**Joy Unspeakable**

**By Rev. Sheryl Stewart**

**Zephaniah 3:14-20 Philippians 4: 4-7 Luke 3: 7-18**

**RR: Isaiah 12: 2-6**

**Summary: What if the most beautiful “flowers of Earth” are, in fact, merely the “buds of Heaven?”**

“Flowers of Earth and buds of heaven” is an intriguing phrase. A flower is fully formed, joyous beauty at the peak of its potential, and a bud is the promise of beauty and joy, not yet fully developed. Many of you have seen those moments of joy on reality shows like “the greatest loser” or that home improvement, extreme makeover show. There we have flowers of Earth, however temporary, manifested in a positive change. Even so, the physical transition experienced by the winner of a diet and cosmetic competition pales before what each of us will experience in heaven when we receive the spiritual body which the Bible promises.

Paul uses farming images when he explains the hope of bodily resurrection by saying people are like seeds, perhaps of corn, wheat, or olives. God’s harvest will reveal our true nature on Resurrection Day. Jesus’ transfiguration hints at His hidden glory, and don’t we sing of His scars: “rich wounds yet visible above, in beauty glorified”?

What if the loveliest flowers of earth which we know – marriages blessed by God, families who respect each other, work which helps others be strong, happy, and safe – what if all these are not full flowers as we suppose, but simply the buds of something greater still? It is literally beyond imagining.

No wonder I titled this sermon with the title of the hymn, “Joy Unspeakable!” I remember the happiest times in my life: My wedding to Jaime with me in bridal white and him in a silver tux, my ordination, officiating at the wedding of my daughter and some other close friends, and Rev. Dr. Don Algeo’s baptism. There was a quality to those hours which I can only describe as magical. Heaven also seems close, usually during deep, accepting, respectful conversations, resulting in mutual growth.

Heavenly moments seem magical because they are so different from most other moments; they seem out of time or timeless, eternal in a way. What if they are not out of time, rather what God intends for every moment? What if the mundane which we think is so real is the exception? What if sin infuses our world so broadly that we think limitation is reality when it is just evil sucking us down?

In Sunday Bible study, we recently studied Job. Our experiences with pain, adversity, and suffering blind us, especially when such moments are undeserved. We thrash around in darkness and think God may be angry with us. Ah, but even if God’s anger touches us, look at what God has done to comfort us! God walked among us as Jesus: tempted, suffering, dying. Even so, Jesus came, not only into Earth but also Heaven.

John the Baptist, fire and brimstone preacher though he was, railing at the snakes who had enough sense to escape wrath; even he answered them when they asked him what to do to please God. “Live lives of integrity,” John suggests, so you won’t be strangers in Heaven. Replace exploitation with generosity, honesty, and kindness; replace evil with good and make every moment magical.

So, what should we think about? Not Wall Street or the endemic news of hate, fear and oppression. Think instead of things that are right, true, honorable, and lovely. Do not envy the powerful person; envy the one who does good and pours out his or her life as a blessing. Exceptional and magical living is not an impossible myth: it is God’s normal. It is joy unspeakable!

So, let’s not even try to speak about it; instead, let’s sing about it!

[Angels We Have heard on High]