

Sandra Stogsdill Brown  
*Jaw Dropping Joy*  
A sermon on Isaiah 35:1-10/3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Advent  
December 15, 2019

One way I like to exercise is on the elliptical machines at my fitness center. Almost always, the TV in front of me is set to the channel that shows one home renovation show after another. Property Brothers, Fixer Upper, Flip or Flop, and these shows are pretty much the same. You start out with a run-down old house that looks like it is beyond redemption. Bunch of mold, choppy floor plan, dated kitchen, peeling paint, hideous wallpaper, terrible, stained carpet, what have you. To the average viewer, it is a hopeless disaster, but we know what's coming. The renovators come in and get a vision of what the house could be. The rest of the show follows the process of making that vision a reality, which typically starts with the workers tearing out old walls and cabinets with a vengeance.

Now there's always some kind of huge crisis along the way—they discover that all the wiring needs to be replaced, or the whole floor is rotten, some terrible thing that costs a bunch of money, but somehow everything comes together in the end, and of course the big payoff of the show comes when the homeowner walks into their newly renovated home for the first time and sees the amazing transformation from shack to showplace. The rooms flow one to the other. The décor and furnishings are now in the best of taste, yet still reflect the style and personality of the owners. Where once there was crumbling and chaos, now there is beauty and serenity. Jaws drop, tears are shed, hugs all around, great stuff.

Have you ever yearned for a transformation like that in your own life? Have you ever felt like the whole world could use a transformation like that?

In Isaiah's vision, God comes to us like a team of designers and renovation experts descending on an old, shabby house. God looks at all the stuff in our lives that isn't working anymore—our grudges, our shattered dreams and disappointments, our rusted out ideas and decaying bodies, and tackles them with a vengeance, saying, "I know you can't picture it right now, but I've got a new plan for you, and it's going to make your jaw drop." Of course, God being God, the whole world gets a new look. . . and God being God, God thinks of everything.

God reminds me of Annabelle Hobbs's birthday parties. (I've described these before, about these before, but I will mention them again). Annabelle Hobbs was a friend of my daughter Rachel, and Annabelle's birthday parties were legendary. They all had a theme. One year, the theme was Victorian tea party, so all the little girls got to decorate hats and take them home at the end of the party, but not just the hats—also a real china cup and saucer, and a bag filled with Victorian jewelry, and candy, and a fancy candlestick, and lace gloves and a handkerchief. And a photo of everyone at the party in an ornate Victorian frame. And a whole bunch of other stuff I can't remember. Another year it was a Mulan party, and Rachel came home with a parasol and a fan and a toy cricket and a bag of trinkets and a bag of candy and pretty much every item Disney ever made that had Mulan on it.

Every one of Annabelle's parties was over the top. Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that Annabelle was the only child of parents who had waited a very, very, very long time to become parents, but be that as it may, her mother, Mary Kate, was a natural born party planner and hostess extraordinaire, and she had both the creativity and the resources to really do things up big. She was so fabulous at it, and so gracious about it, that the rest of us moms didn't even bother trying to compete with her—we couldn't—so we did the only sensible thing we could do, which was to just enjoy her, and appreciate that our daughters got to go to her parties. Of course

we all sent nice birthday gifts, but no matter what we gave, Annabelle's guests always came home loaded down with far more gifts than they brought.

Like Mary Kate, God is the party planner who has thought of everything. These past few Sundays of Advent, we've been reading from Isaiah, and each of the passages has had something in common. Each one has painted a picture of vivid transformation. In Isaiah 2, weapons become tools for growing food. In Isaiah 11, animals who hunt and animals who are hunted lie down together as friends. Today, in Isaiah 35, joy spills over like a can of Sprite after you shake it really hard for 60 seconds and pop it open. Dry desert land where nothing can grow becomes a lush garden. Shaky, worn out hands and brittle joints become strong and flexible again. The wounds of trauma and disease are healed. Where there was sorrow and sighing, there is gladness. And there is SINGING. Lots and lots of singing, not just the people but the planet itself. And just in case you lost your invitation and don't know how to get to the party, don't worry—God thought of that too, because God has rolled out the red carpet and made a pathway where even a fool with no sense of direction cannot get lost. This image of extravagant growth and healing and new life shows once again, our desires cannot compare with what God has for us, because God gives us things we didn't even know were possible.

Stop and think for a moment about the places in own life where nothing is growing anymore, where you're like the dry land of the wilderness. Think about the ways your body has disappointed you. The times you've felt lost. The people you HAVE lost. The dreams that have died. The memories that hurt your heart. All the things that make us grieve and sigh today. God gives Isaiah this vision for a people whose land had been invaded, the temple and its precious treasures razed to the ground, families torn apart with some of them killed, some taken into exile and some of them left behind. And it's for us, too. There is no part of our lives, nothing even on

this suffering planet of ours that is so hopeless and broken that God will not redeem it. And not just redeem it, but transform it into something so beautiful that jaws will drop, and tears will come, and there will be hugs all around. The joy of Advent is that God is coming. God has come to us in Christ. God keeps coming to us in the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit. God will come again, and God will not disappoint. Joy to the World!

Let us rise in body or spirit and sing about one of God's most famous design projects, a cattle shed that was transformed one night long ago . . .