

## Introduction:

I have a difficult task here this afternoon:

- The readings Marg chose are all about joy, rejoicing and praise, yet our hearts are heavy and we probably don't really feel much like praising. So we will explore the wisdom that Margaret offers us in this time of our loss and see if we can find the joy she invites us to experience.
- Secondly I want to say something about Marg's life without as Marg would say "raving on" about her. In one of our visits shortly before she died she said she didn't want us to make a big deal over of her. She wants there to be praise, but not about her as much as about God and God's goodness in her life.
- So here we go.

The first reading is from the prophet Zephaniah:

We don't often have readings from this prophet and part of the reason is that this is a very short book – only three chapters. The first two chapters state some huge problems: the good order of God's creation is reversed and chaos rules, and goodness is perverted on both the personal and national level. We would hardly think that what we heard Eric read a few minutes ago would follow this proclamation of that which is difficult and terrible. But then we have this beautiful promise of hope; that those sent into exile would be restored, that the land would experience peace, and that our time is a time of rejoicing because in spite of everything God is with us. The book ends in an explosion of praise. What Zephaniah does is to bring together the best of Israel's values for guidance in a time of great difficulty. He encourages people with the conviction that in difficulty there is always a new time of God's favor for the people of the covenant. "God has removed the judgment against you... Your God is in your midst – a mighty savior – so shout for joy, sing joyfully."

This is certainly what Marg has shown us in the way she moved about in her diagnosis of cancer. But it is something larger than that as well – this is the way she lived her whole life. In Marg's room she had her chair in front of the window where she could see a tree very close to the building, so much so she could almost reach out and touch it. And then if she turned her attention just a little further out toward the distance she could see a forest. Marg had years of watching seasons change, close up and far away. This brought a certain kind of wisdom that she had about that which was immediate as well as the long view. It invited her to trust the process of seasons and time, of believing that every winter is followed by an amazing springtime of joy and delight. So even from a place of illness, pain, threat to life, Marg could choose a reading that reminds us that we need not fear, nor be discouraged, for God is in our midst -- that even when things happen that we do not understand there is reason for hope. Now hope doesn't mean that all will be easy. Listen to what Marg said to us in June of 1996, quoting Vaclav Havel: "*Either we have hope within us or we don't. It is a dimension of the soul. ... Hope is not the same as joy that things are going well or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success. It is an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed. Hope is definitely not the same as optimism. It is not the conviction that*

*something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense regardless of how it turns out. It is hope, above all, which gives us strength to live and continually try new things."*

Gospel from Luke is familiar to us. But what do we hear in it proclaimed on this day of Marg's funeral? I think we hear some more of her wisdom to us. This prayer comes on the lips of Mary, a woman given a vision of the utterly unexpected. She sang a song that is a variation on ancient themes found in several places in scripture on the lips of women -- usually in the context of meeting something difficult in their lives. I know Marg chose it because she wanted to invite us to a time of praise and gratitude today. I find three themes to reflect upon.

**1. Before the praise comes pondering.** The prayer was born out of Mary immersing herself in her faith tradition and in her reality and then contemplating the depth of what was transpiring. Pondering is part of the Holy Spirit's work in Mary, in us.

One of the things that we know of Margaret is that she was a ponderer and she assisted others in pondering the meaning of their life and the movement and call of God. She did this as a teacher of literature, in the area of faith formation, as a congregational leader and as a spiritual director and in her other ministry at Shalom. It didn't matter whether your theology was on this end or that, whether your skill was great or weak, whether you were poor or wealthy, she invited pondering. The focus could be over great writing, great art, the beauty of the earth, a passage from scripture, life! Marg was a big ponderer. This is not only true of her response to the illness that has taken her life but it was simply her way of living.

In her Chapter address to us in 1992 Margaret said, and listen to her speak to us today: *"It is necessary for religious to clarify what really matters most to them and then to focus their lives in the direction of their highest aspirations. The particular challenge we face is to move from personal vision to shared vision. This can only happen if congregations take contemplative time together. ... There are many who desire to move in this direction. We are not sure what that will look like. The road is not clear. But we sense that this is a creative moment in our history. A time of transformation."* We are comfortable in talking about our contemplative way now, but this was 20 years ago that Marg was calling us to be more contemplative.

**2. "My soul proclaims your greatness O my God."** Another lesson of the gospel is that for people of faith we praise God, whether we feel like it or not. God is worthy of praise. God is faithful. God remembers mercy to all the generations. The prayer captures a keen sense of God's fidelity. This is a love story that began in the beginning, continued to Mary, to Margaret, and to us, to this very day. Marg reflected this desire when she set the tone for this funeral liturgy. We praise because the Mighty one has done great things for Marg and for us. This is not about minimizing the gifts God has given us and we can certainly claim those good gifts, but in the end our best and most appropriate understanding of the gifts we have been given is that they are really all about God's ways in our life. Marg's list of personal gifts is long and we have been talking to each other about them but in the end I think that what is a most appropriate celebration of her life is to give thanks to God and not to praise her. I am reminded of an old movie, Chariots of Fire, about a young very religious young man (Eric Lydell?) who is an outstanding runner competing in the Olympics. As it happens his event is scheduled

for a Sunday and there were those who felt he should not compete on that day. But the man decides to run and he says: *“When I run I feel God’s pleasure.”* Back to the scripture – note that in the gospel Mary calls herself more than a servant of God, she calls herself blessed. To be blessed is to be the recipient of a gift and that is how Marg knew her life. She was blessed. I think in choosing this gospel she wanted to remind us that we too are blessed.

**3. To be prophetic:** In the Magnificat Mary tells what the mystery of her call, and being blessed, means for her people and for the world. She says that this experience will bring the mercy to future generations, it means the scattering of the proud, casting down the powerful, filling the hungry with good things. Isn’t this an agenda for changing the world! It was a formidable message on behalf of those who are poor. This is also a part of what we know about Marg.

Listen again to what she said to us in her Chapter address in 1996. Hear her speak to us...

*It is one of the tasks of religious life to be present to those who lack what they need for a full human life. Religious men and women have a history of this kind of presence. ..In the U.S. women religious built the largest private health care system to attend to those who could not afford health care, they educated immigrant children and built colleges for women. Many of these works are now in the hands of competent laity and once more, religious could be free to attend to the new social needs. Initially new needs are often not met by the dominant society. This is the work of justice, the heritage we claim. And if we want to be credible our actions will have to match our words. It is time to ask what this age is asking of us, needs from us. Which voices are most urgent? What change will be required so that we can do so?*

She goes on to say: *“How will our chapter move us beyond where we are now? How will this action call us to a transformation rather than just a cosmetic change? Change does not come without some pain. What will it cost us?”* Then she gives a long list of things including these three: *“the willingness to speak out, speak for, act up for our values, the courage to move from the private arena to the public and prophetic arenas as we advocate for justice and social change, and a commitment to move from individual self interested to group goals.”* Do you hear her words echo in the work we are doing these days?

We like Mary, and like Margaret can magnify the Lord with our lives. We will honor Marg best and most truly if we receive from her this legacy of faithful living: to ponder/to be contemplative, to acknowledge our blessings and to act prophetically.

Marg also said this to us: When addressing the importance of our being grounded in our mission: *“Then no matter what happens, we will have a faith that withstands storms and fire, cannot be destroyed and does not wear out. It won’t go out of style. We will also leave behind something that is enduring. Having chosen our direction we are free then to allow it to test us and stretch us and bring us to our best selves.”*

Marg’s last three years were pretty storm tossed, but somehow she lived what she talked about and was able to believe in the promises of God in the midst of it all. She wrestled with death even while

dancing with life. In another place Marg told us: *“To live until we die may, in the final analysis, be the ultimate goal in life.”*

In the Acts of John, a Gnostic Gospel, John says: *“To the universe belongs the dance. He (she) who does not dance does not know what happens. Now if you follow my dance you will see yourself in me.”* Throughout the early morning the day Margaret died, Theresa was at her side praying from psalm 30. *“You changed my mourning into dancing; you took off my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness, that my soul might sing praise to you without ceasing: O Lord, my God forever will I give you thanks.”*

**Conclusion:** I close with a poem that I know was significant for Marg, given when she received the diagnosis that there was nothing more the doctors could do, she requested it in the week before she died. The poem is written by Hafiz.

*You have  
not danced so badly, my dear,  
trying to hold hands with the Beautiful One.  
You have waltzed with great style, my sweet, crushed angel  
to have ever neared God’s heart at all.  
Our Partner is notoriously difficult to follow, and even His (God’s)  
best musicians are not always easy to hear.  
So what if the music has stopped for a while.  
So what if the price of admission to the Divine is out of reach tonight.  
So what, my sweetheart, if you lack the ante to gamble for real love.  
The mind and body are famous for holding the heart ransom,  
But Hafiz knows the Beloved’s eternal habits. Have patience,  
For He (God) will not be able to resist your longings  
And charms for long.  
You have not danced so badly, my dear,  
trying to kiss the Magnificent One.  
**You have actually waltzed with tremendous style**  
my sweet, O my sweet,  
crushed angel.*

In the end, Margaret’s final dance of life was fabulously beautiful; we sit in that pause after the great performance – in the quiet that intense beauty evokes. And we remember that it is not only we who appreciated Marg’s dance of life but that as Zephaniah says: *God is rejoicing over Margaret with gladness, and has renewed her in love. God sings joyfully because of her.”* (Zeph 3: 18)

In the ritual in which we named Margaret as our president, Kathleen Grace on behalf of the congregation said to her, *“We have chosen you to lead us, to inspire us, to push us, to motivate us, to help us make real our dreams and our commitments.”* As we take you to your place of rest we want to thank you, for your friendship, sistering, and for your leadership. We are doing things differently because you have lived among us. You have poured out your love on us, we are grateful, and we do praise God singing joyfully.