

This year, could we use more “Christmas cheer?” Apparently so, as houses are lit up early, and Christmas trees were sold out earlier than ever. Our Psalm this morning, talks a lot about God restoring joy and laughter... to a people who had been through a long time of exile, who needed to rebuild their destroyed temples and ruined cities! Restoration is underway; tears are starting to turn into laughter and shouts of joy. Such deliverance and restoration is a divine promise over the ages, but sometimes we need a little boost to rejoice, perhaps from an opening hymn (after our Advent “waiting” songs, there are so many Christmas carols with JOY, like, ... or “Oh, tidings of comfort and Joy!” or our final hymn “Joy to the World!”) The act of singing itself, the energy we use, can lift our spirit.

We can also get a boost from our sense of HUMOR. Sometimes a good joke book can give us a boost. So, full disclosure... besides other reading materials on my end table, I often keep joke books handy; and I think I found some things that might tickle the funny bone in this strange Christmas season that has plenty of feelings of exile and isolation. At Christmas time, we have to know some silly Santa jokes! Surely you have heard one of the most well known (I think it’s from the section of 3rd grade jokes!): “What does Santa say in sad times, like these?” (No, I made that up) ... The common version of the joke is “What does Santa say while walking backwards?” ... “Oh, Oh, Oh!” Silly, I know, but actually, Santa just might be feeling our pain and saying “Oh, Oh, Oh!” ... OK, I’ll get more “serious,” a joke from the “religion” section, a good one for “Rejoice Sunday.” You know the one about the silent convent? One novice nun was told by the Mother Superior to start her vows of silence, but could say two words at the end of a year. A year goes by and the novice nun comes and says: “Bed hard!” The Mother Superior shows sympathy, but explains that it is good for the back and posture, “try to be grateful.” Another year goes by and the novice nun comes and says: “Food stinks!” The Mother Superior shows

sympathy, but explains that it is mostly a plant diet, grown organically right on the grounds, and is very healthy if not tasty. “Try to be grateful.” A third year goes by and the nun comes back to the Mother Superior again who says, “now look sister, all you’ve done is complain since you’ve been here, any better words this year?” Without hesitation the novice replies “I quit!”

Well, maybe that is an appropriate joke for these days, since we sometimes want to quit the challenges of following Christ, the challenge to “rejoice and give thanks... in all circumstances!” as Paul urges his readers to do. The Israelites returning from exile in Babylonia had their challenges to rebuild devastated cities. Paul’s followers had their challenges, even martyrdom, in those early Christian days, and we have our challenges now... to restore not only our health and government, but to rebuild our inner spirit with faith, hope, and love. “How can we rejoice and give thanks in a foreign land?” cried the Israelites as they wept by the waters of Babylon. How can we rejoice and give thanks when we have to wear these stifling masks everywhere, and when we are even hesitant to hug or kiss close family members? “Oh! Oh! Oh!” (My nephew came home from California, now in a greater lockdown, and he is doing the 7-10 day quarantining in an upstairs room, and talking to his parents via Zoom!) All of us are forced to make decisions every day of how much risk we will take to be present with loved ones and friends, and how much we will remain physically distant. Then of course there is the question of government “mandate” versus government “guidelines” or strong recommendations! This virus is causing all sorts of challenges, questions, and painful losses.

Back to Paul’s words “Rejoice always and give thanks ... in ALL circumstances.” True confession... there was a time when I was more of a purist about Christmas; Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer (which my father loved playing on the piano) was too silly for church! I had a critical attitude about how culture has distorted the Holy Story

of Christ’s birth. There is still much truth in this... still too much commercialization, emphasis on requests to Santa for “presents,” versus simply enjoying the “Presence” of God and others... still too much emphasis on being “jolly,” to the exclusion of those who may be in a time of loss and sadness. There are many things to criticize... BUT, I see the value of lightening up, enjoying the cultural things of the season, the decorations, the food, the fun songs (like “Let it Snow,” or “I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus”), yes the jokes too! Because if our faith tells us that Christmas is all about “incarnation,” then the Divine comes “in the flesh,” in the everyday things that bring new life, new joy, new peace. Rick Lang wrote a whole Christmas song about how he loves to “Decorate the Christmas Tree with Love” weeks before Christmas. Someone else could write a song about the wonders of the Night Before Christmas (oops, that’s already been done!) And the fabulous Grinch and Scrooge stories have lasted many, many years now... since they may reflect our real feelings some holiday seasons... “Just let it all pass me by, bah humbug!” BUT, then something in our Christmas present, or memories of Christmas past, might make our heart grow... several sizes! Or the surprise that like a red-nosed reindeer, someone with different looks, a bullied, persecuted sideliners, might just have the unique gifts or strengths, or wisdom needed to shine light into the “foggy night” in our soul. The images, metaphors, and stories of the season have much spiritual depth if we “have eyes to see and ears to hear.”

Like many of us this Christmas, I need a little boost in rejoicing. While I do get a sick of stores blasting Christmas songs over loudspeakers, like my Dad, I do like playing and singing many of the songs on the piano. Something about playing and singing, the very act of MAKING music is very engaging: The silly fun songs can actually can lift my spirit or hit my funny bone. The more serious carols can evoke a deeper resonance in my soul ... I’ll never forget one verse in O Little Town of Bethlehem: “the HOPES and FEARS of

all the years are MET IN THEE tonight.” Such deep meaning that proclaims that “Jesus knows our every weakness or fear,” yet his spirit can bring hope to every fear, strength to every weakness, etc. Our closing hymn, on this Gaudete (Rejoice) Sunday, will be “JOY to the World,” with its memorable ending: “and Wonders of his Love!” That summarizes the epitome of Christmas, a “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling” that we welcome in the Christ Child, reason to rejoice!

Ok, another joke or two that might strike a funny bone, or lift the spirit a little, (new for 2020!) ... How do the elves clean Santa’s sleigh? With Santa-tizer of course! Why couldn’t Mary and Joseph chat with relatives on Christmas Eve? There was “no zoom at the inn.” What’s a new favorite Christmas movie? Home Alone!

OK, just one more, often told: How do we know that the “Wise Men” were really men?... Because if they were women, they would have gotten better directions, showed up on time, and would have brought more practical gifts ... like baby rattles, baby wipes, or more swaddling cloths! Seriously, we do well to meditate on the fact that the one proclaimed Savior by prophet and sages did come into the world as a helpless baby, sharing our human lot, our common human experience, tears and laughter. Thus we can assume that while Jesus was “well acquainted with grief,” as the prophet Isaiah proclaimed, he also experienced much joy in his life. I remind us all that of the many attempts at portraits of Jesus, there is one of a Laughing Jesus, with his head held back, as with a huge belly laugh! It is a logo for the “Fellowship of Merry Christians!”

Tidings of Comfort and Joy to you. May you be blessed with the Spirit of Christ ... with loving compassion during these fearful times, but also with some good laughs of a “Merry” Christmas. Amen.