Repeat the Sounding Joy: Imagining a New World with Isaiah
By Ellen Williams Hensle, 12-14-2025

Under a full moon, a stone – no, it's a Cottontail,
Quiet, still – until Owl hoots.
Then like a lightning bolt,
she dashes the zig-zag path she made
for escape to her brush pile.
Safe, she hides through the next day,
Warming herself till night comes.
Then, again, she must go out to eat.
At night, most hunters sleep.
To others, she's invisible. But Owl sees.
So, before she nibbles twig tips,
She hops her paths, packing down snow,
Making them hard and fast.
Loose snow slows her zig-zag bolt.
She packs three paths *then* settles down to eat,
Quiet, still, ready to leap![1]

Thus Gayle Boss describes the winter survival tactics of the Cottontail rabbit. Boss lives in Michigan and is a keen observer of the creatures that live in her backyard, noticing their daily habits through each season of the year. When her children were young, she started drawing one of those backyard creatures to feature behind each door of a homemade Advent calendar. She chose animals in part because she knew that like all children, her children would like to see a picture of a different animal each day.

But her choice was also deeper than that, deeper than even she quite realized when she began sketching turtles and loons all those Advents ago. Each of these creatures has its own way of surviving the cold and dark of winter, Boss discovered. Our non-human fellow creations have their own wisdom, and over time Boss realized that that wisdom has something to teach us humans about Advent waiting. And so Boss collected all she had learned and observed about the wintertime habits of North American animals into a beautiful book called "All Creation Waits," with the spotlight on one animal for each day of Advent.

In the book's introduction, she writes: "I wanted my little boy, opening each door, to sense that Advent is about darkness – and hope. Fear – and hope. Loss – and hope. When that primal fear of the dark – of an end – begins to slide over us, animals unselfconsciously and forthrightly offer unfearful responses. They take in the threat of dark and cold, and they adapt in many amazing and ingenious ways. Each in its way says: *The dark is not an end, but a door. This is the way a new beginning comes.*"[2]

In her entry for the 8th day of Advent, Boss explains that the Cottontail rabbit, with her gray-brown coat, stands out against the snow in the winter light. So she waits for the cover of dusk to venture out for twigs or bark to gnaw on. But before she wanders too far from home, she packs down paths in the snow for herself – usually more than one, to give herself options. Then when she wanders out for food, she has clear routes back to the shallow den she has burrowed beneath the brush pile. If an owl comes winging across the sky in search of her evening meal, the cottontail can bolt for home, zig-zagging across the snow on the packed paths she has made, without any loose powder to slow her sprint. Her own personal highway through the wilderness.

So too does Isaiah describe a highway through the wilderness – a highway on which God's people can travel home. After decades of exile in Babylon, Isaiah proclaims that the time has come for the people to return to Jerusalem. After their long wait, they are finally going *home*. And instead of a fearful journey back through the wilderness, a journey plagued by anxiety about lions and jackals, a journey plagued by worry about having enough to eat and to drink, a journey plagued by fear of getting lost along the way – instead of a fearful journey through the wilderness, Isaiah proclaims that the people will have a joyful journey. Waters will break forth in the desert to provide enough to drink. The craggy territory where jackals usually wait for their prey will become a land of marshes and swamps, a land uninhabitable by predators. The way will be so clear that no traveler will be able to get lost on it – not even a fool. And the wilderness itself will burst into bloom, rejoicing at the goodness of God. A highway. A Holy Way.

If only our way through the wilderness could always be so clear. If only our way through the wilderness of addiction could be so clear. If only our way through the wilderness of cancer treatment could be so clear. If only our way through the wilderness of broken relationships could be so clear. If only our way through the wilderness of our dark nights of the soul could be so clear. If only our way through the wilderness of war and violence could be so clear. If only our way through the wilderness of prejudice and poverty could be so clear. If only our way through the wilderness of seemingly unbridgeable division could be so clear. Holy God, we long for highways through the wilderness. Holy God, we long for highways through our wildernesses, both the ones inside our hearts and the ones in our hurting world. A highway. A Holy Way.

In Advent, as we long for a highway through the wilderness, we join Isaiah in proclaiming that our God is indeed a maker of ways. As we long for a highway through the wilderness, we hear the words of Jesus, in his response to John the Baptist: look up and look around – what do you see? In the life and work of Jesus we see the blind receiving their sight, the lame taking up their mats to walk; we see the diseased cleansed, the dead raised; we see good news brought to the poor. In the life and work of Jesus we see the great reversals promised by Isaiah and echoed by Mary in her Magnificat, promises that the lowly

will be lifted up, the hungry will be filled, the powerful will be cast down from their thrones, the outcasts will return home, the desert itself will blossom. Our God, out of God's great mercy, can turn anything around – our God can bring new life even out of death. Our God makes a way. And so we rejoice.

My college fellowship group met once a week in a Penn classroom to hear a talk from a local pastor and sing worship songs together, sometimes played poorly by me on a cheap electric piano. One week, a local Presbyterian minister, who has since become a dear friend, came to speak to us. She opened by asking the group, "do you think I am a happy person?" My friends and I looked around at each other – this bubbly young woman with her bright smile, her colorful clothes, her big earrings, her genuine way of connecting – of course she must be happy.

She smiled a knowing smile and then corrected us. No, she told us – "I'm not always happy. My life has been full of hard and sad things. I'm not necessarily feeling good all the time. But I *am* joyful. I have the deep down joy that comes from knowing God. The kind of joy that goes beyond happiness – the kind of joy that no person and no situation can take away. I have joy because I know that God loves me. I know that God is for me. So I have joy even when I'm not happy." I've remembered that talk all these years. From my friend I know that even when I am in the depths of a wilderness with no highway, there is still joy, for God is still present. God is still working. I can choose to rejoice.

My father's family comes from a small town in southern York County called Glen Rock. It's a town with a curious tradition – every Christmas, a group of men carol around the town, beginning exactly at the stroke of midnight on Christmas morning. It started in 1848 with four men homesick for the holiday traditions of their English homeland, and a bassoon – possibly a worse choice even than a cheap electric piano. But though the instrumentation has changed and the group has grown, 177 years later, they're still going. These days, a well-rehearsed group of 50 men in top hats and capes gathers under the town's single stoplight to ring in Christmas with a carol forgotten most everywhere else: "Christians awake, salute this happy morn, whereon the Savior of this world was born…"[3]

And then the carolers and their loyal followers traipse all over town, making their way up and down the hilly streets until they've completed a full circuit of the town. Depending on the weather and the number of followers they have, it might take them until 6 am to finish their circuit. When I was a child, my family would bundle into the car after church on Christmas Eve and drive to Glen Rock to participate in the fun. Usually we would visit the homes of my dad's relatives before heading out to catch the first carol at the stoplight, then follow the group until we'd heard every song in their closed repertoire at least once. Another stop in at the cousins for a cup of coffee and a sloppy joe and then we were on our way home through the dark central Pennsylvania night.

When I was really little, this was just what my family did – of course I didn't know that this was a strange way to spend the wee hours of Christmas morning. As I got older, it was something to look forward to, our own unique family tradition and a chance to stay up really light at night. Then at some point in early adulthood I realized this was worship. To stand out in the middle of a cold December night and sing into the darkness: "Christians awake, salute this happy morn" – this is worship.

I can assure you that not all those morns are happy. The carolers carry on this tradition every year no matter the weather: freezing cold, bizarrely warm, snow, sleet or just plain rain. Depending on the route around town determined for that year, you might end up trudging up the side of a hill in the snow through someone's yard, leaving you feeling more like a cottontail packing trails than a Christmas reveler. And when you think back to 1848, all the years that the tradition has carried on, through wars, through depressions, through times of great uncertainty and transition in our nation and in the world, not to mention all the personal hardships that the carolers have sung through – no, not all these morns are happy. And yet, this faithful group of people gathers in the dead of night anyway, to joyfully proclaim together that Jesus Christ is born. Our maker of ways has come again, into the mess and muddle of human life — our maker of ways has come again, to lead us through the wilderness, to lead us through the night.

The world says, "Worry," and we say, "Rejoice." The news says, "Fear," and we say, "Rejoice." The world says, "Be happy," and the church says, "Be joyful." Let that deep down joy of the Lord seep through to the very core of your being, and join the song.

1. Gayle Boss, *All Creation Waits: The Advent Mystery of New Beginnings*, Children's Edition, Paraclete Press: 2023.
2. Gayle Boss, *All Creation Waits: The Advent Mystery of New Beginnings,* Paraclete Press: 2022.
3. http://162.0.211.250/~northbelltower/c/01w.htm