

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
December 13, 2020

We're in the Joy Business

Isaiah 61:1-11

"I'm in the joy business." That has become actor Drew Barrymore's catchphrase for her new talk show. The show is a mixture of celebrity guest appearances, along with upbeat news, heartwarming human interest stories, and cooking segments. Especially in the midst of the pandemic, Barrymore wants her show to uplift its viewers. In a recent interview, she said:

... I think that right now in 2020, we have to meet this moment; we can't pretend things are not happening and have blind gratuitous optimism. But I'm an optimist, so I think intelligent optimism is what is required here.

... It's funny; in late night shows, they are like, "You made it through the day, we're doing to put you to bed with some laughs, congratulations." I'm like, I want to start the day that way!¹

This morning, you've started your day by coming to a place where we're in the joy business. I'm pretty sure that Drew Barrymore doesn't have exactly the same thing in mind as we do when we speak of "joy." But it does sound like she's onto something when she warns against "blind optimism." Though optimism can have its benefits, a church isn't primarily a gathering of optimists. It's a God-created community of joy, which means that as a congregation we're in the business of joy.

That's not a bad business to be in this time of the year. Everywhere you turn, the letters J-O-Y are displayed on something. They're positioned on a fireplace mantle, stitched into a holiday sweater, printed on a Christmas card, or posted on a church sign. We sing about joy, and with joy, in our worship gatherings. We read Scriptures that make repeated references to joy. We even have a candle on the Advent wreath that bears the name. In the history of the Church, the candle of joy often signaled a mid-point break during the journey through Advent, with its emphasis on penitence and austerity. The third Sunday of Advent was a time to lighten the mood a little.

But then again, a joyful mood is always appropriate in the congregation. "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" says Paul in his letter to the Philippians. Whether God's people gather in Philippi or Bryans Road, joy is always on the agenda.

Today's text from Isaiah opens with the servant-prophet declaring that the Lord has anointed him to speak and act in ways that bring hope, comfort, and freedom to the people of Judah. In other words, the servant-prophet is in the business of joy. How could it be otherwise when the Spirit poured out on you, and poured into you, is the Spirit of the God who rights the wrongs of this lost and broken world. The God who rebuilds what has been ruined. The God who restores what has been destroyed. "For I, the Lord, love justice." (v. 8). This is the God whom we worship and serve, and who has come to us in Christ to bring about his reign of righteousness. No wonder Christmas in the church is dominated by joy.

Joy, though, is inseparable from suffering and sadness. We can't be in the business of joy without also being in the business of sorrow. As best we can tell, the audience in today's text are exiles who have recently returned to Jerusalem. They have the Lord's promise of restoration and new life. But they also have eyes that work perfectly well, and with those eyes they look around their beloved holy city and see the ruins of what used to be. They see violence, cruelty, and oppression. They see impoverishment and deprivation. They see troubled relationships, power struggles, and a temple that still hasn't been rebuilt. They stand amidst the social and structural wreckage, and wonder why the things God has promised seem so far off.

And yet, the servant-prophet says, "I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God" (v. 10). Delight and devastation intermingled. Joy and sadness right alongside one another. Author Madeleine L'Engle has written, "I don't envy those who have never known any pain, physical or spiritual, because I strongly suspect that the capacity for pain and the capacity for joy are equal. Only those who have suffered great pain are able to know equally great joy."²

A few years ago, Pixar released a film called *Inside Out*. The film takes us inside the head of an 11-year-old girl named Riley whose emotions are depicted as anthropomorphic characters. The primary one is Joy, which has dominated Riley's experiences up until this point in her life. But now, as her family is preparing to move from a small town in Minnesota to San Francisco, Riley's emotions struggle to cope with the upheaval. One of the emotions is called Sadness. It's portrayed as a blue blob with a despondent-sounding voice. At first, Riley is confused by her sadness and reacts by trying to push it away. But eventually she learns to accept sadness as part of her identity. In fact, Joy allows Sadness to play a more integral role in what Riley is becoming, which turns out to be for her good. One person who offers some Christian reflections on the film concludes, "The path to Christian joy always leads through sadness."³

Earlier this year, when the coronavirus pandemic was in its early stages here in the United States, Timothy Dalrymple wrote a devotional piece in which he noted surprising ways that joy was emerging in the lives of others. He said, "One thing I have heard amid the pandemic is this: Is it okay to feel joy? Is it acceptable, when so many are suffering, that I am finding joy in additional time for stillness or for family? Is it wrong for me to discover that I am oddly joyful amid the isolation?"⁴ Dalrymple's reflections capture the struggle we often have with holding joy and sorrow together. The presence of one doesn't necessarily mean the absence of the other.

In John's Gospel, Jesus tells us that he wants us to be joyful. He wants his joy, the very joy of God himself, to be in us, and for our joy to "be complete" (15:11). But he says this in the context of getting his disciples ready for his departure, his return to the Father. So Jesus intends us to be joyful, while also facing the reality of experiences that seem like the absence of God. But in reality, God isn't absent. In the wreckage that the former exiles looked upon in Jerusalem, or the wreckage that we must face in our lives and in the world, God can still be present, in the midst of the devastation, working for restoration.

And where God is present, joy is present. As one preacher has put it, "Joy happens when God is present and people know it, which means that it can erupt in a depressed economy, in the middle of a war, in an intensive care waiting room."⁵ Or in the midst of a pandemic. Among a congregation of God's people, in a place like this, on a morning like this.

Earlier in our service, David read Psalm 126 as our call to worship. Part of the purpose of the call to worship is to help set the tone for what's ahead. And it's hard to mistake the

tone of that particular psalm: "Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy" (v. 2). "The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy" (v. 3). "Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them" (vv. 5-6).

It's hard to miss the dominant note of that psalm—joy. But again, joy that emerges out of sorrow. Gladness that springs forth from the soil of sadness. This helps us realize that joy is more than just outward appearance. It's interesting how this time of the year brings all sorts of opportunities for dressing up. We dress up ourselves in holiday attire. We dress up our homes, on the inside and the outside. We dress up our sanctuary with seasonal decorations. These various forms of dressing things up can uplift us and give us a much-needed emotional boost. But at some point, the lights will be unplugged and the decorations will be taken down. The tree at home, and the one in the church sanctuary, will be put away til next year. Yet the joy of the Lord will continue.

Remember that joy isn't a temporary spiritual decoration. No, joy has a depth and durability to it. Even though the holiday sweater goes back into the drawer, the garments of gladness are always in season. In our text, the servant-prophet says the Lord "has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness" (v. 10). Every Sunday you must decide what to wear to church. Right now, that includes a mask. But beyond that, when you arrive here in our sanctuary, you see a range of attire, everything from blue jeans to neckties. Still, when it comes to church clothes, there's one garment that we all agree on. We all need to be dressed with joy.

That doesn't mean dragging yourself out of bed, getting ready, arriving at church, and slapping on a smile before you walk through the door, so that everyone will think everything is fine with you. Everything isn't perfectly fine, with you or me or any of us, at any time, including 11:00 on Sunday morning. We each come here with various experiences and circumstances, some known to others and some unknown. Behind some of our masks there are smiles. Behind other masks, there might be an expression of contentment. Behind others, there might be a look of worry, sadness, or despair. We're not here to evade or ignore those things. We're here to face reality, in all its gladness and all its gloom. But we're also here to claim and celebrate a greater reality, the righteousness of God that has arrived in Jesus Christ. That great reality of a new heaven and new earth, which is at work among us because Christ has come, and will be brought to completion because Christ will come again. That's the basis of our joy.

Saint Augustine once remarked, "In God's home there is an everlasting party." And not just a temporary outburst of celebration. He goes on to say that "the choirs of angels keep eternal festival, for the eternally present face of God is joy never diminished."⁶ Our worship here today participates in the worship that's taking place in heaven. We know there's joy there, so we know there's joy here. Joy that both faces the sadness and is greater than the sadness.

According to C. S. Lewis, "Joy is the serious business of heaven." That makes it our business too. So we gather here to rejoice, and are sent to be bearers of God's joy in the world.

¹ Gautam Sunder, "Drew Barrymore: 'I'm in the Joy Business.'" The Hindu website. November 24, 2020. Accessed December 9, 2020 <<https://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/movies/the-drew-barrymore-interview-im-in-the-joy-business/article33167605.ece>>.

² Madeleine L'Engle, in *A Stone for a Pillow*. Quoted in *Christianity Today*, Vol. 31, No. 3.

³ Ethan McCarthy, "‘Inside Out’ and Christian Sadness." *Christianity Today* website. July 20, 2015. Accessed December 10, 2020 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/july-web-only/inside-out-and-christian-sadness.html>>.

⁴ Timothy Dalrymple, "Joy Comes in the Morning." *Christianity Today* website. April 3, 2020. Accessed December 9, 2020 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/april-web-only/joy-comes-in-morning.html>>.

⁵ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Surprised by Joy." *The Living Pulpit* (October-December 1996) 16.

⁶ Quoted by W. David O. Taylor, "And God Said to Pastors: Use More Sermon Puns and Plan More Parties." *Christianity Today* website. June 6, 2019. Accessed December 10, 2020 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/june-web-only/pastors-worship-and-god-said-more-sermon-puns-more-parties.html>>.