**[1]** December 15, 2024
Sermon Title:  Joyful Rose

Scripture:  Isaiah 35:1-10
Theme: May we always believe it possible that joy will overtake our hearts and overflow our minds.

**[2]“**The desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose, and it shall blossom abundantly. It shall spin around and shriek with joy! The parched land shall obtain gladness through the breaking out of waters. Those scattered abroad in exile shall return to Zion in joy!”

The latest advertisement from the United States Postal Service is that you can “send joy just in time.” You can find the brochures describing this service at your local Post Office.  Our mail delivery in the United States seems to be inching forward toward a day when you can, if you choose to do so, control when and where delivery occurs.  I prefer sending “joy as a surprise” rather than as a known delivery, but hopefully never late.

**[3]** And there is a website called “Joymail.” Sign up once and send joy every month. Using their services, you may send cards, flowers, fruit, candy, and other gifts, on specific dates to specific places without having to initiate each sending. Joy arrives on time automatically, or your money back. The flowers and other gifts are always fresh on arrival, and just on time. You may remember from the biblical story of Jacob sending different gifts at different times, in progressive stages, to his brother Esau; one today, one tomorrow, and so on.  Jacob was hoping at least one of the gifts would bring joy to his brother.

The traditional theology for this Sunday celebrates the seeking and finding of joy along our spiritual journey.  A new way of thinking about joy is that God is active in sending joy our way as we journey along our way toward Christmas. The ultimate gift of joy is God entering our world through a tiny baby born in a stable in a remote part of the world.  In this type of theology, joy is a divine gift given freely in the form of abundant grace, rather than something illusive that we may or may not find in the last analysis.  God sends joy just in time.  God sends joy both
when we least expect it or when we are accustomed to anticipate it. God sends joy both as a surprise or as a known quantity.

**[4]** Some of the other advertisements I have seen or heard over the past few days are: “Bring home the joy.” Or “Share the joy.”  There is nothing better than greeting someone with a smile or bringing home a smile from a long day of work.  The gift of joy is the best gift anyone can share or give.  Joy is often defined as an emotion evoked by the prospect of attaining or having what one desires. There is just a touch of triumph (γηθέω**)** in the Greek word for joy.  Certainly, when we are successful, when we have a triumph in life, we take joy in celebrating that victory, but we can also speak of celebrating the joy itself, as if the joy we receive IS the victory, and not the event that produces it. Victories are often fleeting, few and far between, but each joy we celebrate can last a lifetime.  We do not possess the joy, but the joy possesses us, (Philadelphia Archbishop Charles Chaput) and stays with us as a beautiful memory.  Sometimes we experience joy as we would experience slumping into a large warm coat, glad to be safe for the winter’s night.

**[5]** Isaiah’s language suggests that joy, as a gift, overtakes us! Joy chases us and catches up to us and overwhelms us in its reach. It predicts that one cannot escape the long arm of joy, the long reach of joy. The Hebrew verb ‘overtake’ is the same one used in describing Laban as overtaking a fleeing Jacob after he left abruptly in the night (Gen. 31:25). Joy speeds up from behind to overtake us.  Like a climbing rose, joy overtakes our garden archways and gateways in a wild rhythm of growth that fills in the empty places with color, beauty and sound.

We might think of the word ‘cheer’ as synonym for ‘joy.’  The word ‘cheer’ comes from the French language, meaning “face.” There is a sense in which we lead with our face.  Reading faces is a very critical skill for understanding and communicating with others. In its more basic form, cheerleading is a form of activity designed to lead us into cheer or lead us into joy, perhaps even lead us into success or triumph. Cheerleading primes our spirits, like priming a pump or an
engine. When we are primed sufficiently, we are ready to receive joy as a gift, to be overtaken by joy, as Isaiah puts it (Isa. 35:10)

**[6]** Singing and joy are often found together in the same place. Consider the theme song to the Broadway play ‘Oklahoma.’ “Oh, what a beautiful morning, O, what a beautiful day. I’ve got a beautiful feeling, everything’s going my way.” We might call this a theme song for joy.  Or consider a song from the musical ‘My Fair Lady,’ “I could have danced all night, I could have danced all night, And still have begged for more, I could have spread my wings, and done a thousand things I’ve never done before.” These songs are synonymous with the feeling of lightness in heart that we call joy.  Sometimes, all we need to do is flip a switch in our mood or
in our mind, to one moment being distant from joy, to the next moment, being close to joy.  At one moment, seeing ourselves as distant from those around us, to the next moment being at one with the crowd, in our mood and in our mind.  In some sense, we have a choice, to stay within the limitations of the past, or stretch ourselves to the possibilities of our future. As Moses might say on behalf of God, today, I have set before you life and death, joy and fear, choose life, choose joy (Deut. 30:15).

John Bell tells the story of one of his music students in Iona named Angela. Angela was 37. She had come to an Easter retreat at which there was a lot of singing. She had heard her colleagues and me claim that everyone could sing, and she desperately wanted to do so, because underneath she believed it. But it wasn’t working for her. She told me her story. She had believed that she was tone deaf since a church organist had made that pronouncement when she was a child. In her
twenties she married a musician who promised that he would spend time enabling her to sing. He tried all he could, but it didn’t work.  Thereafter, when they were in company, if someone asked if they ever made music together, her husband would respond, ‘Angela can’t sing Believe me. I’ve tried every trick I know.’  By the time we met, her marriage had ended, and her self esteem was very low. But what intrigued me was that her voice (very distinct) was naturally musical.  When she spoke she used high and low registers, and this was intentional rather than
haphazard. We met in a room where no one else could hear us and, with some trepidation, I said that I’d like to hear her sing.  To prevent any initial awkwardness, I suggested that I would sing at the same time, and that we would sing the children’s nursery rhyme Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star. It was not a very pleasant sound.  There was no fluctuation, just a drone. For reasons which I cannot
explain, I asked if we might sing it again, but this time I would put my hand over one of her ears.  There was a distinct difference. Not only did she approximate the pitch of the starting note, but her voice began to fluctuate. I tried again with both her ears free, and then with one covered. It struck me that when one ear was covered she was more attuned to what was happening in her own voice, whereas when both ears were open she was only listening to me and could not connect with her own sounds. I asked her if she had ever heard her own voice, if she knew inside
what it sounded like. She said no.  So, I asked her to sing the same rhyme, and I put my hands over both her ears. Immediately the color and inflections went and the drone came back. I asked her what she had heard. ‘It sounded awful,’ she said.‘ It was a noise which seemed very far away.’ ‘That,’ I said, ‘is your voice. And it’s like an orphaned child which needs to be loved by its mother. The more you listen to your voice, encourage your voice, became familiar with your voice, the better it will become.’ It was evident that something in her make-up had only let her hear what other people sang, and that both confirmed her own inability to sing a tune and alienated her further from hearing what was happening in her voice. … I met her a year later and she said things were beginning to come right.  It should be noted that whether the remedy involves changing self-perception, or making an existential choice, or watching visually whether a melody goes up or down, or trying to hear inwardly one’s own voice and match it to the melody being sung by others, this takes time. There is no instant remedy, no pills. If it has taken someone 30 years to lose their voice, it might take them three months or three years to find it. The important thing is to believe that it is possible. God never asks people to do what they cannot. In John’s view, God has certainly asked us to sing and rejoice, and to praise God.

Does it make a difference if we can hear joy inside of us in the same way we hear the songs we sing inside of us?  Does a song that you have heard here in church, or in the Christmas cantata, stay with you for weeks at a time? Might joy also linger with the song. Might joy wrap its arms around our loneliness and hug us into the accepting arms of God, the loving arms of Christ Jesus?  There is something very disarming about watching an infant smile or laugh or giggle.  Joy comes down from heaven as a baby, launching divine love into our souls. Joy fills the giant hole inside us with essence and meaning. Joy changes the tune of our inner voices and
sprouts wings inside our hope.

**[7]** Charles Wesley, in his famous hymn, Love Divine, All Loves Excelling, sings the words to us: “Joy of heaven, to earth come down!  Fix in us thy humble dwelling. All thy faithful mercies crown, Jesus all compassion, pure unbounded love, enter every trembling heart.”  Fill us with your precious abundant joy, O Christ.  May we always believe it possible that joy will overtake our hearts and overflow our fears. Amen.