Rejoice in the Lord Always

December 11, 2005 (3rd Sunday in Advent, Year B)

Isaiah 65:17-25 Canticle 15 (Magnificat) 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28 John 3:23-30

Today is the 3rd Sunday in Advent: *Gaudete* Sunday – "Rejoice" Sunday. *Gaudete,* Rejoice, from the traditional opening words on the Third Sunday in Advent: "*Gaudete in Domino semper*... Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say Rejoice!" It is a day that has own liturgical color, Rose, a break from the purple or Sarum blue of other Advent days. It is the Sunday in Advent that by tradition many Anglicans celebrate Mary, prophet, poet and mother. Mary who declared to her cousin Elizabeth: *My soul rejoices in God my savior.*

Gaudete Sunday, the Sunday of rejoicing. It's a funny confusion of a day: Rejoicing in the midst of a season that has such penitential overtones? Pink as a liturgical color? A canticle, the Magnificat, instead of a psalm? Rejoicing is a tricky business, more complicated than it might seem.

So let me start with something less complex than the *Magnificat*: our new manfi-cat. Our cat is a little grey ball of fluff, less than two pounds of long-haired kitten, Maxminio – Little Great one; Great little one. Max is 11 weeks old, playful, stubborn, spoiled, and fearless, heartbreakingly handsome, unreasonably soft. In short, a kitten.

Max is a lesson in joy. Every sound and smell and texture, each corner of every room, fills Max with wonder. And when little Max bosses Jibran, our 4-year-old, 14 pound orange tabby, bosses Jibran away from his food bowl, I suppose that Max may feel that filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.

But the joy that Mary shares with Elizabeth, and the joy that Isaiah shares with Israel, is a more complicated joy. It is a joy born of great sorrow. Isaiah, writing about God's holy mountain, the new heavens and new earth born out of Jerusalem – It is not a vision of peace and delight given to a comfortable people, but a promise given to a people who have lived through 70 years of exile.

Mary, rejoicing with her cousin Elizabeth, is not taking part in some ordinary baby shower. She is a young Jewish woman, unexpectedly pregnant, taking refuge with her family. She is the fianc ée of a carpenter in a poor town in a poor kingdom under Roman occupation.

These are not the people from whom we might expect rejoicing. Their songs of victory are not sung by conquering monarchs at the head of bronze-clad armies. They are songs of victory sung by a poor woman and a displaced prophet. They are songs of victory which turn the world upside down!

The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,
the lion shall eat straw like the ox;

God has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly.

Songs of revolution – quite literally, revolution, turning around. Mary, and Isaiah before her, rejoice in a God who turns the world around, who turns human injustice into divine justice, who turns exile into homecoming, who turns death into life.

Where do we seek joy? We seek joy in sorrow, we seek light in darkness, we find the spark of incarnation, the festival of Jesus' birth, in the darkest time of year. We find the brightness of resurrection being born form the silence of Holy Saturday.

We find John the Baptist bringing repentance, a turning around of life, in the wilderness. And as we talked about last week, the wilderness of John the Baptizer is a very real place. Not just real on the banks of the Jordan, handy to the water necessary for baptizing. That wilderness exists in our own lives. There are deserts in our hearts. There are stony, lonely places that stretch out in our own lives. And it is in that

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wilderness that we hear the baptizer cry, that we hear Mary sing to her cousin Elizabeth.
I have been holding onto a mystery these last two weeks, clutching it like a child clutches a hard-won Easter egg. Two weeks ago in that hour after my mother died, the whole family gathered in her hospital room. There was a new silence, the oxygen and machinery we had grown used to hearing had been turned off. And as we sat in a circle around her bed, there was for me a moment of perfect joy, of rejoicing, filling the whole room.

I'm not sure exactly what it means – it doesn't "fix" the loss or grief – but that joy is very real, and I can turn to it every day, even in the midst of sorrow. I can feel it more clearly than I can describe it, and I share it with you because joy is something that you share, and the more we share our joy the brighter the joy becomes.

Where do we seek joy? We seek joy in sorrow, we seek light in darkness, we seek out life in death, we seek out the baptizer in the wilderness, we seek out the strength of Mary in her confusion and fear.

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior;
for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.

From this day all generations will call me blessed:
the Almighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his Name.

He has mercy on those who fear him
in every generation.

He has shown the strength of his arm,
he has scattered the proud in their conceit.

He has cast down the mighty from their thrones,
and has lifted up the lowly.

He has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.

He has come to the help of his servant Israel,
for he has remembered his promise of mercy,

The promise he made to our fathers,
to Abraham and his children for ever.

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