



**Advent 3 December 14, 2014: St. John the Evangelist, North Vancouver
The Rt. Rev. Melissa M. Skelton**

Thessalonians 5:16-24

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil. May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.”

It's beginning to feel a lot like winter in this part of the world. In Nelson Park right near where I live, tiny birds perch on the top of desiccated flowers in the community garden plots—flowers that at this time of year have become no more than clumps of dark seeds standing on stalks. The birds, doing their best to balance themselves on the top of the stalks, peck at the seeds, grabbing their winter meals. Meanwhile on some mornings the early morning frost ices the surface of the steps of my apartment building, making them glitter like so many stars but also turning them dangerous and slippery when I take my dog out early for his morning walk.

The past few months have been a hard for many in our diocesan community, and it seems that this always happens at this time of year. The father of one of our new priests in the diocese suffered a serious stroke. A deacon in the diocese was diagnosed with breast cancer. The Cathedral community here has had a series of deaths of people important to their life. In the meantime I've been meeting daily with clergy and parish leaders who are worried about many things: the future direction and finances of their parish, tensions among leaders, and big questions like the role of the Church itself in such a polarized time and such a multicultural place as this. And, of course, all of these worrisome personal events and persistent big questions come at a time when, whether you are Christian or not, much of the culture is in the midst of the flashy winter festival it calls Christmas while we in at least part of the Christian Church get a foretaste of Christmas joy on this Gaudete or “Rose Sunday.”

“Gaudete Sunday” is the Sunday on which Advent is more than half over. Also called “Rose Sunday” in that some churches light a rose-coloured candle or use rose-coloured vestments on this day, Gaudete Sunday is a day of joyful celebration of the nearness of Christ’s coming. “Gaudete,” of course, is from the Latin, meaning “to rejoice,” “to be glad” or “to take delight” in something. This particular form of the verb is a plural imperative, and so it means not only “rejoice!” (with an exclamation point at the end) but “Rejoice, ya’ll!”

Yet it’s hard, so hard to rejoice when we, or those we know and care about, are grieving or are in tribulation. It’s hard to receive the delight of the day when so many others are now just trying to make it through the day. Our readings for today reflect this same contrast: the perplexing contrast between the pain of loss and the call to rejoice, for many of the readings are about people or are addressed to people who have every reason to be laid low by grief and loss but who are exhorted to rejoice or asked to remember that joy is a part of the barren winter landscape they find themselves in.

Let’s look at these readings:

- In our first reading, one of the prophets we know as Isaiah, describes his vocation as the one who has been sent “to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, to provide for those who mourn in Zion— to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning.”
- The psalmist in our psalm for today remembers a time of joy even as he yearns for joy again: “When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, then were we like those who dream” he says...”Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy.” Out of this memory and his current unfortunate situation, he cries out: “Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses of the Negev.”
- And then there’s Paul. In his closing to his first letter to the Thessalonians, a people who are waiting for the crucified and risen Christ to return in power and glory right away, he tells them as they wait in a difficult situation to “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in *all* circumstances.”

Yes, most of our Scripture for today is all about joy in the midst of mourning, about rejoicing in the midst of what is not joyful.

I remember when talk like this really got under my skin. It was during the time that I lived in a seminary community with a family member who had a chronic, incurable, life-threatening illness. Life, as you can imagine, was not only hard for my little family, but very uncomfortable for students who were supposed to be learning what to do and say to people in situations like mine. A few people tried out their pastoral skills on me before those skills had become fully developed. I remember hearing things from budding priests such as “Remember to be thankful that you have your family member” or “Try to remember the joys everyday in the midst of your hardship.” I can’t say that the people who said these things were wrong just incredibly wrong-headed in their efforts. The result was a deep aversion on my part to anything that seemed to paste joy over what is difficult in life.

Years later, this is *not* what I think Scripture is attempting to do or to say to us. Likewise, this is *not* what I believe the message to us is on Gaudete Sunday, the Sunday we are offered a foretaste of Christmas joy in the midst of the Advent darkness of waiting and hoping and yearning. No instead, what I believe Scripture is suggesting is found hidden in plain sight in our Gospel for this morning.

In that Gospel, which follows right on the heels of John's lofty and important Prologue, we again meet John the Baptist who the Gospel writer describes as "a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light....He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light." After this description, comes the questioning of John the Baptist by various authorities in which John tries his best to clarify *who he is not*. After listening to this, his questioners finally ask him: "Why then are *you* baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?"

John then answers them in words unique to this Gospel: "I baptize with water" he says, "Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal."

"Among you stands one whom you do not know."

This, then, is the key to whatever joy is available to us in a joyless situation, the truth of the light that is here even in the dark season. The one who brings joy, who is light, is right here among us, unnoticed by us because, well, we don't notice him or can't notice him. And sometimes this is just the way it is! But noticed or not, he is there. His joy is not something pasted over our experience in order to rub it out or to encourage us to pretend that the joyless dark does not exist. Rather, the joy he brings is the assurance that the he, the Holy One, is present and alive with his people in the middle of the darkness and in the midst of the ashes.

He comes with gifts, not like the ones many are busy purchasing in this season. In his hands are garlands for the brows of those bent over in mourning, keys for the imprisoned, clean bandages for the wounded, adornment for those so broken-hearted they did not believe themselves fit to be seen. And if we cannot see him and cannot receive these gifts with our own hands, others will do this for us. Others will take the garland or the keys or the bandages or the adornment and will hold them until the time when we can take them to be our own.

Gaudete: Rejoice. It is a plural imperative addressed to a people who need to hear it and need to understand that part of being a people is that others can and will do things for us that we cannot do for ourselves.

Gaudete.

Yesterday morning I again was out taking my little dog Teddy for a walk. It was early and the first light was already disclosing that the day would not be all clouds and rain but would offer more than one peak of the blue sky and maybe even the sun. We headed into Nelson Park and though I hadn't walked past the community garden for a while, I decided to head that way to have a look at how the gardens were holding up. As I did this, I noticed how desolate

the yards all looked that lined the park. Everywhere were wet, unraked leaves, dying plants and neglected yards—you know how it is this time of the year. As we made the final turn onto the sand and gravel path that leads between the little separate gardens plots, something caught my eye. There, hidden in plain sight, was a tiny potted rose bush that someone had placed in the middle of one of the gardens, a tiny rose bush sporting one pink, wet, weather-beaten rose.

Gaudete. Rejoice, for the Lord is near, hidden in plain sight, hidden in plain sight in the middle of the darkness, hidden in plain sight in the perplexity and the pain of our lives..