

### **Sermon for Sunday, December 11, 2011 Early Service Isaiah 61:1-4.8-11**

This third Sunday of Advent is called “Gaudete Sunday” or “Rejoicing Sunday.” This is indeed a day of rejoicing. Christmas is coming, the day we celebrate the birth of God’s son. We can feel how close it is now...a few weeks ago, it seemed further away, but now it is waiting in the wings. Only two weeks until the glorious day, Christmas Day.

Our children and grandchildren think of that day as a time of presents. They can’t wait for that early morning wake-up and the delightful chaos of unwrapping what Santa has brought them. Our Christmas morning may be a little different. In fact, at each stage of our lives, our sense of what is a gift evolves.

In our teens, we care less about what the gift is than we care about who gives it. Yes, teenagers want stuff. That is a given. But that guitar from Grandma isn’t as exciting to a teen as a strange book from the girlfriend who is his first love. The guitar may be one of the most exquisite, expensive things that the Music Store has to offer, but the aroma of romance that scents that fifteen buck book – that’s magical.

In our twenties, the gift that we seek may be that engagement ring, or that word “Yes!” from the one to whom we will give that ring. It might be news that we have gotten that job we really wanted, the one that will be the next step in a bright career.

In our thirties, the gift may be the expressions on the faces of our little children as they rip open the presents under the tree at 6:30 am on Christmas morning, or it may be your spouse letting you go back to bed while she wrangles the kids after the present opening.

Yes, our sense of gift evolves.

It continues to change as we pass forty and fifty. Perhaps now the gift we seek is calm, or it may be a gathering of family from the various places they are scattered. It may be the sense that life is settling down, and it is a blessed relief after difficult times.

And the years pass, and once again the thing we seek changes.

Suddenly, the best give we can receive is time, time that now seems to be slipping away from us faster and faster.

And the knowledge that we have made it to another Christmas becomes the gift itself. Another Christmas when we can be with those we love. Another Christmas to do something for someone else. Another Christmas to celebrate, and to rejoice. Time is precious. Another Christmas is precious.

Here we stand, on this Sunday when we are to encouraged to rejoice. What shall we rejoice about?

It may be as simple as this: we have survived. We may not have thought of that twenty years ago, but now it is very real.

Neither illness nor a misdirected GRTC bus has brought us to our end. We will celebrate another Christmas, and that’s something to rejoice over.

I don't mean to be morbid, but if we truly believe that each day is a gift from God, as we get older, we realize just what a powerful gift that is. We nervously joke about it: "better on top of the grass than underneath it," but in our hearts we are thinking about our own mortality and the gift of life that God bestows on us.

This may be the truest gift of the season. Not those sweaters and ties wrapped and placed under the Christmas tree, but the awareness that our lives, every day of them, are gifts from God. They are precious and sweet, even on those days when we don't feel 100% or when we feel like we aren't particularly useful to anybody. Each day is another day to thank God for what we are given.

This is not to say that we should ignore the difficult bits. They are a fact of our lives, just as our less-than-sharp vision and crow's feet are facts of our lives...although perhaps the gift is that we can no longer see those crow's feet quite as clearly.

But we rejoice, even with the challenges that the passing of time has brought. We rejoice, in a deeper and sweeter way than we could have a few decades ago, because we know the value of what has been given to us, and we know from whence it came.

So we make a choice to rejoice. As Isaiah prophesied, we wear a garland rather than ashes. We are anointed with the oil of gladness rather than that of mourning. We sing as Isaiah sang: "I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness."

Why do we rejoice? Not because of gifts under the tree, but because of the ultimate gift. There is someone coming, someone who will bring us the greatest of gifts. We don't need another tie or box of cookies. We don't need another paperweight. What we need is what he brings: the garments of salvation.

None of us know the time allotted to us. It may be decades. It may be a day. It doesn't really matter. We can rejoice, because the gift that is brought to us on Christmas Day is timeless. We can rejoice, because Jesus was born, and because he has redeemed us from our sins. And that is something that lasts longer than a Christmas morning – it is for eternity.

Amen.