

Rev. Karen Graham –Church of the Redeemer
December 21, 2008 – Advent 4
“Rejoice”

Restore. Repent. Receive. And now Rejoice. 4 weeks. The four “R’s” of Advent. And we’ve saved the best “R” for last: Restore. Repent. Receive. REJOICE!

“My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” Mary’s song is a song of rejoicing. Here’s how one writer describes the Magnificat, Mary’s song: “It is the song of a young woman shyly placing one hand upon a swelling belly to touch the miracle unfolding within her; it is the song of Israel’s rewarded longing for a savior to come to welcome in the promised age; it is the universal song of the oppressed and disempowered that proclaims God’s favor on their behalf; it is a song of cosmic proportions that reverberates with the truth that divine life permeates and animates the hidden depths of matter.”

WOW! All that in one song: “My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior.”

Mary’s song is our song. The rejoicing of Mary is our rejoicing.

But how can this be? What is our rejoicing?

I know you’ve heard me preach on Christian joy before. Scattered throughout the different seasons of the year, this theme of rejoicing comes up. And it is probably one of my very favorite religious words, especially at Christmas time. I almost always select a Christmas card with the word “Rejoice” somewhere in its message. I have the word “JOY” standing on top of a shelf that I can see whenever I walk down my staircase at home. I like the word. It has a certain beauty and power that stirs something inside of me: Rejoice! Rejoice!

That doesn’t mean I always understand or even experience the word. And while I don’t want to repeat myself unnecessarily, let me say again to you this Christmas that Christian joy, Christian rejoicing isn’t the same as pleasure or satisfaction or feeling that everything is coming up roses. Joy is not self-induced. We can’t force ourselves to feel or experience joy. Joy can’t be bought at the store or hung up as a decoration on the Christmas tree or wrapped in a box in pretty Christmas paper. Joy can’t be bought or manufactured or delivered or even just read about. Joy is a gift -- a Christmas gift from God, who is never content to leave us alone or to just let us be, but who is always entering our lives, offering us his love, creating us to be his people.

Rejoicing is, I believe, something we as Christians dare to do in the face of all the evidence to the contrary. Let me make myself clear. I just said a moment ago that joy

can't be self-induced or manufactured. That we can't make ourselves be joyful. That joy is God's gift to us. Then I said that rejoicing is something we dare to do despite all the other reasons not to. What do I mean?

The gift has already been given, friends. We don't have to produce it or invent it or dream it up. The gift is ours to hold and receive. Emmanuel is here – God is with us – the good news has already been given. Joy has already entered the world and transformed the human story. We don't have to start all over again. Joy is a reality now. What we have to do is dare to see and proclaim and touch and experience that reality. Much in the world and in our own lives holds us back. Would any of us say that joy dominates our culture? Of course not. We know better. What do you see on people's faces when you're out Christmas shopping? Do you see much joy? Don't most people look tired or distracted or frenzied or bored?

The way of the world is more weary than it is exhilarating. It is weighed down more than it is lifted up. And we too get tangled up in the world's weariness. Our burdens weigh us down, too. And for many of you this Christmas season I know the burdens are extra heavy. Death has touched your lives and taken away from you those you love. Illness has left its mark and taken its toll. The economic crisis has affected employment for some of you and retirement for others of you. There have been serious disappointments in your lives; there have been times of conflict and bitterness. The year has included its share of struggle, I know. And our spirits grow weary and our enthusiasm diminishes and life becomes a chore, something to endure. Sorrow leaves us speechless. Grief consumes our energy. Sadness overcomes us.

I know that. I know that. And so the joy I'm talking about is not at all some kind of "simple-minded, bubble-brained cheerfulness that denies the world's human pain or says that somehow our suffering is all for the best." No, that is not at all what it means to be joyful. For rejoicing is an act of courage and faith. We dare to rejoice in the face of our troubles because we know and believe and see and touch and experience God's presence in our lives. Most of the world prefers its sorry weariness, its plodding, trodding, head barely held up kind of weariness. A weariness that zaps your strength and dims the twinkle in your eye and turns your heart to stone. But we know there is something else. We know there is an alternative to weariness. And if we are true believers in Christmas, friends, that means we are believers and receivers of God's gift of joy to the world. And joy melts hardened hearts and joy renews weary bones. It really does.

Our lives don't have to be perfect. Our bodies don't even have to be healthy. We don't have to have everything in order; we don't even have to wake up every day in a good mood. Because rejoicing doesn't really depend too much on us at all. It is God who gives the gift of Jesus Christ. It is God who says "Do not be afraid." It is God who comes to us and lives among us and makes his light to shine in all the dark places and corners of our lives. And we rejoice, not because all the darkness is gone, but simply because the light still shines. We rejoice because the light still shines.

Yes, we live in a weary world. And sometimes our minds and bodies and hearts are so tired, so worn down with fatigue and anxiety and the kind of insane busyness that leave us out of breath, that it is all we can do to sing "Joy to the World," let alone believe or feel it.

But that's okay. Because the joy is already here. The good news is already given. The good news is already given. It's not up to me or you to create it or build it or sew it or bake it or buy it or wrap it. The gift is already here. Christmas comes because God sends it to us. How do we respond? What gets stirred up inside us? We repent. We believe in God's promise to restore all creation. We receive. And what else?

One Christmas a little girl who kept doing things her mother told her not to do and who was daily testing her mother's patience, sat down under the Christmas tree to once again get into the presents her mother wanted her to leave alone. But she sat down anyway, and picked up a bright red package and held it in her hands. She just sat there holding it. And then she said something that surprised her mother so much the mother just laughed and laughed. With eyes shining brightly and with a look of such sweet happiness on her face, the little girl said, "A present for me? WOW!"

And you know, maybe, just maybe, that's what our Advent/Christmas rejoicing is all about. "A present for me? WOW! A present for the world? WOW! A present from you, God? WOW!"

I know that during the course of our lives we all do our share of crying. Or we keep silent even more than we cry or laugh. I know the world's a tough place and that tender hearts get easily broken. I know that every thing and every body gets tired and worn-out. I know that evil surrounds us and darkness is everywhere. I know there are hard decisions to make and challenging problems to contend with and serious consequences to bear. I know there is immense suffering and sorrow and sadness in our world, and in our own hearts and lives. I know all that and so do you.

But I also know that an angel came to Mary one day and told her that with God nothing is impossible. With God nothing is impossible. Not an extraordinary birth. Not a manger king. Not a resurrection. Not a church. Not peace. Not forgiveness. Not love. Not salvation. With God nothing is impossible. Not even joy, my friends. Not even joy. Can you dare to believe? Can you dare to rejoice?

WOW! said Mary. WOW! A baby for me? Let it be. Let it be. My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior. Let it be for us too. May our spirits rejoice. May our spirits rejoice.