

Rejoice and be Glad

November 19, 2006 ~ Thanksgiving Sunday
Rev. Susan Morrison

Joel 2:21-27

²¹Do not fear, O soil; be glad and rejoice, for the Lord has done great things! ²²Do not fear, you animals of the field, for the pastures of the wilderness are green; the tree bears its fruit, the fig tree and vine give their full yield. ²³O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in the Lord your God; for he has given the early rain for your vindication, he has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the later rain, as before. ²⁴The threshing floors shall be full of grain, the vats shall overflow with wine and oil. ²⁵I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent against you. ²⁶You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God, who has dealt wondrously with you. And my people shall never again be put to shame. ²⁷You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I, the Lord, am your God and there is no other. And my people shall never again be put to shame.

Matthew 6:24-34

²⁴“No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

²⁵“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁸And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ³⁰But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ ³²For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴“So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.

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God is with you. And also with you.

God is good. All the time. All the time. God is good.

Grace abounds. All around. All around. Grace abounds.

I am so thankful to be able to stand before you and with you this morning. It took several days after my auto accident to realize that I had had a near miss, a close call, a brush with death. And because the injuries that I sustained – this broken hand and two broken ribs and badly bruised chest and body parts – kept me immobilized for the first week or so after the accident, I had hours and hours to ponder and reflect and pray about the circumstances of the accident, the lessons that it had to teach, and the treasure of life itself that God has given me, to you, to all of

us.

This morning's Thanksgiving scripture readings speak the truths that I have come to realize these past two weeks. Life is all about our relationship with God and God's promises. When our relationship with God is restored – as it can and should be over and over and over again throughout our life – everything else will flourish. If we rest in God's promises, then there is no need to worry, or to be anxious, because we live with faith that God will provide for all of our needs.

Look at the situation in which our Hebrew ancestors found themselves in this morning's lesson from Joel. For years they had lived in exile in Babylon. They had been deported there as hostages by their enemies. They had lost everything. Their possessions. Their homes. Their temple. The familiarity of friends, neighbors, and community. But even in their exile, God had not deserted them, in fact, through the prophet Joel, they are reminded that *as their relationship with God is restored, everything will flourish*. The soil would be restored, the wild animals fed, drought will be a thing of the past, fruit trees will bear and threshing floors and wine vats will be full. All these blessings God will bestow on God's repentant and newly faithful people.

And God isn't finished with God's people. God gave the promise of abundant life through Joel and then made the promise everlastingly sure through Jesus Christ. And Jesus' words to us this morning remind us that when we have faith in him and choose to be his disciple, then there is nothing to fret about, nothing to be anxious about, nothing to worry about. We have nothing to fear. All of the energy that goes into worrying and being insecure can be given over to an attitude of gratitude, a life of being thankful, a faith based way of living that expresses joy and gladness for the blessings that God bestows on us.

Simply stated it's about letting go and letting God. Now those of you who have gotten to know me over this past year know that letting go is never easy for me. In familiar terms and type, I am not a hanger – loving silence and being invisible; nor am I a shaper – finding God in the familiar, the unchanging tradition; I am more of a swinger – using all of my senses and wanting to reach out and touch life itself; and I am most of all a thruster – organized, goal driven, energy-filled and needing to be in control to make sure that the plan happens. But as I look back across my life, I realize that the turning points of my life have been those moments in which God has claimed me as God's own, and I have been bought face to face with the truth of who and whose I am. I am a limited, finite creature completely and totally dependent upon God alone for my life now and the gift of my life in the future.

And that is what my recent auto accident did for me. A friend reminded me that “life happens in the interruptions.” I thought that I had everything under control. Life was good – better than good. And then suddenly, everything that I thought mattered came to a halt. And in these past few weeks since my accident, I turned once again to my Maker, my Creator God, and have been reminded of what really matters, and that is my faith and trust in God's will, God's intentions, not mine. My work, my ministry, my ardent desire for the well being and ministries of this church are not diminished. But my life cannot be based on these things. Being in relationship with God and seeking God's will and God's way are my number one priority. Slowing down, being mindful, being present to the gift of the moment will be arduous exercises for me, but living into this will keep me in constant touch with God.

We live in such a multi tasking world. I pods, cell phones, speaker phone, TV screens in our vehicles, wireless computer systems...the list goes on and on of contemporary devices that tease and tempt and all but demand our multi tasking. Perhaps our world has gone over the top, over the limit of what is healthy and wise.

I don't know about you, but I know that letting go will not be easy for me. It's not something that I will do once and for all. It is something that I will have to do over and over again. Letting go is the beginning of a new life. It is life grounded and centered in God.

I like to hear Jesus' words this morning not as a command, but rather as a promise. “Do not be anxious” Jesus invites us. It is as if Jesus is saying, “If above all else you can put your faith and trust in a relationship with God and strive to live in ways that contribute to the kingdom of God being realized on earth, then God's gift of not being anxious will be yours.” It's a promise, not a command.

And then Jesus illustrates this promise. “Look at the birds of the air and consider the lilies of the field” he suggests.

If you have ever sat and watched the birds, you know exactly what Jesus means. Birds live in the present moment. They eat nature's bounty, never worrying about where the next meal will come from, nor hoarding for the future, nor idolizing or being envious of other birds who have better food. God feeds them and it is enough.

19th century Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard issued some of his most penetrating analysis of the Christian faith through parables. One such story introduces our imagination to a wild stock-dove who became acquainted with two tame doves that were sitting upon the ridge of a farmer's barn. The stock-dove announced to his new acquaintances, "So far, I have had my living; I let each day have its own worry and in that way I get through the world." The tame doves immediately expressed their superiority, insisting that they not only made provision for today, but they also planned for their future security. They reported that the farmer always provided for far more than their immediate necessities. Because of the farmer's granary, they did not live with constant uncertainty. To the surprise of the stock-dove, the tame birds were able to accumulate for the future. They never suffered from lack of food. These tame doves, however, had begun to think all the time about the future. They constantly calculated their anticipated needs. The stock-dove had never previously entertained such thoughts. The tame ones, therefore, had no peace of mind. Their obsession with the future prompted an ever-present anxiety.

Writes Kierkegaard: "Alas, and yet a great change was taking place. Although the wild stock-dove was far from suffering actual need, it had conceived a future need. Its peace of mind was lost: it had acquired anxiety for the necessities of life." The feathers of the wild dove began to lose their sheen. Even his flight became devoid of ease. Each day this pitiful creature found plenty of food. But, for the first time, plenty was never enough. Because of the fear of future scarcity, the stock-dove denied himself the joys of the present moment. He, consequently, went hungry. In his anxiety about survival in the natural world, he made his home in the barn with the tame doves. Concludes Kierkegaard, "Now when the farmer discovered the strange fowl in his barn, he trapped it in a box and the very next day made a delicious meal for himself!"

Kierkegaard makes this poignant appraisal of the parable:

"The richest man who ever lived, if he forgets God, and believes that he supports himself by his labor, has financial anxieties To be dependent on (our) own wealth, that is dependence and heavy bondage; to be dependent on God, absolutely dependent, that is independence Dependence on God is the only independence . . . (Soren Kierkegaard, *The Gospel of Suffering*, translated by David E. Swenson and Lillian Marvin Swenson (Augsburg Publishing House, 1947). Cited here from *Weavings* (May/June, 1990), p. 30.)

"Do not be anxious. Behold the birds of the air, which neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns," says Jesus, "yet God feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?"

And then there are the lilies of the field, resplendent in their beauty. If God creates their awesome beauty, the intricate patterns of their petals and their amazing reproductive systems, will not the same God who created each of us in God's own image, watch over us, and love us unconditionally?

Over these last days I have received many beautiful plants and flower arrangements. And at the height of my pain, I could do nothing else but sit and gaze on the splendor of each flower. In one arrangement there were apricot lilies that gradually unfolded from a tight bud to the fullness of a glorious flower. Another plant sported purple calla lilies. The purple hue was majestic. And then there were other kinds of lilies upon which I could gaze. My yellow lab, named Lily (and of course her older, half sister Sophia) gazed at me even as I could do nothing but gaze back at them. They were confused and concerned and rarely left my side. I appreciated anew their constancy and unconditional love. And then there was yet another Lily...Emma Lily, my 6 month old granddaughter, who also came to keep her grandmother company. As frustrating as it was not to be able to reach out and hold this precious child, it was enough to gaze upon the wonder of new life, to see her smile and hear her triumphant baby sounds. If God so clothes the lilies of the field, and gives us dog companions that love unconditionally and brings the fullness of new life into the world, does not God love and forgive and heal and companion us in our every breath? And to

know that, really know that, is to be one with God and know the promise of independence and freedom from worry and fear, from anxiety and insecurity.

And so, this Thanksgiving, I hope that you will join me in receiving Jesus' promise. Because, if above all else, we can put our faith and trust in a relationship with God and strive to live in ways that contribute to the kingdom of God being realized on earth, then God's gift of not being anxious will be ours. And we will live with thanksgiving on our lips and gratitude in our hearts. With our Hebrew ancestors of old, with the departed and living saints of our own lives, with one another, we will sing, we will shout...Rejoice and be glad! for our God is good and God's mercies will last us for a lifetime. Alleluia. Amen.