

Isaiah 35:1-10  
The Song of Mary (BCP)  
James 5:7-10  
MATTHEW 11:2-11

Sermon – December 16, 2007

Joy. That is what the rose-colored candle, lit on the Third Sunday of Advent, is supposed to symbolize. Peace, Hope, Joy and Love, in that order, are what some consider to be the four themes of Advent. And joy is certainly featured in today's scriptures. We have the awesome and wonderful passage from Isaiah 35, a vision of joy lifted up to the 6<sup>th</sup> Century, B.C. Israelite exiles in Babylon. They would be able to return home to Jerusalem with "rejoicing" and "joy", accompanied by the "glory" and "majesty" of the Lord, by wondrous healing miracles, by the desert blooming, and by peace even touching the most dangerous wild animals.

Joy also radiates through "The Song of Mary" (traditionally known as The Magnificat), the Blessed Virgin Mary's hymn of thanks to God for the honor of being the mother of the Messiah.

And joy permeates Jesus' testimony to the disciples of John the Baptist, who seemed to have been expecting a more ferocious Messiah than Jesus. "Go and tell John what you hear and see," Jesus declares. "The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." Note that Jesus lists "good news to the poor" as just as miraculous and unexpected as the other wonders done by him; bringing good news to the poor is also the miracle all of *us* are most able to help make possible.

That's great, perhaps we're thinking, but that was then and this is now. Are we supposed to put "joy" on our shopping lists? Where can we get it on sale? Does it come with a warranty? Can we charge it?

First of all, let's be clear that joy is different from happiness. Happiness may be a thin or fragile thing; we may start a day pretty happy, but a day of bad traffic, bad weather or grouchy people might lower the happiness we feel at the end of the day a lot. Happiness, then, is vulnerable to forces from outside of us, forces over which we may have little control.

Joy is different. Holy joy – what we're hearing about in the scriptures – comes from God directly to us and pours into us – if we let it. Holy joy helps us to build our spiritual houses stronger than the house of "the third little pig" – not out of bricks, but with foundation supports so deep and strong as to resist *earthquakes*, not merely "big bad wolves."

Those who experienced the totally unexpected liberation from captivity in Babylon and return to the holy city of Jerusalem still had lots of hard work and struggle – but nothing could take away the joy of God’s liberating presence with them. Mary herself had to endure anxiety and great sorrow; yet deep within her was a joy that saved her from hopelessness and brought her through Good Friday to Easter.

Second, joy is priceless. Don’t put it on your shopping list. Be skeptical of any ads which say “Make her or him happy by buying this product,” but you can really forget any ads which promise that “joy” will come as a result of a certain purchase. That’s bogus.

**Joy is a gift**, a gift of God. It is not limited to any time of year, though perhaps we think about it – even yearn for it – more now. So maybe, instead of thinking of the joyful exiles coming home to Jerusalem, of joyful Mary rejoicing in her pregnancy, or the joy Jesus spread around the Holy Land by his words and deeds, let’s think about ourselves and about now.

And to do that better, I invite you to close your eyes and let me lead you in a guided meditation, a meditation that will take you nine days into the future, to your own home, early in the morning of December 25.

Imagine...You’re the first one up in your home on Christmas morning. A bit groggy, you start heading to make coffee, but you’re distracted by a noise, a *crunching* noise, coming from near your Christmas tree. Cautiously, you tiptoe closer, and there, next to your tree, you see a muscular, olive-skinned, bearded man of about 30, clad in long white robe and sandals sitting on the floor and munching on the cookies you had “left out for Santa” the night before. “Good morning” he says, his mouth full. “Merry Christmas.” You notice the scars on his hands and his feet.

“You look surprised,” he says to you. “You’ve been singing, ‘Come thou long-expected Jesus’ and ‘O come, O come, Emmanuel’, haven’t you? Well, here I am. I decided to drop in to see you as part of my birthday celebration.” He smiles. “I hope you’re not disappointed. Did you want some *things* for Christmas, or *Someone* for Christmas, *and for always?*”

You calm down, take a deep breath and say, “Lord, I would like you to be here with me for Christmas.”

“Good. I was hoping you’d say that,” he replies. “Now, what shall we give together, as presents from the two of us,” he says, “in celebration of my birthday? How about three gifts – that’s traditional right? One for you, one for someone else you care about, and one for the world – from both of us. What would you like those gifts to be?”

You take another deep breath, think, and then answer. He smiles.

“Those are fine gifts,” he replies.

“This *isn't* ‘pretend’, you know, and the gifts *are* from *both* of us. So...here’s what *you* can do to make these gifts happen – to you, to someone else you care about, and to the world. With my help, of course.” And then he tells you *your* part in making these gifts happen.

“Christmas was just the beginning of my incarnate life on Earth, you know, not my *beginning* and it was *only* the beginning of the obvious part of my presence on Earth, nothing like all of it. Too many people only know the story of my *first* day on Earth. “Part of *your* job”, he says to you ”is to share *more* of my story, the part you can read in the Bible, and the part which is still happening – which *you* and millions of others are a part of.”

“Christmas isn’t just a day, or even a season” he continues. “It’s new life bursting into a broken and suffering world, a world too often cut off from its roots in God, just like your Christmas tree, here, was cut off.” You follow his gaze to your tree, which despite your efforts, is getting dry and losing needles. He turns back to you and says, “Looks like it’s due to go out on the curb pretty soon. To be chipped, or recycled or land filled, whatever. Some people think that people, too, will all end up as permanently dead as this tree is. Or maybe not.” And he touches a twig on your tree, and instantly it turns a rich, lush green again, new growth appears on the tips of its branches and *roots* start to burst from the bottom of its trunk. Then he lets go of the tree before it starts growing up into the ceiling.

“See? Your tree is back in touch with the source of its life.” Then he looks deep into your eyes, and you cannot pull away. He asks you, “Got life?” He just touches your fingertip, and a thrill ripples all through your body.

And then he’s gone. Vanished. But on the floor next to where he was sitting you find the list of the three gifts, and your part in making them happen. And on the plate next to the half-eaten cookie and the half-consumed glass of milk, you find another slip of paper on which is written, “Psalm 37:4” and “Matthew 28:10b.” You find a Bible, and read: “Take delight in the Lord, and he shall give you your heart’s desire,” and Jesus said, ‘Remember, I am with you always to the end of the age.’”

You put the Bible down and it falls open again to the Christmas Gospel: “Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great **joy** for all the people: to *you* is born this day in the city of David a savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

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