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Joy – Isaiah 25:1-5

Three things: I can no longer count the number of times I have stood before you on a Sunday morning and wondered how much to talk to you about the tragedy that just happened. That's pathetic – in the old sense of the word, which means incredibly sad, and in a more modern sense: inadequate, inadequate to the task of making sense out of nonsense.

Second, what do you want me to say? I'm your pastor, I'm supposed to be leading you in spiritual development. I never expected that we would be navigating the minefield of mass violence at our doorstep – for crying out loud, my son Seth, his friend, and I drove that stretch of I-10 a few blocks from the site of this last massacre several times last summer on our baseball trip. Personal tragedy, we can handle that; a bad diagnosis or the loss of a friend or spouse, yes, we can do that. This, this is something different.

The murder of fourteen human beings so close to home (and, really, should it make a difference how close or far away it was?) is an

area that was overlooked in my graduate work. We're doing this as OJT.

Third, the church calendar, which knows nothing of what took place in San Bernardino, says it's Advent, and that this Sunday, I'm to preach to you about joy.

Joy.

Well, I can do that, but it's not the kind of joy you may be thinking of – delight, say, and happiness. Moreover, any talk of joy runs the risk of sounding like, “Yes, yes, terrible thing; but God wants you to be happy.”

That's not what I mean to say. And here's why.

This is a passage most preachers probably avoid preaching their entire careers. There's no single gripping image; it's not a story; it's not history; it's poetry, a sort of mix of praising God in bad times and what at first blush seems like gloating over another's misfortune.

But that's not really what Isaiah is saying. First off, he's not so much telling us what to do or predicting God's wrath as making a statement. And that statement, trying to be uplifting in the face of looming danger, can feel like Isaiah's whistling as he walks past the graveyard – but it's not that, either.

The people to whom Isaiah spoke, people who were waiting for an army to crush them and send those who weren't killed off to slavery far away, are the same ones who the prophet tells to "Rejoice greatly!... Say to the cities of Judah, behold your God!" How do you do that in the face of imminent doom?

Lest you think that's an issue that was left behind in the new covenant, think of our earliest forebears in Christianity. For them, communion was the centerpiece of worship, with all its words of joy and celebration. That celebration took place, undoubtedly, on days when the congregation had friends put to death that morning...

I wonder what it was like to learn that your best friend had been killed in the arena as part of the "games," and then listen to someone read a letter some guy named Paul had sent to one of your sister congregations: "Rejoice! And again I will say it: Rejoice!"

Were they any less affected than we are? Did they feel any less torn? What kind of rejoicing did they do? What joy did they feel? It must have been powerful, because they kept coming back despite the danger, despite the tension, despite the tragedy.

I wonder, too, what did it feel like to be the preacher on one of these days? I'd love to know what they said. Unlike us, that early church wasn't the establishment, they were used to being oppressed,

murdered, beaten – so how on earth could they say every week, rejoice, rejoice greatly?

The people of Israel during their exiles managed to find hope even as they knew they were being punished. Did the early Christians wonder if they were being punished? Are we being punished? Are we paying a price for falling so far short of God's plan for us, Christ's example?

Here's what the text says, and what Isaiah sees: this time of trouble will pass. We don't know how long it will be in passing, like a kidney stone, but it will pass. Maybe centuries, maybe millennia from now. When it does, the unbelieving, cruel world will see the glory of God. The nations who oppress will no longer do so; the poor and ground down will find rest and contentment.

And even more important is something that is just a bit past where we stopped reading this morning. It is something truly unprecedented in the Hebrew Scriptures, which are as a rule much more concerned with earthly life than some sort of heavenly existence. Verse 7 says, “[God] will swallow up death forever.” Say what?

Even though we know better, we tend to think of death as the end. Hearing Isaiah's words, we may want to focus on the end of death, the banishment of the scourge of life and our greatest enemy. But Isaiah's vision zooms in on something remarkable, a consequence of death's

passing: an end to mourning. Isaiah knows that it's not just the loss that death brings that is the greatest tragedy: it is the grief that goes with it.

So my message today proclaims again Isaiah's words, because we cannot imagine a world without death – certainly not now. Everything dies, we know that; all things pass away. But what we do face is grief, and the grief we know grows deeper every day, with every murder.

Isaiah says, “Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.” (vv 8-9)

May death be swallowed up, and soon. And in doing so, God bring us the ultimate peace of no more grief, no more mourning. When death is gone, then life and living will be lighter and sweeter.

The prophetic word is one of life, not death. Not so much triumph and winners and losers, but a release from the need for someone to emerge on top. The breaking down of walls isn't so much a sign of defeat as of levelling, of all being on the same plane – God's vision of humanity at one, at one with God and with itself. As Isaiah himself says in another place, “Every valley shall be exalted” – that is, filled in and

leveled off – and the mountains will be flattened out, so that all is level and plain.

That is the message of joy this Sunday in Advent, and we celebrate the sacrament as shining a light in the dark around us. And, we glimpse - in a tiny way - the unity that God has planned.