“Gladness Instead of Mourning”

a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus

concerning Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco

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It is the Sunday of Joy: beauty to ashes, mourning turned to gladness, fainting spirits erupting in praise. It’s pink candle day! It’s the Sunday where we pause from the penitence and longing of Advent and start the Christmas party early.

It’s also the day here at Lake Shore where later we will gather together not for another party or celebration but for a Service of Light in the Darkness, a service for the grieving, a sacred space of warmth and belonging for those who are sad, who feel out of place amidst the holiday cheer. So fear not—though the prophet speaks of joy and your preacher repeats the song—if you do not yet have joy, this day is for you too. It is the Sunday not of arrival but of things to come.

It is a Sunday of promise that echoes the song of Mary when she was expectant with child but still waiting for birth: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. . . . He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”

Before we speak of joy, we must speak of sadness, knowing that joy only comes in the morning when the night was full of tears, and though the weary world rejoices, first the world was weary, so very weary. Imagine how these prophetic words felt to a people demoralized by the experience of exile: “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn . . .”

Imagine how this line feels—“I have come to proclaim the day of vengeance of our God”—when you are a captive, a prisoner, a slave. From our privileged position we may cringe at such a violent sounding proclamation, but vengeance can be a welcome world when you are trapped, silenced, and oppressed. Vengeance sounds like relief to the ravaged.

The full passage in Isaiah 61 has even more to say about vengeance than what we read today. V. 5 says, “Strangers shall stand and feed your flocks, foreigners shall till your land and dress your vines.” V. 6: “You shall enjoy the wealth of the nations, and in their riches you shall glory.” The prophet predicts a reversal—the slaves will become masters; the exiles will come home and foreigners will serve them. This echoes Mary’s Magnificat in Luke 1, “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”

God’s salvation arrives for the poor while the rich get a firsthand lesson in poverty. The high and mighty are brought low; the lowly are raised up. God doesn’t just level things in Isaiah and Mary’s prophecies. God flips the tables. The world turns upside down so that thrones are toppled and the lowest of the low reign in power. It’s more than an equalizer. It’s reversal.
This is the Advent message of JOY. If you’re even a little bit well off or benefit at all from any form of oppression, suddenly that pink candle is way more threatening than you ever suspected. Will the weary world rejoice at your downfall?

I trembled with joy to open my mailbox last week and pull out the latest edition of Time magazine. After a full year of covers featuring political men and their terror-inducing antics, I stared in awe and joy and pleasure at a cover of women, named together as Person of the Year, known not for their grandstanding or wealth or fame but for the one thing they all had in common—their bravery. Their raw, risky bravery to tell the truth after countless women before them had told the same stories over and over to deaf ears, accusing court rooms, unsympathetic bosses, and disbelieving friends. Not to mention the countless women who experienced the same stories but never spoke of them because no one told these women they had the right to work their jobs free of harassment, that repeated violations of your body are not supposed to be the cost of being a woman making her mark on this world, that fear and constant vigilance are not the unavoidable curse of your gender but rather the selfish sin of your brother.

I shivered with joy as down they fell—powerful man after powerful man. Is it unfair of me to rejoice when I do not have all the facts? When there might be a man in the mix who didn’t deserve it? Despite how seldom women lie about these things, what if there’s a man in the mix who didn’t deserve his loss of a job, of reputation, of respect? No innocent man deserves to fall. Then again, the wounded woman wants to say, “We were all innocent.” All of us. Every woman who has been taken down by harassment or assault was innocent. Even though as a culture we forget this truth again and again and again and again—no, we weren’t asking for it. No, it was not our fault. No, we are not responsible for being raped.

There is an unexpected reversal in our country: we are listening to women and powerful, abusive men are falling from glory. It feels to me like God’s love for justice is breaking in. Merry Christmas, y’all. This is what holy reversal looks like, and it is messy and it is uncomfortable and confusing and praise God, the status quo can never return.

When the prophet says the ancient ruins will be rebuilt, he does not mean the ruins of the oppressive structures. No. Those are dead and gone for good, thank God. The ancient ruins are very ancient—imagine a time before the world was tainted by a spirit of domination and the corruption of power. Isaiah’s imagery centers not on mortar and brick but on trees and plants. The people of God long for a new planting—a place that mimics not a city they once knew but a garden, maybe like the one in Eden, a place uncontaminated by evil or oppression, by poverty, disease, or fear. But before there can be growth, there is a tilling of the ground.

When God arrives, first there is chaos—an unsettling of the land and an unseating of the powers. Everything is topsy-turvy, and unless you are among the oppressed, you’re likely to fear the whole world is going down instead of understanding that when the abusive powers go down, a certain way of life falls with them and we all must adapt and change and learn a new way of being together and seeing the world.

I am telling you that from my point of view, as a survivor of abuse, assault, and harassment, this
upheaval in our country looks unequivocally good to me. The pain and discombobulation of it all? Bring it on. It is part of the healing, the growth, and the transformation. Do innocent men deserve to suffer? No. Absolutely not. But neither do women, and we’ve been suffering for so long. Will you and I play a role in ending the oppression? Or will we support the continuing efforts to suppress, to cast suspicion on women’s voices and discount women’s stories? Will we be a part of God’s saving work in the world or watch it unfold with a bit of trepidation, with a nostalgic longing for normalcy—a “normalcy,” by the way, that benefitted abusers and silenced their victims so we could avoid seeing the uncomfortable truth that sexism, harassment, and violence to women are more widespread and common than we’ve been willing to admit?

Merry Christmas. The world is turning upside down and by all biblical accounts, that means God is here. God is awake, God has heard, and God is arriving.

Did you ever suspect the coming of Joy would be this unsettling and involve so many courts of law and the removal of so many beloved public characters? Interesting, isn’t it, how we don’t want it to be true when the perpetrator is a personal favorite of ours? Shouldn’t we not want it to be true every time simply because no woman deserves the abuse?

Surely we have learned to do better by now—that we ought not favor the personality of the perpetrator over the truth of the woman who dares to speak up. Do you know how she quakes in bed at night, when the flashbacks wake her up in a cold sweat? Do you know that there is a legitimate experience called retraumatization that can happen every time a woman has to retell the details of her experience, and that not being believed can intensify her trauma so that the retelling ends up more traumatic than the event itself? Did you know about trauma brain—that survivors have to literally heal their brains, all while working, parenting, managing life, and carrying on as usual—oh yes, and they must put their story and their character on trial again and again, subject to the public opinion of people who don’t know them while the internet trolls rip them apart and the masses cast their vote? Did you know nearly all women face retaliation if they tell the truth? That we’ve created a culture in which you have a stronger chance of losing your job for telling what happened to you than of losing your job for aiding a cover-up or harassing your coworker? Did you know that even if a woman succeeds in being believed, she is likely to face being boxed in from here on out and being seen only as a survivor or a tattletale while all her other strengths and accomplishments fade from view? When people see her, they think not of her wit or her skill but of her life’s particular horror—they think of her clothes being ripped off or her boss pressing into her against her will but they do not think of her competency on the job or her extraordinary talent or her compassion for the hurting or any of the other countless things she would prefer to be known for? Did you know even if a woman wanted fame, she wouldn’t choose her life’s most humiliating moment as her pathway to it? Did you know this isn’t fun for us? It’s not opportunist or exciting or cool. It’s yucky and unpleasant. We feel sick after we tell it. We tremble when our words go out into the world and our stories are no longer ours alone but public property because we know so well from experience that few listeners will handle with care. How few listeners will listen at all. How few listeners will have reverence that this is hard and that this is not what we want to be doing with our lives, our voices, and our God-given brains. There is so much more we could be and so much more we could do, but first, first we have to overcome this
relentless, universal obstacle, this thing that has happened to us and to women everywhere, this burden we did not choose . . . and every time we speak of it, someone pipes up to tell us it doesn’t exist. We exaggerate. We are liars. It’s not that bad.

Here is the lesson of these times, of the ongoing accusations of sexual harassment and all the reports coming to light: It is that bad. It has been for a very long time. And it won’t get better until we listen to women.

Listen. The long, long silence is being reversed. Hallelujah. Hallelujah. Surely Christ is in it.

If our Scripture passage from Isaiah sounded especially familiar to you, it is probably because Christ himself said the exact same thing that day in the temple, Luke chapter 4, when they handed him the scroll. He found this passage and read from Isaiah—“The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” He stopped reading mid-sentence. Whereas Isaiah said, “To proclaim and the year of the Lord’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God,” Jesus stopped short and no word of vengeance appeared on his lips. He then set aside the scroll of the prophet of Isaiah and began to tell stories about God’s mercy to the foreigner. People didn’t like that. They wanted liberation to mean the downfall of their enemies. But Jesus took it in a different direction—liberation and salvation for ALL—Jew, Greek, slave, free, man, woman. We are all included in the promise of grace should want it.

With his permission, I want to share with you one of the most healing moments in my own recovery and advocacy work that I have ever experienced. It happened on Wednesday. On Monday I had read an article about thirteen women who reported being sexually harassed or violated by our current president. The reoccurring pain of waking up every morning to an abuser for a president hit me hard that day, and in an act of self-expression I posted on Facebook that I all I want for Christmas is for somebody who voted for Trump to apologize to me or to the world or to women everywhere. I didn’t really expect a reply. I just . . . somehow, someway . . . wanted someone to listen and to think about what it feels like as a survivor when your country pays no heed as you beg them not to place a perpetrator in power. But on Wednesday, our Lake Shore custodian and maintenance manager, Gordon Lawrence, walked into my office slightly trembling and shut the door. He pulled from his pocket a letter of handwritten apology, and with a shaking voice he read it out loud to me. He spoke of his regret in inadvertently contributing to people going hungry and losing their medical insurance and children worrying about being pulled away from their families. He wrote, “I thought he would turn into a statesman for the People. I was never so wrong. I await War and think, ‘Am I gonna be the cause of my family and friend’s deaths?’ Where is the humanity, Mr. President? May God forgive me.”

After reading the letter, he proceeded to tell me that he sees me as a human being and has learned he wants to listen to what I have to say. He said he respects me, and he meant it. There were tears in his eyes to confirm his sincerity, and there were tears in mine as I received this unexpected, blessed and sacred gift of a man telling humble truth back to me so that together, two unlikely comrades, we created a new reality, a new way of being, and we created it together. Merry Christmas. Christ has come. Christ is coming again. Let all the weary world rejoice. Amen.