My sermon for this coming Sunday, with these ecumenical lections:
Is.65.17-25, Ps.98, L.21.5-19

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THE CHURCH JOYFUL

A church, this church, is as joyful as it intends to be; & it is as attractive, & only as attractive, as it is joyful; & it is as healthy & useful to God, & only as healthy & useful to God, as it is joyful & attractive. I invite you, then, to think with me about what joy is & isn't, & how it comes about, & what a privilege & responsibility it is for each of us & all of us together as we lives our lives, & our church life, in this sinful, sorrowful, sad world for which our Lord Jesus Christ lived & died & rose to newness of life.

1 Have you heard this old dour joke? "People say, 'Cheer up, things could be worse.' So I cheered up & sure enough, things got worse." Joy is not cheer, though the joyful are often cheerful. Joy is deeper than cheer, & does not depend on "things" either as circumstances or as possessions. Joy is unavailable to those who demand that "things" get better. Life is difficult, hard, & for each of us--& for each church--"things" sometimes get worse; & we ourselves are only playthings of things if our inner moods merely ride the rollercoaster of outer happenings. But God gives us, in life's storms, the power to control what Robt.Frost called our "inner weather" ("Tree at my window"). "The joy of the Lord is your strength" (Neh.8.10, connected with Bible-reading).

2 It should be no surprise that the Book that helps us to see most deeply into misery is the Book that offers us the highest vistas of joy. No surprise to us Christians, whose Lord Jesus, "for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross" (Heb.12.2; the next v. says "Keep your mind on Jesus. Then you won't get discouraged & give up"). Let's see how this works out in our ecumenical lections for this morning. (1) Ps.98 calls us to pay attention to what's going *right* in our lives & in the world. You don't have to be in the news business to know that there's more $ in telling folks what's going wrong. But you are the lords & ladies of your eyeballs & your earholes: you can choose, & therefore are responsible for choosing, what gets your attention & so gets you. What this Psalmist was alert to was God's "faithful love" & "saving power" as seen, he says "everywhere on earth." If that's what we're noticing day by day, a perpetual song of joy is singing itself inside us, & like an artesian well it naturally bubbles up into our awareness as songs, ever new songs, of grateful praise to God. So this Psalmist begins with "Sing a new song to the Lord!" Joy seeks to be shared, so witness (evangelism, sharing the "good news" of the gospel) is normal: "Tell everyone on this earth to sing joyful songs in praise to the Lord! Sound the trumpets and horns, & celebrate with joyful songs for our Lord & King!" This joy-singer gets so ecstatic that he calls on all nature, all creatures, to join the symphony of joy (as Beethoven's 9th, last, symphony ends with the "Hymn to Joy"). (2) Is.65.17-25, our 2nd lection, preaches anticipatory joy, joy now in view & vision of a future in which, as we learn in the Lord's Prayer, God's will will be done "on earth as it is in heaven." I'll read it in CEV (Contemporary English Version, some alt.). Says the Lord, "I am creating new heavens & a new earth. Celebrate & be glad forever! I am creating a Jerusalem full of joyful people." No war, disease, misery. Even the animals are nonviolent! (3) L.21.5-19 speaks of troubles ahead, resistance to the gospel witness, the destruction of securities we shouldn't have relied on, &, again, the final joy, which when we envision it is also a present joy: Jesus says "You will be saved by being faithful to me."

3 As our Lord's resurrection ensued on the other side of the Cross, God intends, & by grace enables, our joy to spring forth out of our humiliations. (Geo.Orwell said that 90% of human experience is humiliation, so that gives all of us--not just Clinton--plenty of opportunity to come to repentance, conversion, newness of life.) Woody Allen, that master of cinema humiliation, presents us with a gallery of characters all yearning for joy & all stopped, stuck, in humiliation. Pray for Woody! Oprah Winfrey, whom TIME called one of this century's 100 most influential persons, did not know humiliation till, in the film based on Toni Morrison's great novel "Beloved," she imagined herself a slave. Through that, she came to joy, & had this to say on "Charlie Rose" (10.30.98) as she expressed her new-found joy:

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"I want to experience the vision that God would have for me. And to do it with a sense of grace & humility, from that grace of God. That is what I want people to see in me, & want for themselves." That vision & its joy: do you have it in your life? You can. Do we have it in our church? We can. We can know it, & live it, & share it. The church that has it, the church it has, has a future.

4 JOY is so much the tonic, the key note of our Christian Faith that it pervades everyone & everything Christian. Let's look at the hymns we're singing right now in this worship. I'll read them to bring out the joy notes. They are (in the 1974 UCC HYMNAL) 12 ("O be joyful in the Lord"--& the familiar facing one: "Joyful, joyful, we adore thee"); 216 ("Deck thyself, my soul, with gladness"); 156 ("Rejoice, ye pure in heart"). Every night in our devotions Loree & I study some great hymn, & their wisdom & joy refresh our souls, helping us rise from sullen earth & sing praises at heaven's gate. There's a clue: if you're short on joy, study the great hymns.

5 And another clue: "Rejoice in the **world**; if you hallow it with your whole being, it will lead you to rejoice in God" (Buber). The world as God made it, not things. (A Quaker troped an Eng. romantic poet: "Our world is so full of a number of things / That's it's very surprising when somebody sings.") The world begins with one's own body. When I was young, I consulted my body & it said "Joy!" Now, in my 80s, when I consult my body, it says "Ouch!" Your body, said St.Francis of Assisi, is only a donkey; but you are to thank God for it, & be as joyful with it as you can manage, till it can carry you no further. Next to your body, that in the world you should most joy in is the one dearest to you. (My book FLOW OF FLESH, REACH OF SPIRIT is dedicated to Loree, "on whom I have never looked without joy." If she dies on me, will the joy be gone? Not gone, but transmuted. When with gratitude to God I draw her out of my memorybank, the joy will be there with interest--the only bank which, the more you draw out, the more you have in. "I thank God," said Paul at the beginning of Philippians, that prison letter whose dominant mood is joy, "I thank God upon every remembrance of you.") Is your family next on the list of your joys in the world (read all about joy in the three scenes of L.15)? Where is our church on the list? If it's high, if you bring your joy to church, you weigh on the side of our being "the church joyful." God stays away (says the Talmud) when we are gloomy: who wants to be with gloomy people? But if we set our souls & our minds to "rejoice always" (1Thes.5.16), God is happy to come to us. So are other people.

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