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“Sowing with Tears, Reaping with Joy” The Rev. Dr. Andrew Armond
(12/17/2023, The Third Sunday of Advent)

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let us pray. Almighty God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer, in the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Please be seated.

In preparation for this sermon today, I went to Bing AI and asked it to generate a title slide dealing with misheard song lyrics. And this is what it came up with. And I kept the misspelling because I want you all to remember that as smart as AI is, it cannot spell. But this is a thing, right? And so I wanted to give you a couple of examples of misheard song lyrics that I myself have heard or that I know can easily sort of be misconstrued. If you know the great song, Tiny Dancer, Elton John, and then covered later on by Ben Folds, and if you don't know who Tony Dancer is, ask your parents. Or your grandparents. Okay, so that's the first one. I know you know this one, all the lonely Starbucks lovers. No? Okay. From T-Swift. Okay. What's the real lyric? No, it's not. Thank you. Thank you. I appreciate that. Thank you. Yeah. I've got a long list of ex lovers. There you go. That's right. And then this one is really obscure. And if you don't get this one, thank you, Jake. I don't want you to worry about it, but just know that Radiohead has a song where it sounds like they're saying power rangers, power rangers, power rangers. Okay. I offer this to you today by way of edification, of course. And to suggest that I myself have struggled over the years with sort of miss hearing words of scripture and misconstruing or not understanding their meaning. And so I'm going to come back

to that later on in this sermon. There's one passage in particular from our song for today that I often miss here. And so I'm going to come back and talk about that a little bit toward the ends. What we are presented with today is a series of passages for the third week of Advent, which is also sometimes called Gaudetay Sunday, which means joy. So we're anticipating the joy of Christmas that is soon to be here. We are not yet in Christmas season, right? But the stories are sort of moving us in that direction. We're moving toward the coming of the Christ child. We're still got these passages though about Jesus as a four runner. And we're sort of leading up to the story. The passage from Isaiah this morning is one that I've preached before in two very different contexts. The first is that it is one of the two passages appropriate for funerals. And so often this passage from Isaiah today is used in funerals because it talks about this, right, to comfort the ones who are mourning, to provide for people who are mourning, to give them a garland instead of ashes. So if you were mourning in the time of Isaiah, you would pour ashes over your head. And in some churches, they still do this on Ash Wednesday, rather than give you the nice, sanitized cross, they just literally pour the ashes, dump them on your head, right? Because this was the biblical sign of mourning. So to give them a garland, that is a crown of flowers on your head, right? Instead of these ashes being dumped on your head. So it's this image of being comforted. The oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise, think about a weighted blanket, right? That's the mantle of praise, rather than a faint spirit. So this passage is sometimes used in the context of funerals. It was also used, I used this passage at a school graduation. And so I'll set the scene for you quickly here. I was the chaplain of a school in my home state of Louisiana for six years. This is a picture of the quad in that school. It has these really amazing oak trees that are hundreds of years old that have stood the test of many hurricanes and floods and other types of natural disasters. And it was August of 2020. And I preached a sermon at our commencement ceremony. Why did I preach that sermon in August rather than May? I think you all know because 2020 was the

worst year of our lives in many cases. And because these students had very little in the way of an actual senior year of high school. And so even their graduation had to be postponed to August outdoors in South Louisiana. In August, with the robes and everything on, okay? I hope you're getting the picture. It's kind of miserable, okay? But I chose this passage for that sermon because of these words, the oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord to display the glory of the Lord. And I thought, well, I have a great visual right here. We have the oaks surrounding us, right? And I can talk about this passage, which also talks about the rebuilding of that which has been devastated. It talks about repairing that which has been ruined. These were students who had been denied so much during their senior year. And they faced so much uncertainty as they were about to head off to college. And so this passage funerals pandemic and now Advent 3, right? So the third week of Advent. Are we here in the third week of Advent? Has everything been fixed now? Have the ancient ruins of 2020 been raised up? Have our ruined cities and former devastations been repaired? You don't look like the answer is yes, right? I'm not sensing that the answer is yes. I wish we could say yes. And it seems to be the way of the world that this is not so. And the older that I get, the less confidence I have and the idea that things will keep getting better and better. And because of that, actually, I take even more comfort in these passages like the one from Isaiah, because they're not just describing something that happened in the past. They're describing what seems to be the essential human condition, which is hope in the midst of the chaos and turmoil of the world and the chaos and turmoil of our own lives. See us Lewis preach to a sermon called learning in wartime in Oxford. And as you can see, October of 1939. Now, I don't know if you're a student of history, but in October of 1939, this was a time in which it was easy to be quite upset, anxious, and pessimistic about the future. You have Hitler's invasion of Poland. You have World War II looming on the horizon. And Lewis is trying to address the question in this sermon of, you know, what's the point? What's the point of going on with normal life when the world seems to be crashing and burning around us? What is the point of coming to church or going to school or doing all

this sort of the quote-unquote normal things when the world seems to be crashing and burning around us? And so he preaches this sermon. And I just want to give you a few highlights here. He says, basically, war is not this new thing, first of all. And it doesn't create a new situation, he says. It simply aggravates the permanent human situation so that we can no longer ignore it. All of us are mortal. All of us are limited in our powers. All of us cannot control the world around us. These are things that we always know, but he says war tends to bring those things up to the forefront. It tends to remind us of those things in ways that sometimes we just sort of try to live our normal lives and forget. But he says, look, human life has always been lived on the edge, on the precipice. And he says, we're mistaken when we compare war with normal life because life has never been normal. And that sounds a little depressing, I know, but it's actually quite comforting if you think about it. Life has never been normal. We are always in the middle of some kind of war in our lives. We are always facing something. He says, all of the schemes of happiness that centered in this world were always doomed to a final frustration. In ordinary times, only a wise person can realize it. Now, the stupidest of us knows. He says, we see unmistakably the sort of universe in which we have all along been living. And we must come to terms with it. In other words, it brings sort of life and death and the things that are associated with it to the surface, right, where we can't ignore it anymore. If we had foolish, un-Christian hopes, he concludes about human culture they are now shattered. If we thought we were building up a heaven on earth, if we looked for something that would turn the present world from a place of pilgrimage into a permanent city satisfying the soul, we are disillusioned in not a moment too soon. I want to point out one phrase in this to you, right, that this world, he says, is a place of pilgrimage, not a permanent city satisfying the soul. And we all know this, right? We all know that because of the twists and turns and tragedies of life, that this is somehow not the way it's supposed to be. This is not right. This is not our permanent state of being. There must be something that is better. And from that comes the deep hope of Advent. And from that comes the deep hope of our faith. Lewis

really knew what he was talking about. He had served himself in World War One, the first modern total war, and then some of his most famous works like *Mir* Christianity was delivered as a series of radio messages during World War Two.

So I know this is kind of heavy, right? And it's supposed to be Gaudetay Sunday. It's supposed to be a Sunday of joy and hope. Advent is the season of the church year that brings us these stories and scriptures that encourage us and give us permission to express our frustration and longing at the same time. Our frustration that pain and suffering continue in the world and in our own lives and our longing that our faith that God has redeemed this world and is redeeming this world and will redeem this world through Jesus Christ in ways that are ultimately too wonderful even for our imagining. Psalm 26 gets at this. This combination of frustration and longing so well in verses six and seven. This is the misheard lyric that I wanted to come back to. It says, those who sowed with tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping at carrying the seed will come again with joy, shouldering their sheaves. And so this really perplexed me for a while like a song lyric that I had misheard. When you sow the seed, that's when you're planting, right? And so why would that be something that you would be doing with tears? Why would you be sowing with tears? And as best that I can sort of piece this together, what the psalmist is referring to is this idea that this is your grain reserve for the entire season. And when you sow it, it's gone. And you have nothing left. And so you sow with tears because you are literally giving everything that you have into the ground to be buried. And you don't know what the result is going to be. You have hope and you have faith and you pray for rain and you pray that this will actually be a fruitful crop. And that one day, enjoy, you will shoulder the sheaves, right? That have grown from these seeds that are actually almost too heavy to bear, too heavy to carry because it's so much joy that you possess in shouldering the sheaves. I know that you have felt this way. I have felt this way, right? When you're completely tapped out, when you feel like you have given and given and given, all that you have. And you cannot give anymore. You have used up everything. There are no more tears left to be shed. And yet, on this Gaudetay Sunday, the Sunday of joy in our

anticipation of Christ's birth,
the renewal of creation, the joy comes both in the tears and in the reaping.

The sowing of the seed is faith, hope that God will bless whatever meager offering we have,
whatever we have left in the tank, whatever our reserves are, whatever our one seed looks like.

And not only this, we remember, too, that Jesus portrays himself as a sower who sows joyfully
and indiscriminately, who has an infinite reserve from which he can continue to sow.

I'll close with this image from also Psalm 126. It says, Restore us O Lord like the water courses
of the Negev. And it is a very similar image to us sowing in tears and reaping with joy.

This still happens today. This is the Negev, the deserts in Israel. And when the spring rains and thaws and the mountains begin to melt, what looks like a desert begins to change.

And the water comes dribbling in slowly at first, and then it continues to trip over.

This is called Living Water.

And when Jesus has the sowing of the world, it says, I have the living and what

she thinks at first is water like this. Oh, do you know where there's a spring or a river?

Do you know where I can actually get some living water?

And so on this third Sunday of Advent, when yes, it feels sometimes that either the war is

outside or inside our own hearts. We remember that as we sow our seeds,

pierce and grieve with substance.

And we think about the water courses of the Negev. We think about the restoration

that Christmas next week will bring a time of healing and a time of hope for each one of us.

I'll close with this in the Gospel of John. As John the Baptist introduces Jesus, he says,

among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me.

He is already here. He says he is already in your midst.

And yet you don't even know him, but he's coming.

And this is another image of that seed, I think, buried in the ground or of the landscape of our

heart that may look like a desert. Among us stands one whom we do not know, but he is here,

and he is coming. Amen.