

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
Isaiah 35:1-10

December 16, 2007
Rev. Robin Long

If you've been paying attention, you realize that I've made a liar out of myself this morning. Two weeks ago as I stood in this very spot I warned you that we would not be singing *Joy to the World* until Christmas Eve because it is important that we honor the season of Advent which is a far more somber time than Christmas. And yet, *Joy to the World* was today's opening hymn. So what changed in these past two weeks? Have I given up on Advent and jumped right to Christmas? It might appear that way but actually it's just the opposite, instead of giving up on Advent, I'd say that my understanding of Advent has been heightened in this past fortnight, not diminished.

Advent, the beginning of the church year, is the liturgical season proceeding Christmas. Before Black Friday became the official the kick off to the holiday season, the first Sunday of Advent was considered the beginning of the countdown to Christmas—not in terms of how many shopping days were left but rather in terms of how much time believers had to prepare themselves for the coming of the Christ Child. It was a time for fasting, food was a distraction. It was a time when parties and dancing were prohibited. All of these frivolities could wait—Christ was coming and you needed to put every bit of energy and attention that you had in you towards the work of getting things right between you and God before Jesus' arrival. You needed to take account of your sin, ask for forgiveness, and figure out how you were going to reform your life. It was serious work this penitence stuff and folks needed to be completely focused upon preparing and watching for the Christ that was to come. Now, you can imagine that all of this penitence and taking stock of one's life and asking for forgiveness and trying to make good with folks you had done wrong could get a little tiring if not wearisome. And that's exactly what happened to our brothers and sisters of long ago during the Advent season—it was just too dreary and sad to be dreary and sad for some twenty-odd days. And so some inventive ancestor from of old came up with the idea of Gaudete Sunday—a Sunday of joy, the third Sunday of Advent, when fasting and lamenting and calling ourselves to account would be set aside for a day to remember and celebrate the joy of what was to come. After all, that's what Advent was leading up to—joy. The joy that is found in the baby lying in a manger, the joy that will be experienced by all when Christ returns to set up a kingdom of love, justice, peace, and joy on earth. This Gaudete Sunday, this day of joy, gives us the occasion to kick up our heels and celebrate a little because we know that something really good is about to happen.

And that good thing that is about to happen is not the debauchery that happens around the big Christmas Supper. It's not the overindulgence represented by the piles of gifts under the tree. It's not even the happy reunion of families and friends that happen at this time of year. No, the good thing that is about to happen is the joy of the Christ Child—a joy described by the Prophet Isaiah. It is a joy that began in a stable in Bethlehem, was nearly extinguished at a cross on a very bad Friday, a joy that was reborn with an empty tomb on Easter, and a joy that though not yet fully realized, a joy that is available to you and me even now in the midst of a war-torn, strife filled, anxious and hurried world. It is a joy of which we have caught glimpses in our lives. It is a joy that will be complete when Christ comes again to save us and establish God's dominion on earth. It is a joy described by the Prophet Isaiah—a description full of images of resurrection, restitution, and radiant joy.

The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.

The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon; they will see the glory of the LORD, the splendor of our God.

Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way;

Say to those with fearful hearts,
 “Be strong, do not fear;
 your God will come, he
 will come to save you.”

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.

The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.

The days of gray stretch on and on . . . will it ever be spring? The snow is gray, covered with ice—not even a child finds joy in it anymore. But then, when you were least expecting it, the tiny sprout of a crocus along the walkway to your front door. At the site of it you rejoice greatly and shout for joy.

For this is Leelanau, a place of great beauty and peace. Winter with brilliant snow, spring with lovely blossoms, summer with lush fruits, fall with vibrant colors—we’re mighty blessed—the splendor of God is everywhere.

O God the hands that once drew and sewed and wrote and hammered are now bent and aching with arthritis, bodies that were once strong and vibrant betray us

And if the evening news scares you or you’re dreading the next panic attack or you’re starting to forget or you wonder how you’re going to make it through another lonely day, remember that God protects you like a mother bear protects her young. You hear it all the time, don’t get between a bear and her cub. So too, woe to the person who gets between you and God.

For there are evil folks who go through this life blind and deaf to the truth—Nazis, skin heads, racists, sexists, insurgents, terrorists, homophobes, facist

But their’s will not be the last word. For the slaves will be emancipated, soldiers will return home, sick folks will be made well. There will be reunion and joy, so much joy that it just has to be shared.

In lands where there were once soldiers and guns and land mines, now children smile and play, splashing in the warm summer sun.

And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness. The unclean will not journey on it; it will be for those who walk in that Way; wicked fools will not go about on it. No lion will be there, now will any ferocious beast get up on it; they will not be found there. But only the redeemed will walk there.

And the ransomed of the Lord will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

And there really will be a Highway to Heaven. It will be for those who love the Lord. Unbelievers won't be our travel companions on that road and you'll never run into a bullheaded skeptic. There won't be any black ice or snow drifts, no crazy drivers or pot holes, no detours or orange barrels. Only folks fighting the good fight, trying to love the lord their God with all their heart and all their soul and all their mind and love their neighbor as themselves.

And that road will lead us to our heavenly home. We'll arrive in a place of great rejoicing where those who have been last will be first, where the lame will walk and the blind will see. It will be quite a party. We'll be giddy with it all. Shouts of unity will fill our ears. They'll be singing and dancing and tears of joy will fill our eyes.

At the dawning of 1980s, the United States was facing some tremendous challenges—the environmental crisis of the Love Canal, an oil crisis that led to tremendously long lines at the pump, an invasion of Cambodia, Elvis died bringing a sudden end to an era. President Carter addressed the nation and talked about the Crisis of Confidence the American people were facing. Factions and divisions and malcontent were the words of the day. But then a miracle happened that drew the American people together? And what was the miracle—what was it that brought tears of joy to eyes of millions of Americans? It was a hockey team. In the 1980 Olympic games, Team USA was pitted against the Russians in a play off game. The Cold War was at its peak and the Russian hockey team was also at its peak, considered a sure thing for the Gold Metal.

We pick up in the movie when there's one minute left in the game between the USA and Russia, Team USA gained the lead for the first time in the beginning of the third period. The coach, played by Kurt Russell, watches intently as the seconds tick away.

Joy—pure unadulterated joy. The joy that brings tears to an embattled nation's eyes. Oh what a day it will be when the eyes of the people of all nations flow with tears of joy! But until that day when our joy will be made complete, we've got to get through the living of these days. And along with the peace that passes understanding that we talked about last week, we also have some joy to help us along. Sometimes our joy will be just a memory or a hope for the future, but somehow, we'll always have a little piece of joy.

And to get your little piece of joy, I now invite the folks at the ends of the pews to open the white paper bags. Take your little piece of joy out of the bag and pass it down the pew. Everybody take a little piece of joy, if your pew runs out, I know there are enough pieces of joy in this place to go around, we just need to share the joy. And, if your life is such that you don't need a physical reminder of joy right now—if things are going pretty smoothly and you're feeling okay, take a piece of joy with

you anyway and leave it somewhere where someone who may be in mighty need of some joy during this holiday season might find it—in a shopping cart at Tom's, on the table with a tip at a restaurant, on a street bench, a movie seat, or on the bathroom counter at the mall. Leave some joy where someone else can get it. But, if your life is such that you need a constant reminder of joy right now, if you're desperately missing a loved one during the holidays, if you're dealing with a difficult diagnosis, if you're unsure about the future and your anxiety blinds you to the joy in life, well then keep your little piece of joy. Put it in your choir folder or your purse or on your night stand or in your pocket or next to the milk jug in your refrigerator—put it someplace where you'll be often reminded of the joy—not just of the Christmas season but of the joy that is to come for you—a beloved child of God—when this season of Advent draws to a close and we once again welcome a Christ child, who makes all things new, into our hearts and our lives. Thanks be to God for the joy we've experienced in the past, the joy that is present right here and right now and the joy beyond measure that is to come.