The First Baptist Church, Midland
Isaiah 35:1-10; Philippians 4:4-9
June 26, 2011

An Invitation to Joy
A Sermon by the Rev. John P. Dick
Theme: Christian Joy

I understand that before Montana was nicknamed the *Big Sky Country* it was called *The Treasure State.* Can you guess why? If you think it has something to do with its mountains which were loaded with minerals, especially gold, silver and copper, you would be correct. And as you might imagine, because of the great wealth to be found on that land people were drawn in their eagerness to grow rich. In fact, there are many great stories that have emerged with time related to the fame and foibles of those pioneers.

One in particular is told about the gold fields in and around the town of Bannock. Early on in the rush, a small party of prospectors struck it rich. After months of hardship and struggle, they finally located the vein. But it was so large they needed more equipment to properly mine it. So, before returning to town for that extra equipment each man swore with his life that he would carefully guard their valuable secret. Hence, with this common understanding they returned to Bannock to take care of business. But when they set out on the return journey, over 300 gold seekers followed them. Had someone broken the vow? Had their secret been betrayed? No. *Their beaming faces had given them away.*

Can you imagine being so happy about something that without even a word, people identify your cause. We are given to understand that this is the way it was in the early church. People were so filled with the spirit of Christ that they could easily be chosen out of the crowd. ñSee how they love one another,ò the people said. In other words, their joy was apparent. They had a deep satisfaction in simply being alive and belonging to the family of God.

It has been said, ñThere is no cure for birth and death save to enjoy the interval,ò (George Santayana) and I believe that folksy wisdom is right on target. We have nothing to do with being called into this world and we are constrained to do anything about our ultimate demise because eventually the end will come. So why not earnestly and honestly enjoy the gift of our years however many or few they may be.

I believe we find this philosophy clearly communicated throughout the scriptures. In both the Old Testament and the New there are many, many invitations to enjoy life. Perhaps that is nowhere more evident than in the book of Psalms. **"Let all who take refuge in you rejoice; let them ever sing for you"** it says in the fifth chapter (verse 11). Or what about the message of the ninth chapter: **"I will be glad and exult in you; I will sing praise to your name, O Most High."** (verse 1) I love the assurance of the 13th chapter: **"My heart shall rejoice in your salvation."** (verse 5) And then because it acknowledges lifeôs challenges there is my favorite which unfolds in the 30th chapter: **"Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning."** (verse 5b) You see, there are so many references calling us to live the joyful life and to allow that joy to come bounding out of our faith.

Then, of course, you heard the story Kim read earlier in our service. These words spoke to the day when the redeemed of Israel would return to their homes in Zion. After the horrid experience of being exiled, their moment in the sun was returning and they were filled with joy. You can feel their overwhelming excitement and their grand sense of peace and relief through the authorôs words. They were going home and this meant being reconnected to God. Yes joy is part of the faithful journey. So how do we go about preparing ourselves to experience this joy?

Allow me four suggestions. Firsté In order to honestly and genuinely experience joy we must feel good about ourselves. Life is a gift from God. Never deny that reality. We are the result of the Creatorôs masterful handiwork. **"In the beginning,"** the Bible says, **"God created…"** It also says that the work of his hands relative to the human experiment *was very good!* Now when we look upon ourselves in that light, doesnôt it place within your soul a disposition to rejoice. Unfortunately though, not everyone sees life through this spiritual lens.

Sometimes folks are defeated by the circumstances of the day and the burdens carried cause them to emphasize the disappointments and heartaches rather than the victories and the joys. And this can lead to bitterness and complaint which, if allowed to go unchecked, can destroy oneôs spirit.

But this does not have to be. Paul addressed this problem by calling upon people of faith to leave this kind of attitude behind. *Put aside the defeats,* he is saying, *and be joyful in your accomplishments.* And more to the point he is encouraging us to focus upon **whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable… if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.** Go down this road and you will feel good about yourselfé guaranteed. This is one way to find our joy

Suggestion #2 can be defined in one word: Optimism! When we are joy-filled we live with the spirit of optimism rather than pessimism.

Jesus, you know, was an optimist. He lived to seize the glory of every moment. He didnôt fear what life would bring next but rather welcomed each new situation and used it to the glory of God. He never tired of healing the sick or feeding the poor. He never tried to avoid societyôs suffering masses, but saw in everyone a blossoming personality who could live to praise God. As we seek joy within, we are called to do the same. And what a wonderful outlook optimism can shape.

Take George for example. It was his first job as a landscape contractor and he was called to remove a large oak stump from a farmer's field. He was also was using dynamite for the first time and was more than a little nervous. But the farmer was watching so George garnered his courage and carefully went about calculating the size of the stump, the proper amount of dynamite, and where to place it.

Finally, when George was ready he and the farmer moved to the detonator behind his pickup truck. With a silent prayer, he pushed the plunger down. The stump gracefully rose into the sky, flew majestically through the air and then landedé right on top of the cab on his truck.

George, with some surprise, gazed at the ruined cab but finally said with confidenceé ñWow! That was so close. With a little more practice Iôm gonna hit the bed every timeé ò

When we face adversity, do we look at the crushed cab and give in to despair, depression and discouragement? Or do we see how close to the bed weôve come and express joy and optimism? (Tim Riter, Deep Down (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1995), 51) Attitude truly does control the way we look at life and the way we feel. And a Christlike optimistic attitude really will brighten the day.

Then, thereôs a third ingredient in this recipe for joy. It is directly related to the way we believe. And I want to phrase it as a question: How do you see your faith? Is it a divine may or a grim must? Are you the kind of person who sees faith as a tightly regulated lifestyle where belief in God is translated into a long list of donôtsé where life is strictly ordered by the law? I have a hunch youôre not because if you were, youôd probably be in another church. Rather, itôs my guess that most of us feel a grand sense of freedom growing out of our relationship with Christ.

Frankly, if I had to look upon my faithful journey as a grim must I would be out of the church. I wouldnôt be able to stand those kinds of constraints. When Jesus promises us that *we will know the truth and the truth will set us free* (John 8:32), he is talking about being freed from the legalism which so often sets fierce boundaries around the way we liveé legalism which drains the peaceful fulfillment which comes from knowing God and responding to God in ways that we feel called. It is freedom that gives meaning and creates joy out of that meaning. Yes, life in faith is a divine may rather than a grim must and therein we rejoice.

Finally, our last point grows out of our resurrection theology. Do you have a resurrection story in your life beyond that beautiful Easter narrative captured in the gospels? Have you had one of those experiences in which you have risen beyond some serious challenge?

To be sure, life isnôt always perfect. Sometimes itôs downright painful and disappointing. But this doesnôt mean we canôt find reason to rejoice. This is what Paul is talking about in these beloved words from Philippians. **"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say Rejoice. Don't worry about anything but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."** Understand that weôre not in this life without spiritual support so we do not have to spend our days worrying. Instead we turn to God and trust in His ability to see us through whatever may fall our way. For God will bring something great out of something good or something not so good.

Last week I had a wonderful chance to talk with Denny Zeiss and we spoke of his grandson, Jayden. Many are aware of this little guyôs incredibly challenging health issues. Yet in the midst of his anguish, Denny said to me, ñitôs okay. Whatever happens, God is with us. Weôve already seen two or three miracles and weôre just holding on hoping for another.ò

This is what you call a resurrection storyé itôs the saintly ability to see God and experience his compassion in all life circumstances. Itôs easy to do that when everything is going well. But itôs kind of hard to bring this same faith to the table when life is offering a harsh

dose of reality. When we grow through those situations of life confronting death with the certain knowledge that there will be a better day, we are a resurrection story.

Let me close with one more illustration and this time itôs a video. In 2008, there was a horrible earthquake in China which claimed the lives of more than 69,000 people. Though it was centered in Sichuan Province, it was felt from Shanghai to Beijing. In other words, it reached more than 1,000 miles in all directions. After that tragedy, a young American woman named Abigail Washburn traveled to China. Abby is a vocalist and an extraordinary musician who has a passion for the people of China. She has traveled there with her music on several occasions and at one point in her life was planning to go to law school in Shanghai.

But on this occasion, it was the tragedy of an earthquake that drew her and she made her way about the country playing music to help those who were suffering. Toward the end of her travels, she entered a village that had been decimated. There werenôt many who survived and all the homes and buildings were destroyed. And there in the midst of the rubble, Abby saw a little girl sitting and singing an old Chinese folk song. It was in a rare dialect, Abby said, and there really arenôt exact English words to translate the message. But the essence of this little girlôs song was simpleé *We will be okay… we will continue on… we will be happy again.* Now that is what you call a resurrection story clearly demonstrating our resurrection theology.

Well Abby took that song and brought it back to America giving it a new audience with the hope of never letting that little girlôs message die. She calls it *Sala.* A video was taken during the recordingé I hope you enjoy it as much as I do every time I listen and realize the resurrection message it is expressing. *We will be okay… we will continue on… we will be happy again…* Here is the link to the video.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fUw1fDtilq0&feature=channel_video_title

Feel good about yourselfé be optimisticé embrace the divine mayé celebrate your resurrection story. When you do these things, you will be triumphant in any life circumstance. Or as our little friend in China saidé ñYou will be okayé you will continue oné you will be happy again.ò

Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I will say, REJOICE!

Amen and AMEN!