

The Congregational Church in South Glastonbury  
Sermon – December 11, 2005  
“Clothed With the Garments of Salvation”

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11  
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South Glastonbury  
Connecticut

Tucked into the sixty first chapter of Isaiah is this little hymn of rejoicing. The prophet sings, “I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exalt in my God; for God has clothed me with the garments of salvation.” There are a few more verses, but that’s the gist of it: With my whole being I will praise God, for God has blessed me with the gift of salvation.”

I read this little praise hymn and I began to wonder whether I have ever really thrown my whole self, my whole being into anything. I began to fear that there has always been a hesitation, a holding back, a perceptible reserve. I began to long for the freedom to do this, freedom to let go, freedom to take the proverbial plunge, to channel all of my energy, all of my spirit, all of my voice into a single, outrageous expression of praise to God. What would that look like? What would that sound like?

In my head, I have this picture of Mr. Louis Armstrong blasting away on his trumpet. Every ounce of air has been released from his lungs, and his breath is forced through a brass mouth piece. His forehead has broken into a sweat and his cheeks are exploding with mighty gusts of New Orleans jazz. He steps down off the stage, heads up the aisle playing “When the Saints Go Marching In,” and the entire audience is following him around the auditorium kicking up their heels and clapping their hands, singing with all their might, “Lord, I want to be in that number, when the saints go marching in.” Maybe THAT’S what it would look like; maybe that’s what it would sound like.

In my head, I have a recent memory of Aaron Lewis' ordination at the Mount Olive Church on North Main Street in Hartford. My friend, Bob, and I sat in the back row, trying to look invisible. The drummer started drumming; the choir kicked in, the soloist belted out a hymn, and this guy named Roberto sprang up from his chair, lunged to the front chancel area, and danced with both legs and both feet and both arms and both hands and all of himself! Can you picture Roberto? No holding back! It was a praise dance, rejoicing with all of his being! I was envious of his freedom! I wondered what it would take to get me up there, to get me to throw all of myself into one unqualified expression of exaltation!

Isaiah just slips this little praise hymn into the text. "My whole being shall exalt in my God!" It's just that there are times when we can't help ourselves; we just have to sing! We introverts look around and hope no one is listening. We hope no one is watching us make a fool of ourselves. But all of us have this urge from time to time, to just let loose, to let the joy bubble up from our bones and escape out through our mouths and our limbs.

Isaiah has had one of those experiences of salvation, one of those moments of knowing he's been made whole, knowing he's been made clean, knowing he's been forgiven. He doesn't give us the specifics, only that he feels as if God has clothed him with a robe of righteousness, and for a few moments...all is right with the world. And all he can do, in that moment, is to sing a few alleluias!

I do cherish those moments! They are the moments that make a believer out of me! They are moments of grace.

Last week, I enjoyed the final days of my vacation time for 2005. I drove up to Great Barrington, Massachusetts where I had only one day warm enough for bike riding. I cycled along route 41 and turned right at the blinking yellow light. And there it was!

The Guthrie Chapel! The church building where Arlo Guthrie composed Alice's Restaurant! I must say that a smile came over my face and I felt a surge of energy run through my veins. In the twinkling of an eye, I was

transported backwards ten years in time, sitting on the living room rug with our son, Russell, who had found our stash of 33 & 1/3 rpm records and was asking about Alice.

“Who’s this Alice person, and where is her restaurant?”

In that instant, I could see Russ’ freckles and I could hear his young, boyish voice. And all of the love that has ever existed between the two of us was available to me right then, right there, on the side road just beyond the blinking yellow light. I wanted to sing an alleluia! I looked around to make sure nobody was in earshot, and I let one loose!

Two or three days later, out for a walk along Main Street in Great Barrington, I spotted a flyer in a store window. It read, “Lunch every Wednesday; no fee, no questions asked; Guthrie Chapel.”

I stood there and stared at that poster. And I can not explain to you why or how, but I just wanted to sing. I was bowled over, in that moment, by the generosity of people I’ve never met, by the compassion of people I will never know. I was just so glad to see the evidence of people reaching out to people. I tell you, I felt a mysterious wholeness, as if the garment of salvation had been wrapped around my shoulders.

This morning, we lit the Advent candle of joy. Is it not joy we experience in those precious moments of wholeness when it is clear we have been forgiven; when it is clear we have been healed; when it is clear we have been made whole; when it seems God has draped around our shoulders the garment of salvation?

Advent is a season for calling to mind these holy encounters when the only response we can imagine is to sing with all our being, rejoicing in the goodness of God. That is one way to imagine preparing for the celebration of the birth of Christ. And I lift this up for us all, in the greatest of hope. Amen!