

Call to Worship

Leader: Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say, Rejoice!

People: Let us leave our worries at the foot of the cross and find peace.

Leader: Prepare the way of the Lord with worship and praise!

People: Come, let us worship God!

Isaiah 12:2-6

□ Surely God is my salvation; □ I will trust, and will not be afraid, □
for the Lord God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.

With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.

And you will say on that day: □ Give thanks to the Lord, □
call on his name; □ make known his deeds among the nations; □
proclaim that his name is exalted.

Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously;
let this be known in all the earth.

Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, □
for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

Philippians 4:4-7

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. **The Lord is near.** Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

This is the Word of the Lord, **(Thanks be to God.)**

Today’s message is simple: **Rejoice!**

On this, the third Sunday of advent we hear Paul’s words ringing down the ages- like Christmas bells: **Rejoice: the Lord is near!**

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul tells us to celebrate! To be joyful – to let our hearts be at peace –to enjoy *this* day and be thankful we are alive and surrounded by people who love us. Paul encourages us rejoice in God, together!

Today we will hear and follow Paul’s imperative to rejoice in God, and think about how our lives will change for the good if we abandon worry and live lives of celebration and joy in the Lord.

So as you listen to the word of God interpreted this morning, I beg of you to set your worries down and open up your heart to God, as weary as your heart may be, so that God may speak to you this morning through the work of the Holy Spirit in our midst. Set your worries, anxieties, and grief down, and listen for what God is speaking to your heart.

Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians from a prison cell somewhere between the year 52 and 62 C.E. Although it is disputed where exactly Paul was incarcerated, the oldest and most well accepted answer is that he wrote the letter from a prison cell in Rome between 60-62 C.E. If anyone had a reason to despair, it was Paul. He was a Roman citizen, imprisoned on a capital charge, and isolated from his friends and community while he sat in a

prison cell and awaited his fate. But Paul does not despair – he writes to his friends in the city of Philippi some 800 miles away, and encourages them to join him in living a life of joy and celebration in the One true God.

He writes to them, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. **The Lord is near.** Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (4:4-7)

Celebrate, because the Lord is near. This reason Paul identifies for our rejoicing – the perpetual nearness of the living God. **Paul does not celebrate because of a lack of conflict or trouble – he celebrates, and invites all to celebrate with him, because God is near.** Paul implores the Philippians to live lives that exude the nearness of God by extending gentleness and concern for their brothers and sisters. This is not an individualistic appeal for personal holiness – or individual celebration. Paul asks his friends in Philippi to live their lives in the reality that the Lord is near by *holding each other up in faith!* **We celebrate the nearness of God by supporting our brothers and sisters in the Christian community and by reaching out to those who are not part of our community.**

Now perhaps you are thinking that there is not much in your life to rejoice about. Life can often feel that way. **We rejoice not because our lives are free from pain and suffering, heartache and woe, conflict and trouble – we celebrate because we know in our hearts that God is near.** The God

of our ancestors – the one who created everything we know, the one who created us, the one who was humble enough to take on human flesh- the one who has defeated sin and death for our sake – that One – the One we call God, is near. With an advocate like that – we have no cause for worry, no matter WHAT our circumstances – with God so near to our aching hearts – we have no choice but to celebrate.

I recently finished a book my dear friend Jim Tuggey lent me. The book is called “*have a little faith*”¹ and is written by a man named Mitch Albom. Mitch Albom has written many well known books including “*Tuesdays with Morrie*” and “*Five People You Meet in Heaven*”. “*Have a little faith*” is a heart warming true story of Mitch’s relationship with his childhood Rabbi during the last years of his Rabbi’s life. At the beginning of the book we meet Mitch as a successful author of many books, living in Detroit and writing for a newspaper. Mitch admits that he’s a “high holiday” Synagogue attender, the Jewish equivalent of a Christmas and Easter Christian. He does not observe Jewish kosher laws and only attends services when he flies to his hometown in New Jersey. At the beginning of the book it is fairly clear that Mitch does not have faith, and does not believe in God. Despite all this, and to Mitch’s utter surprise, his childhood Rabbi, Albert Lewis, now pushing ninety years old, asks Mitch if he would be willing to present Albert’s eulogy when he dies. The rest of the story chronicles the next 8 years of Mitch’s life as he grows to know and love his Rabbi Albert Lewis – or as he calls him – *The Reb*.

¹ Mitch Albom, *have a little faith: a true story*, (New York: Hyperion, 2009.)

Albert Lewis lives a life of celebration. As Mitch meets with the Reb, reads his old sermons, and discusses issues of faith and life, Mitch is confronted with a man who lives a life of celebration, unapologetically embracing the good in people and unwavering in his concern for the community of faith. If Albert Lewis were alive when Paul was writing to the Philippians, I think Paul would have identified Albert by name as an example of what a life of celebration in the Lord looks like.

Throughout the course of the book Mitch is changed by coming into contact with the Reb’s life of celebration. The Reb’s life exuded celebration, not because it was free from conflict or hardship – but because Albert Lewis chose to deal with all that life gave to him in such a way that reflected the reality that God is near. I know you’re not supposed to spoil the end of a book – but I don’t think this really spoils it. I’d like to read you an excerpt from the eulogy Mitch wrote for Albert. It is a snapshot of the influence just one life of celebration in the Lord, can have on a great number of people.

“In our last visits, you spoke often about dying, about what comes next. You would cock your head and sing, “Nu, Lord above, if you want to take me, maybe take me without too much paaaain.”

By the way, Reb, about the singing, What gives? Walt Whitman sang the body electric. Billie Holiday sang the blues. You sang...everything. You could sing the phone book. I would call and say how are you feeling, and you’d answer, “The old gray rabbi, ain’t what he used to be...”

I teased you about it, but I loved it, I think we all loved it and it comes as no surprise that you were singing to a nurse last week, preparing for a bath, when the final blow took you from us. I like to think that the Lord so enjoyed hearing one of his children joyous- joyous enough to sing in a hospital – that he chose that moment, you in mid-hum, to bring you to him.

So now you are with God. That I believe. You told me your biggest wish, after you died, would be that somehow you could speak to us here, and inform us that you had landed, safe and sound. Even in your demise, you were looking for one more sermon.

But you knew there is a maddening yet majestic reason you cannot speak to us today, because if you could, we might not need faith. And faith is what you were all about. You were the salesman that you cited so often in a Yiddish proverb, coming back each day, knocking on the door, offering your wares with a smile, until one day, the customer gets so fed up with your persistence, he spits in your face. And you take out a handkerchief, you wipe the spit away, and you smile again and say, “It must be raining.”

There are handkerchiefs here today, Reb, but its not because of rain. It’s because some of us can’t bear to let you go. Some of us want to apologize for all the times we said, through our actions, “Go away,” for all the times we spit in the face of our faith.

I didn’t want to eulogize you. I was afraid. I felt a congregant could never eulogize his leader. But I realize now that thousands of congregants will eulogize you today, in their car rides home, over the dinner table. A eulogy

is no more than a summation of memories, and we will never forget you, because we cannot forget you, because we will miss you every day. To imagine a world without you in it is to imagine a world with a little less God in it, and yet, because God is not a diminishing resource, I cannot believe that.

Instead, I have to believe that you have melted back into His glory, your soul is like a returned favor, you are a star in his sky and a warm feeling in our hearts. We believe that you are with your forefathers, with your daughter, with your past, and at peace.

May God keep you; may he sing to you, and you to him.

Where do we look for you now, Reb?

We look where you have been trying – good, sweet Man of God – to get us to look all along. We look up.”²

When we live lives of celebration – let us live lives like Albert and Paul.

We do not always have a choice in the circumstances life throws at us, but we do have a choice about how we deal with those circumstances. We can choose to honor and reflect God’s presence in our lives by having positive attitudes and looking out for other people. Looking out for others can be as small as smiling at someone in the supermarket or sending a card of encouragement to a friend.

² Mitch Albom, *have a little faith: a true story*, (New York: Hyperion, 2009.) 241-242.

Living lives of celebration means living our lives in the reality that God is near. Living lives of celebration means reaching out to other people, and holding them up with the love of God.

As we continue to wait for Jesus to be born again in our hearts during advent, let us take time this holiday season for celebration. After worship this morning the trustees have arranged for a time of eating and fellowship as we celebrate each other. Today we celebrate the joy of having a church family – people who love us just as we are and will support us through times of joy and times of need. Today we celebrate the close of our stewardship campaign, as we celebrate the privilege of supporting our church community financially. Today we celebrate the Christmas season as we wait for the birth of Jesus. **Today we celebrate the nearness of God.** Please join us as we celebrate after the 10:30 service with a community feast.

I pray that our celebration today will spill over into your everyday life, so that your life and our communal life can exude celebration in the Lord as we hold each other up in faith – and reach out into our world.

In the name of the One True God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen.