Sermon for Advent III—Year B 2011
Laughing in Our Sleep

Have you ever laughed out loud while you were dreaming?
I ask because I read an article this past week where the author claims
to have laughed out loud in his sleep.
He can’t remember the part of the dream that made him laugh
nor can he really remember much of the dream—
All he really remembers is waking up laughing in the middle of the night.
Now that’s the kind of dream I wish I would have!
He says he can’t remember ever having that experience before but frankly,
I find it hard to believe.
Screaming or crying in our sleep—
now that is far more common and even believable, right?
But, laughing in our sleep?

Yet we just sang a few moments ago the words of Psalm 126—

*We were like those who dream
our mouths were filled with laughter
and our tongue with shouts of joy*

If I could laugh in my sleep, would I be taking seriously the words of Paul
who tells us this morning—*rejoice always and give thanks in all circumstances*?

Looking at the readings for this morning and
knowing that the third Sunday of Advent has been traditionally called
“Gaudete” or “rejoice” Sunday—
(mainly because in medieval worship the first scripture chanted in Latin
on this day consisted of Paul’s words found in his letter to the Philippians:
“Gaudete in Domino semper…”
“Rejoice in our God always, again I say rejoice.”
Rejoice: the coming of Christ is growing nearer!)
All of this made me think I had to take a closer look at all this.

In the six short verses of the psalm we sang, the word joy appears three times and
together with Paul’s “rejoice always”—
well, as I contemplated these texts this past week
I wondered whether this was all a little too cheerful, too “Pollyanna” for our age.
The news this week did not present many uplifting stories;
most of it was about scandal, abuse, murder and economic distress.
In the face of all that, somehow “shouts of joy” don’t seem appropriate.
It occurred to me that it might have seemed that way to the psalmist’s early readers, too. Crisis after crisis plagued the people of that age (and every age before and since), too. Whether the predicament was the threat of war, drought and famine, poverty, or the same types of personal suffering we all experience, many of those readers probably would have related more to the “tears” and “weeping” parts of this psalm.

And, yet, that is exactly the point.

The psalmist isn’t naïve. Nor is Paul for that matter. They both know first hand the brutalities and the sufferings of our human condition. The psalmist bases his prayer-song on the national disaster and lost fortunes of the people of Israel and he laments on behalf of those who had been deported to captivity. We "sow in tears" and "go out weeping," the psalmist says, but nevertheless we dream of laughter and joy.

Isaiah, too, speaks of ruined cities and national grief, but prophesies about a time when gladness and beauty will overtake disgrace and despair. And in this week’s gospel, John acknowledges the darkness of the world, but celebrates the light that darkness cannot overcome.

The psalmist and the story of the man who laughed in his sleep remind me of a better way to live than the one of chronic anxiety. (And lately I really need to be reminded of this!) It isn't true that joy is unjustified in our unjust world. Nothing is too wonderful to be true, the novelist Ron Hansen once observed. There are more things that are true than human suffering, namely, that God speaks and acts.

In his Advent Credo, Jesuit priest and peace activist, Father Daniel Berrigan tells us that there are greater things that are true than injustice and futility:

*It is not true* that creation and the human family are doomed to destruction and loss — *This is true:* For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life;

*It is not true* that we must accept inhumanity and discrimination, hunger and poverty, death and destruction — *This is true:* I have come that they may have life, and that abundantly.
It is not true that violence and hatred should have the last word, and that war and destruction rule forever —
This is true: Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, his name shall be called wonderful councilor, mighty God, the Everlasting, the Prince of peace.

It is not true that we are simply victims of the powers of evil who seek to rule the world
This is true: To me is given authority in heaven and on earth, and lo I am with you, even until the end of the world.

It is not true that we have to wait for those who are specially gifted, who are the prophets of the Church before we can be peacemakers —
This is true: I will pour out my spirit on all flesh and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions and your old men shall have dreams.

It is not true that our hopes for liberation of humankind, of justice, of human dignity, of peace, are not meant for this earth and for this history —
This is true: The hour comes, and it is now, that the true worshipers shall worship God in spirit and in truth.

Like the psalmist, Berrigan knows what it means to sow in tears and to go out weeping. Someone once asked Father Berrigan how many times he had been jailed for the gospel, and he replied, "not enough." Father Berrigan knows that beyond the brutal realism of tears and weeping there are dreams of joy and laughter.

In her memoir called Mighty Be Our Powers (published just this year), the Nobel laureate Leymah Gbowee describes how one night she had her own dream while sleeping on her office floor in Liberia:
"I didn't know where I was, “ she wrote. “Everything was dark. I couldn't see a face, but I heard a voice, and it was talking to me — commanding me: 'Gather the women to pray for peace!'”
At 5 A.M. Gbowee woke up shaking, feeling like she had heard the voice of God.

Now peace was a distant dream for Liberians after fourteen years of savage civil war from 1989–2003.

By some estimates, 10% of the population had been slaughtered. Twenty-five percent had fled the country. Starvation, systematic rape, torture, mutilation, and President Charles Taylor's cocaine-crazed child soldiers had traumatized the nation. Schools and hospitals closed. There was no water, electricity or phone service.
Later that morning, Gbowee related her dream to the women at her Lutheran church. Sister Esther Musah, an evangelist, led them in prayer: "Dear God, thank you for sending us this vision. Give us your blessing, Lord, and offer us Your protection and guidance in helping us to understand what it means."

What it meant was the start of the Liberian women's peace movement that ended the civil war.

About twenty Lutheran women began to gather every Tuesday at noon to pray. Sometimes they fasted. They invited other Christian denominations to join them. At one meeting a woman named Asatu spoke up: "I'm the only Muslim here, and we want to join this peace movement."
"Praise the Lord!" shouted the Christian women.

And so Muslim and Christian women formed an alliance. They shared their horror stories. Training sessions and workshops followed. They passed out brochures and marched to city hall. Three days a week for six months they visited the mosques, the markets, and the churches of Monrovia and they cried out in the wilderness of the Liberian Civil War: "Liberian women, awake for peace!"

In the end, the women forced President Charles Taylor into peace talks in Ghana, and then in Ghana the women barricaded the men in their plenary hall until they signed peace accords.

After the 2003 accords, they were instrumental in disarming the country, registering voters, and electing Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as the first woman head of state in Africa.

Who were these women?
In answer to that question, Gbowee says, "I will say they are ordinary mothers, grandmothers, aunts, sisters."
They sowed bitter tears.
They went out weeping.
And I say they were empowered through God’s promises and prayer to act on their God-given dreams of peace, joy, and laughter.

Perhaps now we might understand better why theologian David Ford asserts: “Joy may be a greater scandal than evil, suffering and death.”
Joy tests us just as suffering tests us.
Joy tests us by inviting us to be transformed by it.

In the end, perhaps that is why, more than any other reason, I found it so hard to believe in the possibility of laughing out loud in one’s sleep. Perhaps you do too?
After all the possibility of joy exposes us to repeated disappointments—
Let’s be as honest as the psalmist—The world is full of deceitful promises of joy.
The invitation to be transformed by joy requires trust,
even surrender, and such trust exposes us to massive risk.

And yet, Paul says (and really its what all of scripture tells us) is this:
*We were created for joy.*
Not the transitory joy of tinsel and red bows of a single season,
as charming as they may be.
No, we were created for nothing less than God’s own everlasting joy—
the *shalom* of divine mercy, compassion, and reconciliation for us and for all people.

This *is* the very essence of hope, the source of all our joy—today and always.

And now I say to all of you:
“Lutheran men and women of Redeemer and Holy Trinity,
it is time to awake!
It is time to awake and claim our anointed identities as ones
who testify to the Light that no darkness can overcome,
to laugh and to share such joy as this and
in turn bring into being God’s liberating grace!”