

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen.*

Yes, Rejoicing, being joyful, is a fundamental state of mind. It doesn't depend on whether we are, in the moment, happy or not. Or comfortable. Or having a pleasant day. Or feeling that God is in his heaven and all's right with the world. Rejoicing, though you might not always recognize it, is a foundational attitude of scripture, of the Bible. We often read the ancient Hebrew prophets as if they were either gloomy or downright sarcastic, judgmental, cranky harbingers of doom. But in fact, they are, to a person, the ultimate optimists. They have the gift of looking beyond and beneath the trials and tribulations of the world to speak God's truth. And that truth, as we ought to know, is fundamentally loving. It might sometimes seem like the tough-love of a caring parent, but love just the same. On this Gaudete Sunday, I won't expect that you will be giggling hysterically or swooning with delight, and please don't expect that of me, either. It has been a hard week in our dear parish, and as I said, nothing will ever be quite the same again, but I do rejoice, I am filled with spiritual joy, and I pray that you might be, too.

We meet four Biblical characters in this morning's readings: Isaiah the prophet, Mary the God-bearer, Paul the Apostle, and John the Baptizer. We have no clue, by the way, what they looked like. Aside from a couple of examples I can think of, none the Bible heroes and villains are physically described in any usual way. You can close your eyes and imagine them in any way you'd like, any shape or color, and you'd be as right as anyone else. Yet we know their names well. We have no idea what their voices sounded like, whether they were squeaky, or gravelly, or bombastic, loud or soft, but they were indeed given speaking parts, speaking words which have become famous and memorable. Just the same, I assume they weren't happy every day of their lives, but I'll bet they felt joy. There were probably days when they packed their lunch in the morning and went to work as a prophet, a God-bearer, an apostle, or a baptizer when they would have rather stayed in bed. But they found, I think, daily joy in their special connection to God. Good days and bad, I'll bet they rejoiced.

For his part, Isaiah lived through the exile of his people, the destruction of their temple and their way of life. But to a people who certainly felt abandoned, he witnessed to hope and the power of God to console and make all things new. Now, Mary, who became pregnant out-of-wedlock, whose young world was turned upside-down just as she was planning her wedding, couldn't have had an easy time, either. But here is her voice today, witnessing that her heart rejoices in the saving grace of God. However you might picture her in your mind, or

hear the sound of her voice, her universal message has endured down through the ages, and inspires us yet. Paul the Apostle, who clearly had some rough times, was shipwrecked, disrespected, incarcerated, and who probably spent a lot of nights alone with a blanket under the stars, got up each morning and took joy in his work as a missionary. And, drawing on his own experience, what does he witness to the Thessalonians? Rejoice always! In little faith communities throughout the Mediterranean basin, Paul shared his testimony that the Lord is near, so be joyful even through your tears and fears. And what about John, who called himself the forerunner of Jesus, called to make the ways straighter, called to be the front-man for the Messiah? We call him John the Baptist, but here in our reading this morning, we might better call him John the Witness, for that is what his presence, his role, in this narrative drama is all about. His voice, crying out in the difficult wilderness, is one of testimony.

So, in case you missed it, I believe we can tie each of these Bible characters together by the concept of joyful witness. And, as you might imagine, as your preacher today I am calling each of you to be witnesses, and to rejoice in the opportunity. If these four Bible heroes are too remote for you, then take up the example of our dear Laura, the one whom Kellie so fondly and appropriately calls 'Ma Bennett'. I cannot think of a time when Laura and I have spoken that she hasn't been a joyful witness for the Lord. Even when discouraged about her health, even when mourning the departure of Artie and Wendy and John, even when facing her own death, she witnessed to me about her relationship with the Lord. And I have learned much from her. Dear friends, that is what a real Bible hero is: one who rejoices without reluctance or embarrassment or hesitation to witness to a deep relationship with a loving God. One who rejoices for God's sake.

Abiding spiritual joy in all circumstances, as Paul writes, is another one of those spokes of the metaphorical wheel I have been promoting this season, which has as its hub the Incarnation of Jesus, and whose rim is the turning of our lives out here on the roadway. Joy is one of those spokes which support the integrity of the physics of our tires as the rubber meets the road. We travel over nasty bumps and through the occasional snowdrift, but the strength of our fundamental joy sustains and reassures us. I hope that you will take every opportunity, in every season, to witness to that joy, writing some Holy Scripture of your own. 'Rejoice, again I will say rejoice! The Lord is near.' Amen