

## *Be Glad and Rejoice*

Isaiah 65.17-25

Thanksgiving Sunday  
November 22, 2009

Each year about this time a longing awakens within us, and we begin a journey home for the holidays. As we begin this journey let us be glad and rejoice, and let us pause to express our gratitude for all the gifts bestowed on our lives: family, friends, freedom, prosperity; and most importantly the highest of hopes that characterizes our faith – to find our true home in a world of peace and goodwill.

- From *Be Glad and Rejoice*

### *The Reading*

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord— and their descendants as well. Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.

*Home is where the heart is. Home is where you hang your hat. Home is the sailor home from the sea, or just Home sweet home.* We describe home in many ways, but our descriptions invariably have less to do with a place – with lumber, brick, or mortar - than with the feelings that make our lives worthwhile: a sense of safety and belonging, affirmation and encouragement from people whose lives are intimately intertwined with our own, the mirth and joy of special times shared together, and of course the love that animates and molds our

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spirits, and whose memory alone can help us through difficult times. Home certainly calls to mind a place; but it is not just any place; it is rather a very special place where these feelings - and the people who inspire them - are known.

Each year about this time a longing awakens within us, and we begin a journey home. This is appropriate, I think, for what better time to begin this journey than at Thanksgiving? And what better way to begin a journey home than by pausing to express gratitude for the wonderful gifts that have graced our lives?

I must admit that the memories of home evoked in my spirit this time of year are bitter-sweet; they bring both tears to my eyes and a smile to my lips. They bring tears, because some of the special people who have graced my life are no longer with me; I can still hear their voices, I see their faces clearly, and I continue to feel their love; but I can't hold them close, or squeeze a hand in affection. Even through the tears, however, I am grateful, because the impact they have had on my life could never be measured in years; and the love they have shared with me could never be exhausted in a lifetime. For these memories of home from times gone by I am grateful, and because of them I will be glad and rejoice!

My memories this year will be particularly vivid, because Jamie and I are taking a *guy trip* to Birmingham to see my family. We're packed and ready to go, and in fact have been preparing ourselves by doin' a lot o' spittin' & chewin,' and telling crude body part jokes! All we need now is a Mountain Dew and a Goo Goo Cluster candy bar!

My memories of home this year will also be particularly bittersweet, because for the first time in over fifty years, I will not return to our family home; I will not return to 716 Kenwood Drive, Birmingham, Alabama, 35214. I'll always remember that address. In fact, I'll always remember our very first telephone number, ST 61388, which was a party line with three of our neighbors. "Don't talk too long," mom would say, "Mrs. Usher might need to use the phone."

I will always think of that place as home because of the wonderful experiences I had there, and especially because of the wonderful people who shared their lives with me; providing nurture, encouragement, correction, and love... most of all, love. We all associate

home with a place, but when all is said and done it's really the relationships that we treasure. It's really the people who make a place home.

I'm sure any of you could share similar stories from home; stories that if not similar in plot and characters, are similar in the effect they have had on your life. There is so much in our personal lives for which we can be grateful, you and I; and yet, there is more.

There is, for example, the message of promise and hope Isaiah delivered to the people of Israel upon their return from exile. God had delivered them from the Babylonians, but their longing for home was yet to be fully satisfied, for they returned to find their home in a state of chaos. Their cities were in disarray, and their temple – God's sacred home – was no more. At such a time as this, Isaiah offered hope to the ancient Jews by announcing God's sure and certain promise to create new heavens and a new earth. No more would there be weeping or the cry of distress. No more would children die in their cribs, or lives be cut off in their prime. No cry for aid would go unheard; in fact, even before they called to God, God would answer! God's children would lead peaceful, productive lives, and – how did Isaiah put it? – “The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox...” And, “They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain...”

Isaiah's message offered hope to the ancient Jews and, in fact, continues to offer hope in our day, some two thousand, and five hundred years later. Indeed, how could it fail to inspire hope, this assurance that God is *about to create* new heavens and a new earth; or better yet, that God is *now creating* a world characterized by peace in which we will find our true home? God is about to create... God is now creating. There is a tension between the present and future tenses of these statements that is instructive. It implies that while we are not yet home, we are on the way. We don't live in the ideal world described so eloquently by Isaiah, but we can have faith in its approach, or better, we can have faith in the journey that is leading us there.

Can you envision such a world; a world in which there will be no more tears, and no lives cut tragically short by malice or disease? Can you envision such a world; a world in which labor will be meaningful, and parents will no longer harbor secret fears that they are bringing children into a world without hope? Can you envision such a world and see it as anything more

than a dream? I hope so, for it is no dream world. Say rather that it is the world of our dreams; and though we live in a world that often shatters dreams, we can allow God to work in and through our lives to make this world a reality. We can inch our way toward such a world of peace; for how else is God creating such a world if not through those of us inspired by its vision? One small step at a time – learning to see others and ourselves from God’s perspective, learning to resolve conflict without violence, learning to be compassionate, and to share the earth’s bounty – one small step at a time we can leave behind the brokenness of this world, and approach a world of peace, our true home.

Each year about this time a longing awakens within us, and we begin a journey home. Even as we begin yet another journey home, let us be glad and rejoice; and let us pause to express our gratitude for all the gifts bestowed on our lives: family, friends, freedom, prosperity; and most importantly this highest of hopes that characterizes our faith – to find our true home in a world of peace and goodwill.