Sunday, December 23, 1990
**GIFTS THAT JESUS GIVES US (No. 4 in a Series: The Gift of Joy)**
Luke 1:26-38

The story of Christmas according to the Gospel of Luke is, among other things, the story of angels and their joyous announcements. An angel appears to Zechariah, a priest, and tells him that his wife Elizabeth is to have a baby who will be the "preparer of the way" for the Messiah. Zechariah and Elizabeth have been hoping for a child for years — so it is a message of great joy.

Six months later, the same angel appears to a young woman named Mary and tells her that she is to have a child, and this child will be a blessing to all people everywhere. Mary's response is a joyful one once she gets over the surprise of the announcement.

When the child is born to Mary, an angel appears to the shepherds and tells them the good news of the birth in Bethlehem.

The shepherds are at first afraid of the angel. But the angel said, "Do not be afraid; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." (Luke 2:10-11)

"Good news of great joy." The birth of Jesus brings to all of us the gift of joy. Later, as a teacher, Jesus brought joy into the lives of countless people.

Yet there are many people who approach Christmas not with joy but with apprehension and fear. For some, it is a sad and lonely time. It is said that more people become depressed at this time of year than at any other. Family quarrels increase. Too much drinking, too little sleep, frayed nerves, too many parties, and exhausting schedules all combine to take away the fun that could be evident during this season.

Some people are sad and lonely because the holidays remind them of all the people gone from them: dead parents, lost friends, and our own lost better selves of earlier Christmases.

Preparations for the holiday are so laborious and so expensive that some usually happy people are reduced to muttering cranks. The suicide rate goes up in December, and it is related to the ambivalent feelings many individuals have about the Christmas season and what it should mean to them. It's no wonder that one child, age 7, wrote a letter to God in which she said, "Dear God, did you think that Christmas would turn out like this when you started it?"

For some adults, there is the reality that Christmas can never be the kind of Christmas it was for them as children. 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 and grandchildren's gifts, and this vicarious device sometimes works pretty well, but only on a temporary basis.

There is also the unbearable melancholy that afflicts some individuals during this season. This is rooted partly in the misguided notion that everybody else 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?

So this year, during this holiday season, give the gift of joy! So many people need it in their lives. Let's look more carefully at what the gift of joy is and how it can be given.

Giving the gift of joy does not mean that we simply gloss over the problems and suffering in individual lives and in the world at large. The story of Christmas has never implied that life is free of pain or that there is no darkness in the world.

The Gospels tell us of a young couple who had to flee to Egypt as refugees soon after their baby was born and of all the little boy babies being killed in the region of Bethlehem and beyond.

Christmas is the story of the birth of a baby who is the Savior of the world, yet who as a young man was crucified because he was perceived as a threat to those in power. But it is also the story of that same individual being resurrected — demonstrating that God's love for the creation and for all of us can never be killed or done away with in any manner. That love, which became flesh in Jesus at Bethlehem, can never be extinguished. Love is the most powerful force in creation. Remembering that is the basis of our joy.

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 in more ways than one. But at the same time, the Christmas narratives emphasize that the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never put it out and never will. That's another reason for our joy.

Even today, that light still shines, and the darkness cannot put it out. So no matter how dark the world is, no matter how dark the problems in your personal life, the story of Christmas reminds us over and over 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.

There can be no greater reason for joy than this! With his birth, life, death, and resurrection, Jesus has given us the priceless gift of joy. So we can be people of joy, fun, and laughter, and we can give this gift to others.

It's certainly a needed gift, even among those of us who call ourselves Christians. Have you noticed how some church people always seem to be so grim and serious? One child, age 10, wrote a letter to God about it: "Dear God, can't you make church more fun? What about having a few videos?"

Some people take most of the joy out of Christmas in the way in which they receive the gifts given to them. There was a young woman who decided that it would be a beautiful thing to give her parents a surprise dinner party several days before Christmas in honor of their wedding anniversary. She worked for many days to arrange the party. She carefully cleaned the house, arranged the guest list, 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 joy. 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.

This holiday season, be a good receiver of the gifts that come to you, and you will, in this way, be giving the gift of joy in return.

As Christians, we know that the gift of joy is one of God's greatest gifts. We see it expressed in fun and laughter. It is built into creation.

A few Sundays ago, in the first sermon in this series, I mentioned that what I remember most about the Christmas season as I was growing up is the pure, unadulterated fun we had as a family during this time of year. And most of the joy came not from the material gifts we received but from the pure fun of being with each other and from the games we played together — cousins, brothers, sisters, parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles. We received from our family the gift of joy.

Children naturally have fun if we let them. For your Christmas joy, listen to some additional letters from children to God. These and others I've used earlier in this sermon come from a little paperback book, "Dear God: Children's Letters to God," edited by David Heller.

A child, age 9, wrote this letter to God: "Dear God, do you have a few minutes? I have a few things to say. First, thank you for the bike at Christmas. Second, thanks for the snow. Third, how about more holidays?"

Another child, age 9, wrote: "Dear God, what do you do with families that don't have much fun? There's a family on the next block like that. I don't want to get them into trouble. I don't want to say who. See you in church."

"Dear God, what did Adam and Eve do for fun? My mom said they played with toys and ate, but I know better." —Chris, age 9. "Dear God, my dad thinks he is you. Please straighten him out." —Wayne, age 11.

"Dear God, my mom is acting weird because she is getting old. Can you take back a few gray hairs? That would help bring the house back to normal." —Mike, age 9.

"Dear God, thank you for my parents, my sister Anita, and for my grandma and grandpa. They are all real warm and special. I forgive you for my brother Phil. I guess you didn't finish working on him." —Sean, age 12.

"Dear God, when you threw Adam and Eve and all the others out of the garden, that must be when you started to have schools. You must have been plenty mad. Hope this gives you a laugh." —David, age 9.

"Dear God, want to hear a joke? What is red, very long, and you hear it right before you go to sleep? Give up? Answer: A sermon. Your friend, Frank." —Age 11.

Then I came across this Christmas limerick written by an eleven-year-old child:

There was a young woman named White,
Who sang carols with all of her might.
She would ring someone's bell, and warble "Noel,"
Till they begged her to sing "Silent Night."

There's a theological dimension to joy because joy is often associated with play. Playful elements that involve joy and fun are found in all cultures. The intention of play is joy, and

when this intention is realized, we have an experience that transcends our everyday world. So take some time to play during the holidays.

Remember, above all, the Christian faith is one of joy. There was joy surrounding Jesus' birth when the angel announced, "Do not be afraid; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people." There was joy on Holy Thursday, for Jesus said, "These things I have spoken to you that your joy may be full." Jesus spoke of joy when he said, "You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy."

The Apostle Paul reminds us in his letter to the Galatians that one of the fruits of experiencing God's Spirit within us is joy.

This holiday season, receive and give the gift of joy. Have some good laughs. Remember, despite all the darkness and suffering in the world, life is ultimately in God's hands. "Be of good cheer," said Jesus, "I have overcome the world." Amen.