

"A SAVING SENSE OF JOY"

TEXT: "Rejoice in the Lord always; and again I will say, Rejoice. Let all men know your forbearance. The Lord is at hand!"

(Philippians 4: 4, 5)

INTRODUCTION

As some of you know, one of my favorite stories of this time of year involves a six year old boy who was given a part in his Church's Christmas Nativity pageant. He was cast as an angel. He didn't have much of a part, but what he had to do and to say was very important to the total pageant. He had one line and he learned it carefully. This was the line: "Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be for all the people".

He worked on that line. For days in advance, he would say it at the breakfast table. He would repeat it at supper. He would say it at night just before getting into bed. The day of the performance arrived. But, as you might guess, when the time came for him to say that line, his mind went blank. He stood there on the stage. He saw all the people sitting there - friends, members of his family. He remembered their lofty expectations of him. He just couldn't remember how it went. And when it came time for him to speak that one line, all he could come out with was:

"Say...have I ever got some good news for you!"

OUR WORD TO YOU

And this, friends, is our word to you this morning. We have some good news for you who have come to share in this celebration of Holy Communion. It's news that is tied in with the coming of Christ into our world and that momentous event of His birth for which we are preparing ourselves on these Sundays leading up to Christmas.

It's the glorious news, the great news, the good news of His coming. I know you've heard it before - some of you have heard it many, many times in your lifetime. But hear it again...slowly...thoughtfully...with your full understanding of its great implications. John, in his gospel, caught the spirit of that event...this news, this light, this hope that keeps on coming. Remember how he puts it in his gospel:

"In Him was life! And the life was the light of men. The light still shines in the darkness, and the darkness..the darkness has never put it out!"

I heard it said recently by one of the leaders of the Church in this land that the next generation will go to the faith that can enkindle hope. We stand within a great tradition that at its best - is hopeful. In Him our highest hope. In Him life's deepest meaning. We are more than optimists -- for what we believe about today and tomorrow is grounded not in how we feel or what the weather is like or what is happening on Wall Street - but rather in what we believe about God and how our belief relates to the deeper questions of life and human existence.

The candles of our Advent Wreath speak of peace, hope, joy and love. Today, we lit the candle that speaks of hope.

THE JOY THAT IS OURS

For a few moments this morning, reflect on the joy that is ours...that should be ours.

At times we tend to live lives of quiet and not-so-quiet desperation. We're up against tremendous problems - in the city, in the nation, in the world. At times they make us tight, grim, irritable, unhappy, intense. Here we live in the most fantastic city on the face of the earth, enjoying a high standard of living, but we seem so hard put to truly enjoy it and to relax within it.

Even those of us who belong to the Christian Church tend to get uptight about things. We do not challenge the prevailing mood of the city, but rather tend to embody it, to reflect it, to express it. And this, despite the fact that we have chosen to build our lives on a faith, on a way of life that has great positive affirmations at the heart of it - regarding God, regarding man, regarding the very nature of existence.

We listen to them, but they don't seem to really touch us, or get through to us. We have those moments when we seem unable to enjoy each other, unable to find the joy in our worship, in our fellowship, in the tasks we take on for Christ. How quickly they become a burden to us. We fail to enjoy God. The joy disappears in our religion. Not all of us, but many there are who trudge along in gloom, in darkness, in pessimism...without that measure of joy that springs from deep religious convictions about life.

We need to remind ourselves that joy has been a mark of the people of God from the very beginning. This celebration of Communion is not only a time when we remember a death that was died for us, but it's also a time when we celebrate a presence, a power, a spirit at work in our world - in our midst. We should be able to lift our heads and hearts and sing out with Paul,

"Rejoice in the Lord, always! Again I will say rejoice. Let all men know your forbearance. The Lord is at hand."

We sang it earlier, "Rejoice. Emmanuel. God with us!"

OUR JOY SPRINGS FROM THE CHRIST EVENT

These are the days when we remember again how God broke into the arena of human life in the child of Bethlehem, and through that magnificent disclosure revealed himself to mankind. In so doing, He set us free - from servitude, released man to joy, to the more abundant life. In so doing, He provided man with the security of God's abiding love and favor, without which it is difficult to sustain real joy for long. As Paul put it, "If God be for us, when then can be against us?" That is the word. God is, indeed, for us!

Did you see the article in last Sunday's NY Times (Theater Section), entitled "When Religion Cast Off Wonder Hollywood Seized It". It pointed out that Hollywood is flirting with heaven and hell. It spoke of some of the films like Star Wars and Close Encounters of the Third Kind. To quote some of the lines.

Writes Andrew Greeley:

"Angels in the Scriptures have gone out the back door while aliens and science fiction have come in the front...you can demythologize Wonder out of your sacred books, but you can't demythologize the hunger for the Wonderful out of human personality.

Is there Wonder in the universe? Is that Wonder gracious.. benevolent? There is still in the universe Wonder, Marvel, Surprise - the same message the stars, the lights, and the tree at Christmas time give us. Is that message true. Is that Wonder gracious. It darn well better be".

FAIL TO CATCH THE JOY

Yes, this time of year reminds us of the glorious news of Christ's coming...wonder, marvel, surprise. ~~And that news should be filling us with deep joy, making a difference in our lives. Is it? One wonders.~~ In our city so much is geared to the celebration of Christmas on a certain level - more of the winter carnival feeling than a religious holiday or holy day. You know how it is:

"Christmas time is here by golly,
Deck the hall with hunks of holly,
Kill the turkeys, ducks and chickens,
Mix the punch, bring out the Dickens".

Shallow, superficial and by the time we get to Bethlehem on Christmas Day, we're so exhausted and our nerves so rattled and frazzled, we fail to catch the wonder and warmth, the quietness, the hush and deep joy of "O Holy Night".

It was on the 17th of December in the year 1903 that the Wright Brothers succeeded in keeping their homemade airplane in the air above Kitty Hawk for the first time. On landing they sent a telegram to their sister in Dayton Ohio with these words: "FIRST SUSTAINED FLIGHT TODAY - 59 SECONDS...HOPE TO HOME FOR CHRISTMAS." The sister in Dayton was so excited with the news that she took their telegram to the local newspaper office and next morning, believe it or not, this headline appeared over the story of their flight, "POPULAR BICYCLE MERCHANTS EXPECTED HOME FOR CHRISTMAST HOLIDAY".

And so it was that a bungling editor missed the point of one of the great events of this century. He failed to see what it was all about. Our hope and prayer is that you will not miss the deeper meaning of the days ahead - the good news, the joy and gladness of this Holy Season - the peace, the hope, the wonder, the love...look beneath the surface of it all... and say with John

"In Him was life . And the life was the light of men.
The light still shines in the darkness, and the darkness
has never put it out".

PRAYER

O God, in a day when everything that was once nailed down seems to have come loose, help us to hold fast to what we have learned and come to believe of thee through Christ, whose day of birth we shall soon be celebrating.

Make us, we pray, partners with the wiseman in their curiosity; partners with the shepherds in their wonder; partners with the angels that sang with great joy at His coming. Let the message of these days touch our lives, we pray

ANNOUNCEMENTS: December 4, 1977

HOLY COMMUNION For many years it has been the custom of this Church to celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion on the first Sunday of the month. Especially for the benefit of visiting friends we do like to announce that the Table of the Lord in this Church is open to all. That one does not have to be a member of this parish, nor of this particular denomination to receive the Sacrament. We would invite and would encourage all to receive the Sacrament here this hour, and trust that the time for you may be an occasion of spiritual renewal, a time of rededication of your life to the Will of God as revealed to us in the life of His Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

The elements will be served to you in the pews. Upon receiving them, please hold until have been served, and then together as one family of faith we shall commune.

GREETING We greet the visitors worshipping with us today and we hope the opportunity will be ours to greet you in a more personal way, following this service - either at the door as you depart, or perhaps downstairs in the CR where coffee and tea will be served. Be free in the sharing of your name. Sign one of our Guest Books. Join us on other Sundays - in worship and in Christian fellowship.

CONCERNS Be sure to pick up your copy of the December issue of our Church news sheet - "A Word in Edgeways". Copies are available in the narthex by the door and also downstairs in the Community Room.

The Seniors High Class has a treat in store for today - a trip to Radio City Music Hall this afternoon to take in the Christmas Show and the movie, "Pete's Dragon". Bud Brown is planning to serve a hot dog lunch to those involved around one o'clock. Be sure to take in this fun event.

There will be a twenty minute meeting of the Canvassers today in the choir room from 12:40 to one o'clock...to review the progress on the financial canvass. We're up to 134 pledges (one less than this year a year ago), and the amount pledged is \$42,000. We're getting there...we still need to raise another \$8,000...and have a pledge potential of about 50 persons who can help us do it. We hope to hear from those who have not yet turned in a card of intention today.

JESUS SAID "It is more blessed to give than to receive". In this spirit, let us worship God with our morning offering.

It's the three o'clock show. Members of the Adult Fellowship planning to attend should be here around one-thirty.

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Let all men know your forbearance. The Lord is at hand"
(Philippians 4: 4, 5)

INTRODUCTION

You may have heard about the little five year old boy who was given a part in his church's Christmas pageant. He was cast, or perhaps one should say mis-cast, as an angel. Nevertheless, he learned his lines carefully. He didn't have much of a part, but what he had to say was very important. It was vital. This was his one line: "Behold I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be for all the people".

For several days in advance, he said it at breakfast. He said it at supper. He said it at night to his mother and then to his father before going to bed. But as you might guess, on the night of the performance when he moved out on to the stage and saw all the people sitting there - his friends, his family - and remembering the lofty expectations of his parents, his mind went blank. He just couldn't remember the line. And when it came time for him to give that line all he could remember to say was:

"Say.....have I ever got some good news for you!"

OUR WORD TO YOU

This is our word to you this morning. We've got some good news for you who have come to share in this celebration of Holy Communion. It's news that is tied in with the coming of Christ into our world and the event of His birth for which we are preparing ourselves on these Sundays in this Season of Advent.

It's the good news of his coming. I know you've heard it before - some of you, many times across the lifetime. But hear it again - slowly, thoughtfully, and with your full understanding. John, in his Gospel, caught the spirit of the event - of this news, this light, this hope that keeps on coming. He put it this way:

"In Him was life.....and the life was the light of men. The light still shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never put it out!"

I heard it said recently by one of the leaders of the church in this country, and I believe it, that the next generation will go to the faith that can enkindle hope. We stand, friends, within a tradition that at its best is hopeful. We are more than simply optimists -- for what we believe about today and tomorrow is grounded not in how we feel or what the weather is like or what may be happening on Wall Street, but rather in what we believe about God and how our belief relates to the deeper questions of life and existence. "Say.....have I ever got some good news for you".

THE JOY THAT SHOULD BE OURS

For a few moments this morning, think about the joy that is ours, that should be ours.

At times we tend to live lives of quiet and not so quiet, desperation. We face tremendous problems in this city and in the nation. You know them as well as I do. At times they make us abnormally intense, nervous, tight, grim, suspicious, irritable, unhappy. Here we live in the most fantastic city on the face of the

earth, enjoying a high standard of living, but we seem so hard put to truly enjoy it and relax within it.

Even those of us who belong to the Christian Church tend to get uptight about things. We do not challenge the prevailing mood of the city, but rather tend to embody it and express it. And this, despite the fact that we have chosen to build our lives on a faith, on a way of life that has some great affirmations at the heart of it regarding God, and man, existence. We listen to them, but they don't really seem to touch us or get through. Why, we even seem unable and unwilling to enjoy each other, unable and unwilling to enjoy our worship, our fellowship in the church, the tasks we take on become a burden within a short time, we fail to enjoy God. Not all of us, but many there are who do not have this measure of joy that springs from deep religious convictions and affirmations about life.

I feel it's fitting on a Communion Sunday like today that we should remind ourselves that joy has been a mark of the people of God from the very beginning. This celebration of Communion is not only an occasion when we remember a death that was died for us, but it's also a time when we celebrate a presence, a power, a spirit at work among us. Therefore, we should be able to lift our heads and hearts and sing out with Paul:

"Rejoice in the Lord, always; again I will say rejoice! Let all men know your forbearance. The Lord is at hand!"

For you see, joy is a quality of life that comes when the deepest questions of life are answered, satisfied, when the issues of life are resolved once and for all. And they have been. And this is the good news we have for you.

A WORD ABOUT HUMOR From this deep sense of quiet joy then springs laughter and humor, the overtones of the radiant and affirming life. Someone has put it this way:

"Joy is to laughter what solid harmony and a firm melodic line are to a descant in music. They support the descant and make it possible".

Several weeks ago my wife and I attended a Friday night service at Temple Isreal on East 75th Street with a group of the Seniors from the School where I teach Comparative Religions and Ethics. Rabbi Zion that night preached a wonderful sermon on the place of humor in life. He brought out the fact, and I agree, that one certainly needs to have a sense of humor if one is going to live in this city. A sense of humor is essential, one of the signs of the healthy, balanced life. When we lose the ability to laugh we may be heading for trouble. An indication of a sick or disturbed personality is the inability to laugh.

One of the things I enjoy about Fulton Sheen is his sense of humor, his ability to poke fun at himself, to laugh at himself. He was recently interviewed on television and in the course of the interview, he shared this story. It seems that one day before taping a sermon for TV, he stopped for some refreshment at the studio snack bar. Two or three of his friends were with him. In his full regalia of robes - reds, purples, whites - he made an impressive appearance. He sat there at the table with his friends. The waitress after taking orders from his friends, then turned to him and after looking him over from head to toe and back again, said: "Well, cock robin, and what will yours be?"

A sense of humor is one of the surest devices I know against a tendency to

take ourselves too seriously. We ought to take our causes seriously, and no cause more seriously than the Gospel of Jesus Christ - but not ourselves. A sense of humor can be a fine antidote to our various "messiah" complexes and preachers and laymen alike are prone to such complexes. Many a strained situation in a church committee meeting, or a board meeting in industry, in political confrontation, has been eased by a touch of humor - at the right time, in the right way.

One of the things I notice about the young reformers - radical and otherwise - is the absence of humor. They take themselves with a kind of God-almighty seriousness, a kind of spiritual arrogance. Of course we must give serious attention to the issues that stand before us. No one disputes that. But we all need slack, now and then. If we can relax and enjoy a few strokes of humor, then we will be better equipped to participate in the shaping of history and do a more constructive job over a longer period of time.

OUR JOY SPRINGS FROM THE CHRIST EVENT

This season of the year reminds us again of how God broke into the arena of human life in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and through that magnificent life revealed something of himself to mankind. In so doing, He freed man - from servitude and released him to joy and to the more abundant life. In so doing, He provided man with the security of God's abiding love and favor, without which it is difficult to sustain real joy for long. As Paul put it in his letter to the Romans: "If God be for us, who then can be against us?" This is the word. God is, indeed, for us.

I'm reminded of a course that I took in seminary at Boston University, a course in the problems of rural church life. The first day in the class room, the professor, Dr. Pat McConnell turned to us and said: "Gentlemen, relax, you all are going to get A's. Now let's see what we can learn about our subject". Can you imagine the freedom, the joy, the fun of exploration that opening word touched off in us. Our grade was guaranteed. We could study. I learned more about the problems of the rural church in New England and other parts of the country than I ever thought I would. My only frustration is that I haven't had the opportunity to put all my learning into practice. But that day may come. But - in a way, this is what the Gospel is trying to say to us:

"You are by faith sons of God. Worthy. Acceptable. Now grow up and be men. God is on your side."

FAIL TO CATCH THAT JOY

Yes, this time of year ought to be reminding us of the glorious news of Christ's coming. That news should be filling us with deep joy. It should be making a difference in our lives. Is it? I wonder? At times we fail to really catch that sense of excitement and joy. In our city, so much is geared to the celebration of Christmas on a certain level; it's more like a winter carnival than a religious holiday or holy day.

"Christmas time is here by golly,
Deck the hall with hunks of holly,
Kill the turkeys, ducks and chickens,
Mix the punch, bring out the Dickens"

That's the way it's apt to be! Shallow, superficial, and by the time we arrive at Christmas Eve, we're so exhausted and our nerves are so frazzled and we've partied it up so much that we fail to feel the warmth, the quietness, the hush and deep joy of "O Holy Night".

It was on the 17th of December in the year 1903, that the Wright Brothers succeeded in keeping their homemade airplane in the air above Kitty Hawk for the first time. On landing they sent a telegram to their sister in Dayton, Ohio with these words: "FIRST SUSTAINED FLIGHT TODAY - 59 SECONDS - HOPE TO BE HOME FOR CHRISTMAS". The sister in Dayton was so excited with the great news that she took the telegram to the local newspaper office and next morning, believe it or not, this headline appeared over the story: "POPULAR BICYCLE MERCHANTS EXPECTED HOME FOR CHRISTMAS HOLIDAY"

And so it was that a bungling editor missed the point of one of the greatest events of this century....he failed to see what it was all about. "Say" said that little boy in the Christmas pageant, "have I ever got some good news for you!" Closer to Our hope and prayer is that you will not miss the good news, that you will not fail to share in the deep joy and the gladness of this Holy Season....because you failed to see what it's all about. the truth than he realized.

"In Him was life and the life was the light of men.
The light still shines in the darkness, and the
darkness has never put it out".

PRAYER: O God, in a day when everything that was one nailed down seems to have come loose, help us to hold fast to what we have learned and come to believe of thee through Christ, whose day of birth we shall soon be celebrating. Make us, we pray thee, partners with the wisemen in their curiosity; partners with the shepherds in their wonder; partners with the angels that sang with joy at His coming.

In his name we pray. Amen

AN ORDER OF WORSHIP

for

The Proclamation of The Word and The Celebration of The Sacrament

I. The Preparation

AN ORGAN PRELUDE

"Allegro moderato"

Rheinberger

THE GREETING

Minister: Break forth into songs of joy, for the Son of God appears.

People: Emmanuel is coming indeed! Rejoice!

Minister: Let us sing His praise to the ends of the earth.

People: Let us worship our helper and our deliverer.

AN ACT OF PRAISE: Hymn No. 354 "O Come, O Come Emmanuel"

AN ACT OF CONFESSION (Seated, in an attitude of prayer)

Minister: In the coming moments of silence, let us search our lives and confess our sins to God, our Father.

(A Period of Silent Confession)

Minister: Almighty God have mercy on you, forgive your sins, and bring you to everlasting life.

People: Almighty God have mercy on you, forgive your sins, and bring you to everlasting life. Amen

AN ANTHEM

"Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence"

Holst

(over)

II. The Proclamation

A READING FROM THE SCRIPTURE: Philippians 4: 4 - 13

A HOMILY "A Saving Sense of Joy" Mr. Clarke

A HYMN: No. 360 "Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus"

AN AFFIRMATION OF FAITH: "The Apostles' Creed" (No. 738)

A PASSING OF THE PEACE (Standing)

Minister: The peace of God be always with you.

People: And with you also.

A LITANY OF INTERCESSION (Seated, in an attitude of prayer)

Minister: Let us pray to the Lord.
We pray for peace in the world.

People: Hear us, O Lord.

Minister: We pray for all Christian people, that their lives
might bring many to faith and obedience in Christ.

People: Hear us, O Lord.

Minister: We pray for those in authority among the nations,
that they may govern with justice and promote peace.

People: Hear us, O Lord.

Minister: We pray for those who serve our needs, for those who
help us laugh, for those on whose strength we depend,
that they may live in joy.

People: Hear us, O Lord.

Minister: We pray for those who suffer: the lonely, the poor,
the hungry, the sick, the imprisoned, the oppressed.
May they be strengthened and delivered.

People: Hear us, O Lord.

Minister: We pray for the enemies of the Gospel, and for those
who do wrong to others, that they may be reconciled.

People: Hear us, O Lord.

Minister: We pray for the dying, that they may rise to eternal life.

People: Lord, have mercy on us all, and guide us by your love
into the peace of your salvation. Amen

III. The Celebration

A THANKSGIVING

Minister: Let us give thanks to the Lord.

People: It is surely right to do so.

Minister: Almighty and eternal God, we give You thanks for your continual love and care for every creature, for creating us in Your image and for calling us to be Your people. Though we have rebelled against Your love, You have sent us prophets and teachers to lead us to the way of salvation.

We give thanks for the gift of Your Son, Jesus, whose life, suffering, death and resurrection have delivered us from the way of sin and death.

We give You thanks for Your Holy Spirit, who leads to the way of truth, defends against adversity, and heals all by the power of one love.

We give You thanks that our Saviour Jesus has given us this memorial as a sign, until His coming again. On the night He was betrayed, He took bread, and when He had given thanks He broke it and gave it to His disciples saying, "Take, eat. This is My body which is given for you." And after supper, He took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them saying, "Drink this all of you. This is the cup of the New Covenant, sealed by My blood".

Minister and People: O God, we offer to You ourselves in this thanksgiving, to go forward in Your service as your people in the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray:

Our Father in heaven,
Holy be your name.
Your kingdom come
Your will be done on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive our sins as we forgive those who
sin against us.
Save us in the time of trial and deliver
us from evil.
For Yours is the Kingdom, the power, and
the glory, forever. Amen

AN OFFERTORY AND ANTHEM

"The Holy Birth"

Rowley

THE DOXOLOGY (Standing)

(over)

THE CELEBRATION OF THE COMMUNION

Minister: The bread which we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?

People: Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all share the one bread.

(After the bread is distributed to all, the minister will say, "The body of Christ, the bread of heaven". Then all will commune together.

Minister: The cup which we drink, is it not a sharing in the salvation of the Christ.

People: The cup which we bless is our communion in his salvation.

After the cup is distributed to all, the minister will say, "The blood of Christ, the cup of salvation". Then all will commune together.

A READING FROM THE SCRIPTURE Isaiah 40 (selected verses)

AN ACT OF PRAISE: A Hymn, No. 364 "Lo, He Comes With Clouds Descending"

THE DISMISSAL

Minister: Depart in peace.

People: We go in the name of the Lord.

Minister: Serve the Lord with gladness.

People: Thanks be to God.

A CHORAL AMEN

AN ORGAN POSTLUDE

"Allegro"

Rheinberger

PREFACE TO THE SERMON

According to the Order of Worship which we are following this morning, you will note that a "homily" is called for at this time. I thought it would be wise for me to refresh my mind with the meaning of the word, although memory served to suggest that it had something to do with homiletics - "the art of preparing and preaching a sermon". Nevertheless, to be on the safe side I turned to the dictionary and this is what I read:

HOMILY:

- "1. A discourse or sermon read or pronounced to an audience, especially one about something in the Bible" (this was fine....but then I read on to the 2nd definition)
2. A serious admonition or exhortation upon a course of conduct; a tedious, moralizing lecture".

Now, I confess I wasn't "turned on" by this word "homily" (chances are it leaves you cold, too). I then began to wonder what definition was given for the word "sermon". Just for the fun of it, I looked it up, too. This was what I read as a part of the definition:

- "3. A serious exhortation, rebuke or reproof; an address on one's conduct or duty - especially a long, tedious, annoying one".

So there you have it. Homily. Or sermon. Either way, according to my dictionary which may end up on the white elephant table of next year's fair - either way it's apt to be tedious....and tedious, I see, means sluggish, fatiguing, irksome....as one who was reared on doing things by the book, I find comfort in the fact that I am.

LET US BOW OUR HEADS IN PRAYER

Help us, Lord, to be master of ourselves so that we may become the servant of others.

Take our lips and speak through them.
Take our minds and think through them.
Take our hearts and set them on fire.

In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen