

## **Sermon for Advent III, December 13, 2009**

The Painting on the cover of the Bulletin this morning captures for me the true meaning of Advent and particularly this “Rejoice” Sunday.

An American visitor to El Salvador once asked the martyred Archbishop, Oscar Romero, what should be told about the persecution taking place there. He responded: “Tell them things are desperate—and tell them we are joyful.”

Rejoicing is an ever present theme in Scripture. A lack of joy is seen as a consequence of our separation from God, and joy comes from our reunion with God.

At the beginning of Advent three years ago, my mother was dying from a massive stroke. It was very difficult to find joy in her dying. As the special beauty of the rose on the bulletin cover lies in the child held there, I am just now beginning to grasp that beauty lies not only in the growth and the flowering of the rose, which was my mother’s life, but also, in its fading, in her death as well as life.

The great theologian of the twentieth century, Paul Tillich, argues that we can learn much about joy by looking at its opposite, “sorrow.” The sorrow is often found in the half light and silence of our lives. Sorrow is the feeling of being deprived of something that belongs to us and is necessary for our fulfillment. Even with the half light of dementia, my mother was able to enjoy a quality of life within a community that loved her. In many ways, she was a much happier person because she lived in the moment, not in the past or future.

We may be deprived of a loved one, creative work, or a supportive community. We may also be deprived of home, honor, love, and physical or mental health. All of these and more bring sorrow, the sorrow of sadness, the sorrow of loneliness, the sorrow of depression, the sorrow of self-accusation, particularly this time of year—a time shared by

the half light and silence in nature. Joy, however, can be hidden in the sorrow, in the half light and silence.

Joy preserves within itself its opposite, sorrow. Joy provides the foundation for happiness and pleasure. It is present in our striving. It does not take away the risks and dangers. It makes the joy of life possible both in pleasure and pain, in happiness and unhappiness, in ecstasy and sorrow. Where there is true joy there is fulfillment. And where there is fulfillment, there is joy. In fulfillment and joy, the inner aim of life, the meaning of creation and the end of salvation are attained.

Just how are we to find fulfillment and joy in this community of faith? Paul reminds us to be patient and strengthen our hearts. How might we strengthen our hearts? Paul says that we do this through prayer in all circumstances, and especially around persons who try our patience. Do not grumble against one another, as James says.

We are to pray through our tears and our fears, to give thanks always and know that prayer connects us with the energy to bring goodness into our lives and others as well. As the Very Rev. Samuel G. Candler, Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip in Atlanta, reminds us, the season of Advent as we usually experience it, is not spent waiting in prayer.

*"We say that the season of Advent is a season of waiting. We try to persuade ourselves that if we just say that often enough, it will become true. Advent is a season of waiting. Advent is a season of waiting.*

*"But it's not. Advent is a season of impatience. Sure, there are other times throughout the year when we experience impatience. But this season, the time between Thanksgiving and Christmas, this season is the climax of impatience, when all our anxiety and hurry and worry are concentrated into four short weeks...*

*“The horrible possibility lies in the back of our mind that our expectations will indeed go unfulfilled - that what we are waiting for will never happen - that we will forever sit lonely and empty....*

*“In last week's gospel lesson, John burst on the scene with fire and vengeance, full of confidence and certainty. He announced the coming of Jesus with great hope and expectation...*

*“But, today, he represents Advent in another way, in a way that is just as authentic as last week's style. But he is tired. He is discouraged. He questions. John the Baptist is like us. He jumps to hope ...But, later, he has questions; he even has doubts. At least John had sense enough to ask the right question: "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"*

*...Because that is the Advent question: "Are you the one I've been waiting for, or shall I wait for another?" Is this the present I've been waiting for?....*

*“We will find a precious gift (in the Advent Rose), the gift of Christ; we will find reconciliation and peace-if we have eyes to see beyond our expectations-if we look around us and notice new places where Jesus is working. "Go and tell John what you see and hear," said Jesus. "The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk. The dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them."*

*“Jesus Christ did not come to those people who had the details of his arrival all worked out. He came to the blind, the lame, the lepers, the deaf, the poor, the dead. He came to the downtrodden. He came in humility for the humble. He came for those who did not have it all worked out for themselves. He came for those who knew they needed Him.”*

Let us pray: Come Lord Jesus into the half light and silence of our lives. Amen. Come Lord Jesus. Amen!