

### “Joy and Rejoicing”

Luke 2:8–11

Philippians 4:4–7

“Deck the Halls with boughs of holly. . . . ’Tis the season to be jolly,” etc., etc. and on it goes.

In addition to the good cheer that is in the air these days, there is another current rumbling beneath the surface. It is the time honored tradition of Christmas grouchiness. Its most eloquent representative, everyone knows, Ebenezer Scrooge of Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*.

“Oh! But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! A squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner. Hard and sharp as flint. The cold within him froze his features, nipped his pointed nose, and shriveled his cheek.”

On Christmas Eve, his nephew and employee, Bob Cratchit, wishes, “A Merry Christmas, Uncle.” And Scrooge’s famous response: “Bah! Humbug!”

“What’s Christmastime to you but a time for paying bills without money; a time for finding yourself a year older and not an hour richer? If I could work my will,” says Scrooge indignantly, “every idiot who goes about with ‘Merry Christmas’ on his lips should be boiled in his own pudding and buried with a stake of holly through his heart. He should!” **Now that’s grouchy.**

“Joy and Rejoicing” is the theme for this third Sunday of Advent, the joy of Christmas, the joy that is at the heart of the good news of Jesus Christ. In some churches there is a pink candle in the Advent wreath, signifying joy. However, in many wreaths (including Head of Christiana), all the candles remain blue. That way we avoid the angst when someone lights the pink candle out of turn) And no, the candle is not pink because Mary really wanted a baby girl, as some have suggested.

So this is Christmas Joy and Rejoicing Sunday. But there continues this literary tradition of Christmas grouchiness. Scrooge is its first

spokesperson. A little closer at hand is Dr. Seuss's unforgettable character, the Grinch. *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* has been "must" reading for years:

"The Grinch hated Christmas! The whole Christmas season!  
Now please don't ask why. No one knows quite the reason.  
It could be, perhaps, that his shoes were too tight.  
But I think that the most likely reason of all  
may have been that his heart was two sizes too small. . . .

"They're hanging their stockings," he snarled with a sneer.

"Tomorrow is Christmas; it's practically here!"

Then he growled, with his Grinch fingers nervously drumming,  
"I *must* find some way to stop Christmas from coming."

So the Grinch steals Christmas on Christmas Eve. All of it—stockings and gifts, trees and wreaths, the roast in the icebox, even the log in the fireplace—and spirits it away and throws it all over a cliff. **Now that too is a very grouchy Christmas.**

I got a little grouchy as Christmas approached several years ago when the lottery, promoted itself by stealing our best Christmas carol, "Joy to the World," and turned it into a jingle to sell more lottery tickets. The voiceover set a new standard for tackiness with this pitch, "Joy someone with holiday scratch-offs from the Pennsylvania Lottery. Who knows? They might joy you back." That made me grouchy. What will they come-up with another year?

For Christians, however, Christmas is, at heart, about joy and rejoicing.

"The Lord is king! Let the earth rejoice," the psalmist insists (Psalm 97:1).

"O come let us sing to the Lord. Let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation." (Psalm 95:1)

The prophet Isaiah: "With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. . . . Shout aloud and sing for joy." (Isaiah 12:3, 6)

One of the most fascinating examples of Joy and Rejoicing is in the Old Testament book of the prophet Zephaniah, and the reason is that Zephaniah is really unpleasant, the gloomiest, most dismal and depressing book in the Bible. Things are so terrible, people are so wretched, that there is simply nothing good to say. The only thing is for God to destroy everything and start all over again. And then, after several chapters of this, near the end, without warning:

**“Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel!  
Rejoice and exult with all your heart.”**

Apparently there’s something going on there that is more important than all the evil and injustice and despair in the world;  
something more profound, more real, than all the dismal gloom the prophet sees in the world;  
apparently there is **a light shining in the darkness.**

Speaking of darkness and despair, St. Paul was in jail, in a dark, dank cell somewhere in the Roman Empire, we’re not sure where exactly, but we know he was on his way to Rome for his trial and probably execution. And what does he write to his friends in the little church in Philippi, who themselves were facing persecution, torture, and possible death?

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.”

This is no superficial, Pollyannaish, phony cheerfulness.

Rather, this is something that wells up out of the depths of Paul’s soul, something grounded in a reality more real, more powerful, than any jail cell, any physical torture; more real than death itself.

**“Rejoice—always; again I say, Rejoice.”**

Isn’t it strange that Christianity and the Christian church are not, in the public imagination, very joyful or even very happy. Duke Professor, Philip Caldwell tells about his grandmother changing churches late in her life. When he asked her why, she responded that in her new church she felt, for the first time in her life, God’s loving presence. “God wants me to be happy,” she said. “I never knew that before. I thought church was about keeping me from doing what I was not supposed to do. And I never felt like I was good enough”

Indeed “Presbyterian” is used by some as a synonym for a grim, moralistic, tight-lipped piety. We Presbyterians kid ourselves by describing our Denomination as God’s chosen frozen.

There are books published and lecturers that argue that joy is not only a human capacity but vital, central to our humanity. Medical science knows about it: happy, joyful people are inclined to be healthy. In a now famous self-designed experiment, the late Norman Cousins, editor of the old *Saturday Review*, recounted his own self-treatment with humor in an article in the *New England Journal of*

Medicine in 1976, after he'd been diagnosed with a very painful, life-threatening form of arthritis. Doctors gave him little chance of recovery. Cousins treated himself with laughter: watched funny movies all day long and began to feel better and be better. Researchers discovered that laughter, joy, actually stimulates the brain to produce endorphins, which help us cope with pain.

But all too many people are not joyful. Yet joy is key part of who we are. We are missing something important if we are living joyless lives. And joy must be shared to be fully experienced. We know about that, I think. Joy simply cannot be contained, confined; it has to come out, be spoken, shared, shouted, or sung. Like, "Joy to the World, the Lord is come."

It's an uphill battle. There is a lot about life that is not particularly conducive to joy and rejoicing. It's clear why these past 15 years might be called "The Decade and a Half from Hell."

The 15 years began with the Y2K scare and 9/11 terrorist attacks, and included long, costly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Hurricane Katrina—the worst natural disaster in our history—  
and continued with a massive financial wipeout, and Syria explodes, and thousands upon thousands refugees flee to seek security and home, and terrorists move beyond the middle east to London and Paris and invades a holiday party in California....

Certainly this past decade and a half will go down as the most disheartening and disillusioning decade Americans have lived through since World War II."

"Rejoice always; do not worry about anything," St. Paul admonishes. That's easier said than done.

We do worry.

We have bills to pay,  
children and grandchildren to raise;  
we have mortgages and home improvement loans;  
we have less money than we had a few years ago;  
and everybody wants our money in this season.

We worry about our cholesterol, our weight, and the state of the nation.

And Christmas, for some of us, is a

particularly stressful time.

There is so much to get ready and do and we want everything to be perfect, and sometimes it is, frankly, too much. So for some, stress levels soar and depression deepens at Christmas.

For some, the relentless cheerfulness of the season accentuates our grief over the loss of a loved one, our fears for our own lives, our prospects, our health.

**“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice,”** a man wrote to his friends from a jail cell, on his way to death. And the one he followed, Jesus, on the last evening of *his* life, knowing that he was just hours away from his crucifixion, sitting at table with his friends, eating their last meal together, must have startled them:

**“I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.”**

There is something going on here, something at the heart of the biblical witness, that is so profoundly good that the only appropriate response is joy—not penitence, not guilt, not remorse, not even reverence, **but joy**. There is something going on so profoundly good that nothing in our circumstances can overcome it, a light so steady and resilient that no darkness, no matter how dark, can extinguish it.

When, on a dark night long ago, shepherds were startled by a sky full of light and singing, they heard an angel, a messenger from God: “Do not be afraid; for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.”

A little later, wise men from the East came to Bethlehem, and when they saw the star in the sky, Matthew says, “They were overwhelmed with joy.”

From his birth to his death thirty-three years later and his resurrection three days after that, the story of Jesus Christ is the story of joy.

Joy is home. God created us in joy and created us for joy, and in the long run not all the darkness there is in the world and in ourselves can separate us from that joy”

Last Thursday I visited with Ann Cool and her attentive daughter, Debbie. The members of the Care and Fellowship Commission had baked cookies and breads ... and gathered candies and lovingly bagged them to take to

our home-bound folks. They asked me to please deliver these to Ann and Debbie. Ann is in the latest stages of Lou Gehrig's disease. And she hangs on. Debbie met me at the door. She introduced me to her brother Doug. They spoke through tears. Mom is near the end. The hospice worker was there earlier. Mom shows no recognition. It's so sad.

I listened ... finally, I said, Well, I came to sing some carols and pray with your mother. (my visits always included singing and praying/Ann had been choir director for years back at Pencader Presbyterian Church.)

I went into her room. Oh how grim the situation had become. There was no recognition. No opening of eyes.

I stroked her forehead...held her hands. I'm a little ashamed to admit it, but for a moment I thought, "This is beyond me." "This is beyond word and song."

But because I was thinking about the promise that there is light shining in every darkness and thinking about old Paul, sitting in his dark jail cell and writing "Rejoice in the Lord, always," I sang as best I could, "Joy to the World, the Lord is Come."

And then two verses of "Angels We Have Heard on High ... Alleluia" ... and we prayed together, with the Lord's Prayer,

**That because . . . there is light that shines in every darkness.**

**Because of the birth of a child in Bethlehem,** there is good news of great joy to all the people, wherever they are, whoever they are, whatever is happening to them.

**Because of the man the child became,** the love and compassion he embodied....

**Because his followers have found in him courage and hope** in times of suffering and tragedy; there is good news of great joy.

**And because today, in whatever circumstance you find yourself,** God comes to you, to love and save and give you life in all its promise and fullness. There is reason for great rejoicing.

Even Scrooge and the Grinch found it irresistible.

So in the noise and accelerating busyness of the days ahead, listen for a quiet voice, the voice of an angel, a messenger from God:

“Behold! Good news of a great joy for **all** the people.”

Amen.