

- The third reading is from the gospel, according to Saint Luke, the second chapter. When the time came for purification according to the law of Moses, Mary and Joseph brought Jesus up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. As it is written in the law of the Lord that every first born male shall be designated as holy to the Lord. And they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons. Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. This man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came in to the temple, and when the parents brought in Jesus to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took Jesus in to his arms and praised God, saying, Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word. For my eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples: a light, for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people, Israel. The child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about Jesus. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother, This child is destined to cause the falling and the rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed. So that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed, and a sword will pierce your own soul, too. There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. Anna was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage. Then, as a widow, to the age of 84. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. Coming up to Mary and Joseph, she began to praise God and to speak about the child to all there who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. When Joseph and Mary had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and in the favor of God was upon him. This is the word of the Lord.

- Thanks be to God

- They had waited for a child, prayed for the gift of a baby. The test. The waiting, the hoping, the disappointment. And then, praise God, the news was good and after a nine month wait, she gave birth to a lovely baby girl. Rejoice! But not completely. A friend told them in their joy, "Well, now comes the hard part. "Raising a child, enduring a teenager, paying for college. "Each day, as a parent, "you have less control over your child's life, "and there's just so many dangers "for children these days. "So many distractions, I tell ya, now is the hard part." To their surprise, it was not yet time to rejoice. December graduation from college, Well, congratulations, 16 plus years of education successfully behind you. You got to be filled with pride. Rejoice! Not necessarily. Because now it is time for getting in to graduate school, and then getting out. You're not finished yet. Not by a long shot. You better postpone that post-graduation party. It's not yet time for noise makers and party hats. There're responsibilities and duties. It's not yet time to rejoice. A Christmas wedding! It's a beautiful setting particularly this time of year with the poinsettias, and it's just perfect. The church so beautifully decorated for the season just, what a perfect beginning for a marriage. But of course nothing is perfect. Marriage! Marriage means responsibility and setting goals together, and working to achieve those goals. A wedding is a fine event, but marriage, oh that's another matter. Lots of marriages

don't work out so well. Even though they start with much promise. They fall, they fail, they break apart. They end in sorrow. Better to wait a few years before pronouncing the word perfect upon this union. Let's keep the couple on probation. There comes the seven year itch, and then there's the 10 year hurtle to get over together. It's not yet time to rejoice. The incarnation, God with us, dwelling among us in the flesh. We had waited. We had waited down through the dim millennia for deliverance. We had prayed with the prophets. God come down here and save us! Or show us glory! But mostly what we got were just hints, glimpses. We got promises. And it is of the nature of a promise that everything is future oriented. There's this great gap in a promise between the expectation and the fulfillment. I shall come, God promised. I shall not leave you desolate. I shall bear my strong arm to save! And still we waited. We waited and waited. Then, in the middle of a star lit night in Bethlehem, there was a baby's cry. Light shone from the stable out behind the inn. The heavens were split open with sounds of angelic joy. Music, such had never been heard before. Heavenly messengers spoke glad tidings. Wise men came to worship. Joy! Promises fulfilled! Pledges made good! Deliverance, salvation, joy! Joy. But Christmas is only a day old. And already you can feel the music begin to dissipate. We had put away the twisted ribbons and the wrapping paper. Today there will be leftovers for lunch. Relatives from the East baring gifts have returned home by another way. And what of the joy? January is bills to pay, and the darkest days of winter. And if January the 1st comes, can April 15th be that far away? So we think, well, maybe we move too quickly to the victory songs. Maybe we should've waited to claim fulfillment. Perhaps there are more promises yet to be made good upon. See! There is something about us that makes joy difficult. Joy! Complete, unrestrained, unconstrained, uninhibited joy is hard for us. We are just full of reservations. Claims of fulfillment. Always have to answer to hard realities. Christmas card sentimentality must answer to sober pragmatism. It may not yet be time to rejoice. What is there about us that makes joy so difficult? Maybe it's because you think back on your life and how many times have you gotten pumped up? Only to be deflated and let down? That invigorating new job, the perfect job becomes, in just a month, just another day at the office. Maybe we learn to defend ourselves by not allowing ourselves to become too joyful. You live a while. You go around the block a few times. You learn to hold back. Prudence requires restraint. A student awhile back telling me, she is just the most perfect person in the world. This is love. This is just wonderful. I want to spend my life with her. I just can't get her out of my head. I ask him. I said, "You didn't date much in high school, did you?" (crowd laughs) This has got to be the first time. If you noticed with children, it is of characteristic of young children that they just, they specialize in unrestrained joy and exuberance. But as a child grows up, there is this diminution of delight. You learn, as you grow older, that the time is rarely right for full throated joy. Church. Church is bad about this, I'll admit it. You come here on Sunday, you hope to get a word of encouragement. Some great affirmation that God is good, that life is worth living. That you're going to make it through the week. But I, as your preacher, stand up, and I say, Wait a minute, not so fast! You're not yet to the land of rejoicing. I don't care what the hymns say. You got these bad habits. You got these little dark secrets. All the ways that you disappoint; you fall short. You're not ready to rejoice, it's not yet time. Pull up those tulips and plant turnips. Exchange those patent leather pumps for sensible Rockports. The end of the service today, I've got a baptism. Baby that I helped create. Married the couple a couple of years ago, they're back here at the altar for the baptism of their child. And they are so excited, it's their first child. They are exuberant. And I stand up there, and I stare this baby in the face in the baptism service, and I say, all right. Are you prepared to resist injustice, and evil, and oppression, in whatever guises they present themselves? The answer is: I will. It's just discipleship, it's this burden. Too many of my sermons can be summarized by the phrase 10 reasons you're not really a

Christian even though you thought you might be when you came to the service. (crowd laughs) Church specializes in deflating the enthusiastic and in puncturing the exuberance of the blissful. Church is where we come to be bathed in this weekly should, ought, must. A party? Oh, not so fast, you're not ready to rejoice. There's still more for you to do. There's still more for God to do. But not today. Not this Sunday. When the epistle speaks of the fullness of time. Paul has been going on to the Galatians, hammering them for their inadequacies. He begins a letter to them: You stupid Galatians. I've only been away a couple of months, and how dumb can you be? You've already fallen back in your, and he hammers on them for a couple of chapters, and then he gets here, and he says but, but in the fullness of time God sent his son so that you might no longer be slaves but you would be children of God. The fullness of time. The fullness of time! What a great way to speak of the incarnation in Bethlehem of God Almighty. The fullness of time. Time's fulfillment. Time before Christ is for us time of yearning, and reaching, and wishing, and hoping. Time of desire not yet assuaged and hope not fulfilled. The theologian, Karl Barth, spoke of the Old Testament for all of its beauty and grandeur and places. He says it is the finger pointing into the void. You heard, didn't you, during the Sundays of Advent, the Hebrew prophet speak of darkness and of sin, and desire, and yearning? The pain of exile. The hopelessness of homelessness. But not today. Not this Sunday. Not this Sunday when old Anna at last sees what her tired, geriatric eyes have been scanning the horizon for her whole life to see. Not today. Not today when the prophet Isaiah proclaims an exchange of ashes for garlands and green shoots springing up in the dry desecrated desert. Not today. Today is one of those days when even for preachers, it's just impossible to get around the joy. The pure joy. Joy is full, large, unrestrained. And I'll tell you why. Because today you see it is joy not of our devising. If there is to be hope for us, for us, at the end of history's maybe most bloody century, if there is to be hope for us, it's gonna have to come from the outside. It will not come from digging down and seeking human potential. It's going to have to be a joy that comes not of our devising. It's joy that comes when desperate prayers have been answered, and hope is fulfilled, and dreams made reality. It's joy that can only come as gift of God. Not as something of our own making. Sad what passes for joy around here. Particularly next week. New Year's. One of the dumbest holidays of the year. People get together, run out in to the streets, and try to look pleased that they're a year older. That the calendar has flipped over. You can't feel joy at an occasion like that except through chemical inducement. (crowd laughs) Joy, real joy, it cannot be self or chemically induced! It's got to come from the outside as a gift. Real joy is always reflexive. Something that is received. Joy comes to us as a baby. God with our face. God with us. God comes to stand beside us and be for us in order that we might truly be for God. Today in this post-Christmas sermon, you will note, I've got absolutely nothing for you to do. I have no good work to urge upon you. I don't want you to improve or try to do better. Or clean up your social attitudes. Or get out there and feel something inspirational. I don't think I have once in this sermon invoked those three favorite homiletical words: Should, ought, must, you gotta do. Only thing I want is to invite you to rejoice. To permit you to praise, to encourage you to carol. Time is full, tomorrow bright. The future is light, 'cause we're not alone. To our surprise, and great delight, something's afoot at Bethlehem. God among us. Rejoice!