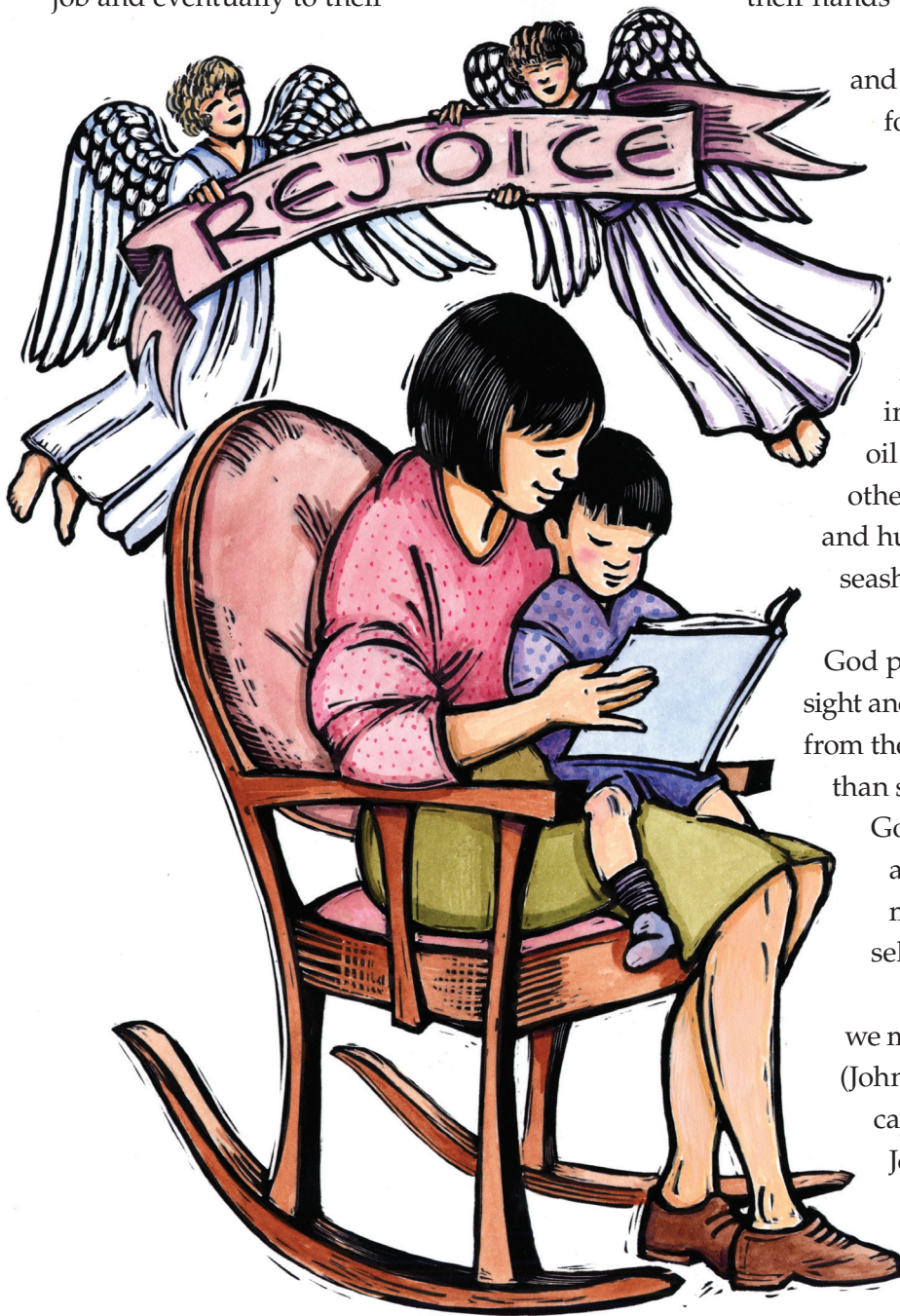


# Joy

Rebekah Rojcewicz

As parents, we know that our children will cling to us only briefly. Soon they will begin going beyond the family to their play groups and to school. They will spend more and more time with their friends. They will go off to college or a job and eventually to their

own families or communities. Our desire for them echoes Isaiah's prophecy for the people of Israel: "You shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands" (Isaiah 55:12).



We long for our children to be safe and well. But more than this, we long for them to be happy. In this we are very much like our own heavenly Father, God. In creation we find many things that assure us of God's concern for our physical well-being: the air we breathe, the plants and animals we take for food, the cotton and wool we weave into clothing, and the coal, wood, and oil we burn for fuel. But we also discover other kinds of things, such as wildflowers and hummingbirds, precious gems, intricate seashells, pets, and best friends. Why is this?

In the Garden of Eden, Genesis says, God placed trees that were "pleasant to the sight and good for food" (2:9). God's intention from the beginning has been that we do more than survive: we are meant to enjoy our lives.

God longs for us to enjoy his presence and his love. This longing is expressed most perfectly in the gift of God's own self, the gift of Jesus.

Jesus tells us that he has come that we might "have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). The capacity for joy is the capacity to experience life abundantly.

Joy is a spiritual gift, a fruit of God's spirit alive and at work within us.

God has created us—body, mind,

and spirit together, as one. Our joy is nurtured as our deepest needs are met: physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual.



## The Capacity for Joy

Young children have a great capacity for joy. They have deep needs, but these needs are simple: nourishing food and drink, warmth, light, shelter, and interesting things to see and do. They need to touch and be touched, love and be loved. As their most basic needs are met, they are happy. This particular kind of happiness (a word that the Bible uses alternately with “joy”) is not the same as the temporary emotional excitement we often mean when we use the word “happy” (as when the child gets an ice cream cone or goes to a birthday party). It is more a deep contentment than an emotional high. In young children, joy manifests itself in peacefulness, in focused activity, and in a certain light in their eyes. Their joy sometimes erupts in declarations of love, in exclamations of praise, or in spontaneous song—familiar or improvised!

In addition to being very simple in their needs and straightforward about their desires, young children have a marvelous capacity to receive what is being offered as gift and to enjoy it thoroughly (as long as it is what they really need), whether it is a cool drink, a climb on the rocks, or a bedtime story.

## Nurturing Joy

What can we do to nurture children’s capacity for joy? We can be attentive to their most basic needs. Reading and studying about child development can help, as can seeking the wisdom of other, more experienced parents. But the best guide we have is the conscious and prayerful observation of our own children.

Knowing the joy that Jesus came to bring requires that an announcement be made. At the Annunciation, the angel Gabriel says to Mary, “Rejoice,” and then he tells her that she is to be the mother of Jesus. At his birth, the angel proclaims these words to the shepherds: “I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people” (Luke 2:10). In the parable of the true vine, when Jesus tells us how very close he is to us and we are to him, he says, “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete” (John 15:11).

Even the youngest children need to hear this Good News. They who are richest in the capacity to give and receive love need to hear that there is one who loves them with a complete, perfect and everlasting love. Beyond food, shelter, and education, beyond even the precious gift of the love of family and friends, the best gift we can give them is to tell them about God and God’s love for them. Better still, we can help them meet Jesus “face to face” by listening together to his words of love in the Bible, by praying together, and by participating together in the sacramental life of the Christian community.

Joy can be hard to come by for us as adults. We’re so busy, so responsible, so preoccupied. Our happiness so often seems to depend on objects obtained, successes won, or events occurring as planned, that we forget what our needs are. We lose touch with our heart of hearts and can’t remember what we wanted in the first place.

Young children—in their simplicity, in their absorption in the moment and what is placed before them, and especially in their capacity for enjoyment of God’s presence and love—can teach us a great deal about joy and also about God, who desires that our joy be complete.

