SUNDAY, DECEMBER 13, 1987

"REJOICE"

(No. 3 in a Series: Advent Verbs)

I Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1:6-8, 19-23

There are people who approach Christmas with apprehension rather than anticipation; with fears instead of joy. For some it is a sad and lonely season. More people become depressed at this time of year than at any other. Family quarrels increase. Too much drinking. Too little sleep. Frayed nerves. Exhausting schedules. All these combine to take away the joy that is supposed to be evident during this season.

Some people are sad because the holidays remind them of all the people gone from them: Dead parents, grandparents, lost friends, and people far away that they may never see again. There is sadness too because of our own lost better selves of earlier Christmases.

Preparations for the holiday are laborious for many and so expensive that usually joyful people are sometimes reduced to

muttering cranks.

For many adults there is the reality that Christmas can never be Christmas again as it was for them as children. The mystery and the magic are gone. So there is a lot of regretting done at this time of year. There are attempts by parents to recapture the old feelings by spending enormous amounts of money on their children's gifts and sometimes this device works pretty well, but then fades quickly. Threading itself through every emotion is the problem of money--not that there may necessarily be an insufficient amount to handle Christmas bills, but however much there is too often becomes a measuring stick of one's inner sense of worth.

Money also gets involved in one's estimate of others. We suggest our regard for friends and relatives by buying them gifts and every gift requires a decision about price. We would like to get grandmother a coat, but we settle for a sweater. Gift decisions and money decisions add up to tensions.

There is also the unbearable melancholy that afflicts many individuals during this season. This is rooted partly in the misguided notion that everybody is hysterically happy as Christmas approaches and by

comparison we don't feel as happy and we wonder why. Is there something wrong with us?

Maybe we misunderstand the Christmas message. The story of Advent and Christmas have never told us that life has no problems--that there is no darkness in the world. I know of someone who sent out a Christmas card with a quote from St. Augustine, a quote that found the pattern of the cross in the nailed wooden sticks of the infant's crib. Some people told her it was in poor taste, since it mentioned suffering during the season of Christmas.

But there is nothing in the Christmas narrative to make us turn the manger into a Disneyland scene. The Gospel of Matthew tells us of a young couple who had to flee to Egypt soon after the baby was born, and of all the little boy babies being killed in that region of Bethlehem and beyond.

Advent prepares us for the story of the birth of a baby who was the Savior of the world, yet who as a young man was crucified. But it is also the story of that same individual being resurrected--meaning that God's love for all of us can never be killed, or done away with in any manner. That love which became a person in Jesus at Bethlehem can never be extinguished.

Thus it is no accident that when the stories about Jesus' birth took form in the early church, they emphasized the fact that it was night when he was born--the world was in darkness--but at the same time the Christmas narratives tell us that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has never put it out.

Even today that light still shines and the darkness cannot put it out. So no matter how dark the world is, no matter how despairing the problems in your personal life may be, the story of this Advent season is that the light still shines. Even more important, this light does not avoid darkness; it does not gloss over problems, it shines in the darkness and through it. The light overcomes, overpowers the darkness.

It's no wonder that the Apostle Paul could write as he did to the congregation in Thessalonica, "Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

Here we have the third Advent verb--"REJOICE!" Notice especially that we are told to "Rejoice always," and to "give thanks in all circumstances." We do not rejoice only when things seem to be going our way.

We Christians are to rejoice when from all outward appearances there is seemingly nothing to rejoice about. That's because as Christians our rejoicing and our loving stem from a new source, a new force and power in the world and in our lives that is not dependent on the changing circumstances around us.

We all know of course that much rejoicing and love can be natural reactions to pleasant and happy occasions. Good things happen to us. We are united with old friends and family. We get a raise in pay. We are surprised by some unexpected gift. Our children do well. Our grandchildren are the most beautiful in the world. We can have many personal reasons for rejoicing in these times, and we can also have many personal reasons for not rejoicing.

But we are talking here about a kind of rejoicing that does not depend on the circumstances of life around us at any given time. It is here that the gospel begins--where externally caused love and joy run out; when the world around us is not loving to us and does not smoothly greet us. At such times, the Gospel says to us--continue to love, even love your enemies; continue to rejoice, bless those who persecute you. We are invited to rejoice and love at precisely those times

when from a human point of view it seems to make no sense at all.

We Christians are able to rejoice even in the most distressing of times because our faith is that in spite of external circumstances, God's will, God's power will triumph. This is the message of Advent. That's the meaning of the Advent verbs--"Watch!" Watch for the good which is continually coming to you from God. "Comfort!" God's coming to us in Jesus in Bethlehem is good news. And now, "Rejoice!" "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" Shall falling stock market, or an international trade deficit, or a staggering national debt? None of these things nor anything else in all creation can separate us from the love of God.

"Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances."

I suggest to you this morning that one of the most wonderful gifts we Christians have to give to the world, especially at this time of year is "Joy." With our rejoicing, we can give others joy.

This gift of joy is especially needed because there are always people around us who work at destroying the happiness, fun and joy that is present. There are people

who can find something wrong in every situation and they insist on mentioning all the flaws they find. They have not learned, as I said last Sunday, that things in life do not have to be perfect to be good.

A young woman who was having trouble with feelings of depression said that she remembers that as a child her home was a rather gloomy place and there was little time for rejoicing. Everything was always serious and dour. At breakfast one morning, for example, her brothers told her a funny story, and she began to laugh. Her mother, finishing her cup of coffee, admonished her by saying, "Remember the old saying, 'if you laugh before seven, you'll cry before eleven.'"

When this young woman grew up and had a home of her own, she found herself becoming overly serious and humorless. She could not give the gift of joy and had trouble rejoicing even during this season of the year. But she kept working at it and began to make some progress.

Feeling more alive and free, she decided one day that it would be a beautiful thing to give her parents a surprise dinner party in honor of their wedding anniversary. She worked for many days to arrange the party for her parents. She carefully arranged

the guest list, cleaned her house, and prepared a lovely meal. The party was a success. All the guests had a wonderful time. After the party was over, the young woman's father thanked his daughter for the wonderful party and his eyes sparkled with pleasure as he spoke. Finally her mother said, "You shouldn't have gone to all that trouble, dear. It was very nice of you to try. The roast beef was a little well done." And all the joy began to fade away.

This Advent and Christmas season, be a good receiver and giver of joy. So many people need this gift in their lives.

Remember that rejoicing and the fun that goes with it does not mean that we are not taking life seriously. It means that we are not taking life too seriously. Joy is to be a part of life. It is built into creation by God.

What I remember most about the Advent and Christmas season as I was growing up is the pure, unadulterated joy we experienced as a family during this time of year. And most of the rejoicing came not from the gifts we received, but from the pure joy of being together, as brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts, uncles and grandparents.

Beneath this rejoicing was the deeper joy

of an abiding Christian faith. That was its foundation. In fact, I believe that's the trouble with the religion of many people--there is no joy in it, no ecstasy, no hop, skip or jump, just a dutiful trudge.

The Christian, said Augustine once, should be an alleluia from head to foot. Another person wrote--"Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God."

Advent and Christmas mean just that--the holy joy of being aware of God's presence among us in a new and wonderful way, not in a new set of rules, not in some new ideals, but in a person, Jesus. No wonder the angel said to the shepherds, "I bring you good news of a great joy."

So the third verb of Advent is "REJOICE"--but it's more than for Advent, it's for all year round. AMEN.