celebrate as a form of resistance?

We're going to sing one song to get us warmed up, and I want you to take whatever you came in with today - whatever anxieties or stress, whatever hurts and pain and hold them. Keep them close.

We're going to sing this first song together and not *ignore* that pain, those stresses and hurts, but *because* of them. We're going to celebrate the God who is with us this Advent season, this God who is bigger than all our hurts and pains, who feels them with us, holds them with us and holds us, too.

Message

This is the third week of Advent. Christians all over the world are spending the four weeks of Advent preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus. Advent is a season of hopeful imagination. We look forward to the return of Jesus by putting ourselves in the place of God's people as they waited for the birth of the Messiah.

This year, our Advent series is called Christmas is for Dreamers. We're exploring the words of the prophet Isaiah, one of the first of God's prophets to look for a savior to rescue us.

We began by asking God to shape our desires, to help us want the right things. Last week, we reflected on the nature of hope. Hope is the stubborn insistence that the way things are isn't the way things are always going to be.

Today, we're pressing into the *response* to hope, the "Okay, so what next?" question. Today is all about *joy*.

On a day we explore joy, it's worth remembering that the Christmas season is not joyful for everyone. For a lot of folks, this time of year brings deep pain of loss, loneliness or alienation.

Even for those of us looking forward to Christmas, this is the season of endless holiday parties, too much shopping and decorating and wrapping and travel, travel, travel.

Which is a big part of why this third Sunday of Advent is the Sunday we celebrate Joy. It's easy, in the midst of hardship, to forget joy. And, weirdly, it's easy in the midst of celebrating to forget joy. It's easy to think of Joy as an easy word, a simple, weak word that basically just means "be happy". But Joy is far more than that, as we'll see in the Scripture today.

[Scripture Slide] Turn with me to Isaiah 35. For the last couple of weeks, we've heard prophecies from the Prophet Isaiah who challenged the nation of Judah to remain faithful under the shadow of the Assyrian Empire. Today, we're fast-forwarding a couple of centuries. Assyria is long gone, having been conquered by the Babylonians. And unlike the Assyrians, the Babylonians weren't content to let Judah live as a vassal kingdom. Instead, they conquered Judah, destroyed Jerusalem and God's Temple, and forcibly deported the core of the ruling and cultural leaders.

It was a cultural apocalypse for God's people. And as you can imagine, it was pretty difficult to imagine any sort of JOY. Their whole world had been devastated. But it was into those circumstances that a disciple of Isaiah spoke these words. Just like his prophetic forebearer, this anonymous student challenged his neighbors to imagine a better world than they can. He challenges them to hope (as we saw last week). Pay attention to two things as we read. First, note the dream the prophet offers. And second, note what the prophet asks of the people in the present, those hearing his vision.

Even the wilderness and desert will be glad in those days. The wasteland will rejoice and blossom with spring crocuses. Yes, there will be an abundance of flowers and singing and joy! The deserts will become as green as the mountains of Lebanon, as lovely as Mount Carmel or the plain of Sharon. There the LORD will display his glory, the splendor of our God.

With this news, strengthen those who have tired hands, and encourage those who have weak knees. Say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, and do not fear, for your God is coming to destroy your enemies. He is coming to save you."

And when he comes, he will open the eyes of the blind and unplug the ears of the deaf. The lame will leap like a deer, and those who cannot speak will sing for joy! Springs will gush forth in the wilderness, and streams will water the wasteland. The parched ground will become a pool, and springs of water will satisfy the thirsty land. Marsh grass and reeds and rushes will flourish where desert jackals once lived.

And a great road will go through that once deserted land. It will be named the Highway of Holiness. Evil-minded people will never travel on it. It will be only for those who walk in God's ways; fools will never walk there. Lions will not lurk along its course, nor any other ferocious beasts. There will be no other dangers. Only the redeemed will walk on it.

Those who have been ransomed by the LORD will return. They will enter Jerusalem singing, crowned with everlasting joy. Sorrow and mourning will disappear, and they will be filled with joy and gladness. -- Isaiah 35:1-10

[Babylon Map] The central image of this vision is the roadway through a desert that has turned into a paradise. While the image is beautiful on its own, it held even more resonance for God's people. To get to Babylon from Judah, you had to go through the desert. So the image here isn't just one of easy travel. It's specifically God making a way for the Exiles to return home. This is a vision of a return - and a restoration.

Again, the image of the people who aren't whole in body being healed is powerful, but it's *even more powerful* when you remember that this vision was delivered to the losers of a devastating war. Those who weren't whole in body were specifically maimed by the war - losing limbs and being blinded (the Babylonian emperor blinded the Jewish king before taking him in chains back to Babylon).

So again, what the prophet offers here isn't abstracted feel-good platitudes, but concrete, specific promises that God is not finished with God's people. God is still on the move, working to rescue, redeem and restore.

There are two big reactions when we hear a promise like this and we're in dire straits. The first is pessimism. We want to roll our eyes and scoff. "Yeah right. Things aren't going to get better. Give me a break." Some of you had that reaction as soon as I started talking about joy. You considered your current circumstances and checked out. Of course, you don't call it Pessimism. You call it 'realism'. But the end result is the same: you're convinced things are just going to be bad, no matter what you do.

The other reaction to a prophetic announcement like this we might call Positivity. We say, "Oh great! God is on the move! I knew things would work out!" Positivity can slide easily into blind optimism, which is a shield that blocks us from the pain in the world. Positivity can too easily say, "Good, things are going to work out, no matter what I do."

Do you see how Pessimism and Positivity are mirrors of each other? Both are sure the future they imagine will happen regardless of what they do.

Instead of pessimism or positivity, anti-racist activist Andre Henry challenges us to *hope*, the very heart of Advent practice. Andre says,

"Hope is a humility about the future. You don't know what is going to happen tomorrow, and because you don't know, there is space to act. Pessimists are sure that no matter what you do, tomorrow is going to suck. Optimists also say, 'No matter what you do, everything's going to be fine.' Both excuse themselves from action.

"But hope looks at the future and says, 'Maybe. Maybe things can turn out well and we have the power to influence the outcome.'" -- Andre Henry, anti-racism activist

Hope says, "Maybe." Maybe we can move. Maybe we can act. Maybe God is inviting us to shift the future. That's the call of the prophet. Right in the middle of his vision, he spoke not of the future, but of the present suffering:

With this news, strengthen those who have tired hands, and encourage those who have weak knees. Say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, and do not fear, for your God is coming to destroy your enemies. He is coming to save you."

Strengthen. Encourage. Be strong and don't fear. God is coming.

Hope is what spurred the Kiowa to dance the Gourd dance in secret, to pass on their culture and traditions even when it was outlawed. Hope is what brings them together today to dance in defiance of extinction, to proclaim to the world, "We're still here."

What does active hope look like for you in the next ten days? Maybe it's choosing to be joyful. Maybe it's choosing to forgive, or to extend a hand of reconciliation.

Friends, hope is an active thing. Hope spurs us to double-down on the Way of Jesus, to insist on embodying the fruit of the Spirit even when it seems pointless.

During this Advent season, we say, "We will be a people of love. We will be a people who makes peace. We will be *patient*. We insist on being kind, treating everyone like beloved family members. We will be generous. We will be faithful, gentle and self-controlled."

We will exhibit real joy. We won't be Scrooges or Grinches because we know God is at work. And we won't slide into passive positivity that ignores the real suffering around us.

We will be joyful on purpose. We will celebrate as an act of resistance. With our joy, we will drag God's future work in to the present. We will be a people who shows the world what the promise of God with us looks like.

Let's celebrate!

[Songs] Let's sing together. Our songs are a celebration, an act of hope. We choose to believe God is with us, that God is on the move, that God is doing good in the world!

Communion and Examen

[Communion Slide] Jesus invites us to the table, to the cross. To come is an act of hope. God is with us!