My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Our Lord God of our grateful hearts, minds, Spirits, and souls, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

I think we all remember as children times when we were loaded onto school buses and told we were going somewhere. Sometimes it was a well-defined journey like going to another school to compete against another team, and we knew about what to expect. But other times we were herded for a field trip to something we didn’t know about.

Maybe here we went to the ocean to explore tide pools and life beyond the boundaries of what we see on land. Maybe we traveled out to the farm in the spring to learn about lamb births and new life as a way to understand our own reproduction cycle. In Denver we went off to the federal mint and understood more about pennies, nickels, dimes and quarters and how they were made and what happened after that. Departures meant adventures, and most kids were up for that.

But it seems like it took forever to get there, and to pass the time we often sung a song in very hushed tones so that the teachers couldn’t hear us in the back of the bus: “99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall, 99 Bottles of Beer. You take one down, pass it around, there are 98 bottles of beer on the wall. 98 bottles of beer on the wall…” and so on, and it passed the time pretty well.

As kids we were free to make up all kinds of realities and stories in our imaginations. And the world gets a hold of us and slowly dulls us, reminding us of what is to be sensible…logical…soooo responsible, practical (singing to the tune of Supertramp’s “The Logical Song”). We grew up and out of what’s possible to know better.

And so it must have felt almost impossible to believe what God is telling the ancient Israelites through our prophet Isaiah this week. God tells us in stark contrast what it means to trust the nations and this world more than the possibilities of trusting God’s grace and building more life. God has shown the people that in placing their trust in kings and defenses against one another, that they begin to suffer, wither, and slowly decline in Spirit and social fabric until there is nothing left and they are carried off to Babylon, away from the promised land of Jerusalem to which they were led and prospered for 10 generations. God shows them the judgment that they have brought upon themselves, because they embrace riches over sharing, might over generosity, and power over one another. God’s ways are those of kindness, compassion, justice, mercy, love, and kinship, and when those ways are forgotten it is only a matter of time until all is lost.

God seeks us out not in judgment; we do that to ourselves. We do a fine job of giving ourselves pats on the back for our good times, thinking we earn and deserve all we have because of our own means and ends. And the more we do that, the more we do not see how unraveled we can become, and then one day wonder how we got here, in need of help. We can be hard on ourselves just fine, can’t we? Such is Isaiah 33 and 34 reflecting our downtrodden world.

But then God offers an oracle of joy, a mirror image of what life has been to what life can be. Isaiah 35.

God doesn’t allow the people to rest in despair. But neither does God allow us to give up hope. God reminds us of our possibilities which are impossible: parched land and wilderness of our hearts somehow become safe for the people. The downtrodden can shout for joy. Those who are bent over straighten up. People begin to understand the ways of love and the Lord so that there is actual, physical change in the world, and onetime rivals who cannot understand each other start to listen to one another.

Heck, they may even wander into a coffeehouse on Wednesday and start singing so that joy overtakes them, our scripture says, and their barriers seem to melt when they consider their neighbor first rather than themselves.

But beyond the definition of our troubles and the dislocation of our lives, it requires us to own up to how we no longer wish to enter into our troubles again and again as God has shown us. We can do more if we leave that place and go somewhere else. To another point of view. A point of view is a view from a point, and change requires us going to a different point. And then look.

We just might be amazed at things when seen from someone else’s world. Departure to go toward someone who can help glimpse God and God’s purposes is scary, because the rewards have nothing to do with riches or betterment as our world defines it. Joy can be ours if we give into grace. But it requires us to accept God on God’s terms, not ours. Remember, we’re made in God’s image, not the other way around. And we can forgive because God forgives US first. Look in the mirror and let’s see what our life is like in God’s joy, rather than what God is like in our joy. See the pattern here?

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

Even in an oracle of Joy, it can seem like we are on a long and winding road. And we don’t remember how we were propelled onto the journey, what the defining moments were that put us on this path. We know that we can feel that we cannot return to where we were, but that doesn’t help us understand the road ahead.

The point is that departures often transport us to another context, so that we can not only learn more about ourselves, but our place in the world. It’s not familiar, but it helps us contextualize our place in the world and among people, places, beings, and things.

But we are on the journey nonetheless. And the journey can feel interminable, just like our school trip, and we just want to get there, singing our song which dulled our senses rather than enlivened them.

What is the joy of our departure now, at this point in our lives, at this point in our faith, and how and where are we transported into new contexts? What do we see around us? What do we dismiss all too readily? And what catches our attention, and what do we do about it?

Are we alive, or are we singing 99 bottles of beer on the wall right now? Where are we at, each of us and all of us? Do we feel grounded, or in transition? And where is God in all of this? I invite you to come alive with a child’s imagination, and consider larger questions in our holiday rush to only God knows where.

And for that adventure, thanks be to God, Amen.