

## Rejoice that I am Going

6 Easter C, 5/22/22

Emphasis, in speaking out loud, whether to many or to few, is everything. Note how differently the title of this sermon, taken straight from the words written in red, sounds, depending on which word one emphasizes:

*Rejoice* that I am going. – Do not be sad; do not weep. Be happy for me, and for yourselves. Everything will be fine when I’m gone.

Rejoice that *I* am going. – Be glad that it’s me – we all know it didn’t have to be. God help us; they or you could’ve picked someone else.

Rejoice that I am *going*. – As in, be happy I’m not staying. It’s for the best; you’ll see, if you don’t already.

Rejoice that I *am* going. – One might as well add “after all.” Be glad that I’m not only leaving, but leaving now. I thought about giving it a miss – or, perhaps I’d have stayed longer, but I can tell by the look in your eyes...

Which way did he mean it? Does the sentence have the same range of inflection-driven meanings in the original Greek? In Aramaic, the nearly-dead-now language that Jesus used? Sort-of, in the first case – one wants to add, “and in the ablative” – and I have no idea in the second. I wasn’t there. You weren’t there. Nobody we know was there. We don’t even know who was there, only that they didn’t have a tape recorder or a wax cylinder or anything, really, to record the words he said as he said them – in red? Do people really speak in that, or any of the colors of the wind? It’s a good reminder that, until very recently, all that our species had to remember spoken words by were their own ears. Actually, what they had was the brain those ears were connected to (or that we hope they were connected to) and the memories it made but could not easily share, about what someone said and how, and what it

felt like to hear them say it just that way. How did he say it, again? “Rejoice that I am going.” It’s been such a long time that I can’t be sure, not really; sorry.

Which means that words must do what sounds cannot. Words written must convey how they are to sound, which is a large part of what they want us to take them to mean, except sometimes you really can’t tell. In this instance, I really can’t tell.

One thing I can tell, and probably should have already. Jesus is not saying “rejoice” here as a command, but as the money piece of an “If you loved me, you would...” clause. This sort of thing always sounds manipulative. “If you really loved me, you’d take out the trash” or “...not move that queen” in chess, or “...not go near that queen” on the street or wherever. (I mean that strictly in the sense of not approaching royalty not personally known to you.) “If you loved me,” that is, “you would let HM troop her own colour and stay home where you belong, safe from the madding crowd.” And who among us has not considered, after the week that was and the weekend before it, whether any public space is safe, in a country that by some accounts has more guns than people as well as less political will to do something about that than the good Lord gave a goose who catches her gander taking a gander at some other gander’s blushing bride. To hear her squawk at him down by the lake this week, the May sun shining and goslings everywhere, and then these two, her with wings outstretched and how they lean those necks into you when they’ve have all of you they’re gonna take, and him just hopping and flapping, trying to hot-wing it out of the way, “It wasn’t me, babe. I never even looked at her, I swear. I’m just trying to get across this here stone path before the fat dude with the snake stick gets any closer.” But she wasn’t having it, no, not this time, and the last I saw of them was them taking it into the water to see if splashing about it would help resolve the matter. Rejoice that I am going, indeed – heck, I rejoiced that we all were going to soon be elsewhere. Safer, too.

Now, that goose was motivated by jealousy, not hate – that is, the instinctive equivalent of envy, a quick-fire “this one’s mine and you ain’t having ‘em” reaction, much as if someone had tried to grab her goslings or her food – and you can see her point, to a point. Anger, too – “how dare you hurt me, even if you weren’t exactly planning on it,” which is a sort of, “If you loved me, you would...” dialed up to 11. One can empathize with that, to a point. But shooting up a grocery store you drove three hundred miles to in Buffalo just because that’s the closest place you could know for sure you’d find Black people living their lives and doing nothing wrong, least of all to you? Nope. Shooting up a church in Laguna Beach after sitting among them for hours because...what? Taiwan and its people somehow offend you by being unapologetically who they are, self-governing, and free? Doing likewise to the people in a synagogue in Pittsburgh, a Wal-Mart in El Paso, a good part of Wilmington, most of Greenwood? But those were years ago. Or that time in Charleston when a white fella sat with the people of Mother Emmanuel A.M.E. Church and even through their Bible study before shooting at them until they died? Uh-uh.

“That’s not the devil,” said James Baldwin, a resident of Buffalo’s East Side. ““That’s America. They made him, they brought him up, they put him there.””<sup>1</sup> Each of them who were responsible for the incidents I named, and many more besides: armed to the teeth, steeped in hatred and lies, and convinced they were right, as their forebears had been and as their successors will be, white supremacist thinking being what it is. We must deal with these people and their consequences, and as we do so, I find it wise to keep in mind what a more famous James Baldwin wrote some sixty years ago to his nephew but could’ve written yesterday: “Please try to remember that what they [white people] believe, as well as what they do and cause you to endure, does

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<sup>1</sup> ‘That’s not the devil. That’s America’ by Silvia Foster-Frau, *The Washington Post* 5/17/22. Web. Accessed 5/18/22.

not testify to your inferiority but to their inhumanity and fear.”<sup>2</sup> They have chosen to reject what is best in us as people and to choose what is worst – and I, for one, would rejoice if they were the ones getting going and staying gone – the cry goes up, “How long?” – except today’s gospel reminds us that it is Jesus who got gone, and has stayed that way, and we must make of it what we will. (Back) to the Father he was going, he said, and you should be glad for me, he said. He made sure they heard that he would send the Advocate, or Counselor – his Spirit – to remind us what he taught and how to love as we ought. Then he left them with this:

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

(Jn.14:27)

‘As the world gives’ – every war ends in peace, at least until the next war. Each day dawns, but soon enough night comes on again. Nations rise, nations fall; people amaze with their brilliance and altruism, and then stun with their stubbornness, violence, and self-deception. We love openly, when we can, but often clingingly, cloyingly, and controllingly. Our hearts are often troubled and they are often afraid. What if I’m not good enough? What if I never have enough? What if all I have gets taken away? For “I,” say “we” to get a sense of what this does to a group or a people. Whatever we have, we have for a limited time only, as the world gives. A phrase in Japanese shows one wise reaction to this: *mono no aware*.

[It is] a Japanese idiom for the awareness of impermanence (無常, mujō), or transience of things, and both a transient gentle sadness (or wistfulness) at their passing as well as a longer, deeper gentle sadness about this state being the reality of life.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> James Baldwin, “A Letter to My Nephew,” *Progressive Magazine* 12/1/62.

<https://progressive.org/magazine/letter-nephew>. Later expanded into “My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation,” in *The Fire Next Time* (Dial Press, 1963).

<sup>3</sup> Quoted from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mono\\_no\\_aware#cite\\_note-3](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mono_no_aware#cite_note-3), in [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mono\\_no\\_aware](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mono_no_aware).

That is, I think, in the best sense possible, the peace that the world gives. I find it beautiful – alluring, even; *sic transit gloria mundi* but without surprise or regret that this is so. But is it the same thing as what Jesus, in John, is speaking of? Is it in this spirit that we should teach ourselves how to say aloud, “Rejoice that I am going”?

The emphasis I put on that question will give us one answer. I myself, as I write this, am not certain what it will be. The emphasis I planned to use would stress the penult: “Rejoice that I am *go-ing*,” meaning that you (his disciples) should rejoice that he is not staying here but is bound for somewhere else. This is not quite to another place and time, but a different way of being – *be-ing*; there’s that penult again, the penultimate (or next-to-last) syllable – making the ear carry the weight of the meaning as its power is revealed to the mind. The peace that God gives is not based on the impermanence of things – though impermanent they are, even in memory – but on the impermanence of us. It is our own mortality and limitations that should free us from attachment and desire, and hence from clinging to what will not last and stop us from causing suffering as we cling.

Easier said than done, he said to himself and a room full of people who still grieve along with him for those untimely gone, whatever the reason. I only said it because he said it – He, in the words written in red. Live without feeling troubled; live without fear. Pray continually for the grace to do so, and to understand how to do so, in a world that is much troubled and in which there is much to fear. Rejoice that we are going – in good time; no need to rush – to another one where there isn’t, to a city that needs no moon or sun to light it, and where nothing accursed will be found, nor any deceit, and where sorrow and pain are no more, nor suffering, but life everlasting. *Inshallah*; what will be, will be – so just let it be. *Amen*.