

Rejoice!

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on December 12, 1993, the third Sunday of Advent. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Luke 1:47-55; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

A six year old boy wakes up early on Monday morning dreading the thought of going to school and discovers that, overnight, a foot of snow has fallen, schools been canceled and his dad can't make it to work. That's joy! A forty year old woman goes back to the doctor to get the results of her mammography. "Everything looks fine to me," the doctor says. That's joy! A little girl goes to bed on Christmas Eve before the tree's put up. She wakes up at five in the morning, sneaks downstairs and discovers that the living room has been transformed into a fairy land of color and light and beauty with gifts piled high beneath the decorated tree. That's joy!

"You and I were created for joy, and if we miss it, we miss the reason for our existence" (Ormedes). The reason Jesus Christ was born and died was to restore to us the joy we've lost. The Presbyterian Church officially teaches that the chief end of men and women is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. So it's safe to say that whenever we experience joy - real joy - the purpose and meaning of life is being fulfilled. Joy is what God created us for and joy is one of life's deepest longings.

Many years ago a poor, unmarried, pregnant teenager sang a song of joy. Despite her circumstances, she was able to sing because she believed the Good News that she would give birth to the Son of God. The Good News of Jesus Christ is a story of joy - the joy of women, like the Virgin Mary, who discover that God wants them to help God. It's the story of hungry people God fills with good things. The Gospel tells the story of forgotten people God remembers. In a world of broken marriage vows and

dashed hopes, it tells the story of a promise God keeps. It tells the story of men and women of low estate whom God raises up.

"My spirit rejoices in God my Savior," the first Madonna sang, "for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant." One of the greatest joys in life is the joy of being looked upon with favor by someone we respect and love. The last time I returned to Princeton Seminary, Dr. Story, my old Greek professor, retired now, came up to me with a big smile on his face and both hands stretched out to me. "Ted, it's so good to see you." He invited me to sit down with him and we talked for about a half hour. It had been years and years since we'd seen one another, but he remembered me. I felt joy. He looked with favor on me and remembered me. That's joy.

The Lord looked with favor on Mary. She was a nobody. Nobody looked with favor upon her. She was from Nazareth, a small rural town that history had bypassed. She was a woman. Jews and gentiles alike looked down on women as second class citizens. For another thing, Mary was an unmarried pregnant teenager. In the eyes of her neighbors she was a great sinner. She was used to frowns from disapproving moralists condemning her lifestyle. She was a nobody. Nobody missed her if she stayed away from the weekly sabbath services in the synagogue. Mary was a nobody! But God looked with favor on her.

Do you ever feel that your colleagues and neighbors and relatives don't look with favor on you? Maybe you're a teenager who feels that you're parents or teachers don't often look upon you with favor. They're always giving you a hard time. Maybe you're new in town and feel that you have to live here fifty years before people begin to look upon you with favor. Or maybe you're different from everybody else. You

think differently. You live differently. You act differently and people don't look with favor upon you.

Charlie Shedd remembers seeing a little girl on the sidewalk with tears streaming down her face. A stranger came by and asked, "Why are you crying?" She sobbed, "We're playing hide and seek and I'm hiding but nobody is seeking me." Most of us know that feeling at some time in our life. Nobody's seeking us, and we're hiding, half afraid that we'll be found. If you've ever had that feeling, if you have it now, listen to Mary's song of joy. The Virgin Mary sings about the God who comes seeking women *whom other men would not seek* and men who try to hide from one another and from God. She sings the Good News - the Good News of how God looks with favor upon the lowly and fills the hungry with good things. Joy is believing this Good News.

So many things rob us of joy. The thought of growing old, the increasing infirmities which come with the passage of years, the grim specter of illness ~~and~~ and the valley of the shadow of death. Our joy is taken from us. We lose a loved one through death or through divorce or through ~~long distance~~ *separation*. Joy goes down the drain. And then there's money - lack of money. Most of us wish we had more money. We run up tremendous bills on our credit cards at Christmas and the thought of taking half the year to pay off our Christmas debts robs us of joy.

And events outside of us rob us of our joy. Is it right for us rich Christians to experience joy while children are starving? How can we experience joy when we see on the news the terrible things that take place in the world? If our joy is honest joy, it must somehow make sense of human tragedy. Otherwise religion becomes a narcotic that blinds us to the world's injustices. When I wonder if joy is appropriate

in a world of hunger, oppression and injustice, I'm encouraged by the impression I get from people closest to suffering. I sense a joy in Mother Theresa whose life is dedicated to ministering to the poorest of the poor (see Smedes).

Yes many things rob us of joy. But
~~Despite the things that rob us of joy and make us wonder if joy is even~~
in Christ
appropriate, when, through Jesus Christ, we believe that God looks with favor upon us *His world*
when we believe that, sinners, we experience joy. Joy! Think of it! God has looked with favor on us! The *- His suffering world*

Lord of heaven came down from heaven to earth and eats and drinks with us sinners. God, in Christ, suffers and dies for us. What a good and great God! ~~A joy that nothing and no one can take from us. God looks with favor on us!~~

Joy - that kind of joy - begins to transform us. We begin to look with favor upon men and women upon whom others look with disfavor. Our attitudes change towards people whom the world puts down: the lowly and the hungry. ~~When our soul magnifies the Lord, and our spirit rejoices in God our Savior~~ *We* begin to change. We begin, ever so slowly, to become like Jesus in his attitude toward the hungry and lowly.

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant." Joy is believing with our hearts and minds and souls that God has come to us in Jesus Christ - *has come to our world -* God looks with favor upon us in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Let us pray: Holy God, give us grace to believe, with joy, the Gospel. Give us eyes to see that you are looking on us with your favor because of Jesus Christ. Open our eyes to see the One who even now stands unrecognized among us; who is present with us to fill the hungry of this town with good things. Please let none of us go away empty. Amen.