

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, DECEMBER 13, 2020

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

THIRD SUNDAY of ADVENT

GATHERING

PRELUDE

Lighting the Third Advent Candle

A prophet tells us how God comes—
through someone who receives God's spirit,
and through a community that hears the good news:

The Spirit of the Living God is upon me
because God has anointed me . . .
to announce good news to the humble,
to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to captives,
and release to those in prison, . . .
to comfort all who mourn,
to give them garlands instead of ashes,
oil of gladness instead of mourners' tears.
(Isa. 61:1-3 REB)

We light our third candle,
as a sign of hope
that the Spirit of God may anoint us
to show God's liberating love.

**Living God, proclaim liberty to captives.
Set us free, that we may free others.
Bind our wounds, that we may heal others.
Fill us with your Spirit,
and anoint us with your love.**

CALL TO WORSHIP

One: Immanuel:
All: God with us.
One: Incarnation:
All: God in the flesh.
One: Into this world...
All: ..God comes, with us, in us, for us.
One: Come, let us worship the God who comes.

*OPENING HYMN “What Child Is This” GtG 145

One: What child is this, who, laid to rest,
on Mary's lap is sleeping?
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet
while shepherds watch are keeping?
**All: This, this is Christ the King,
whom shepherds guard and angels sing;
haste, haste to bring him laud,
the babe, the son of Mary!**

One: Why lies he in such mean estate
where ox and ass are feeding?
**All: Good Christian, fear; for sinners here
the silent Word is pleading.**

One: Nails, spear, shall pierce him through;
the cross be borne for me, for you.
**All: Hail, hail, the Word made flesh,
the babe, the son of Mary!**

One: So bring him incense, gold, and myrrh;
All: come, one and all, to own him.

One: The King of kings salvation brings;
All: let loving hearts enthrone him.

One: Raise, raise the song on high.
The virgin sings her lullaby.
**All: Joy, joy, for Christ is born,
the babe, the son of Mary!**

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***UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION**

Merciful God, you come to us in the joy of new birth;
why, then, do we fail to see you and fail to heed your call?
You demonstrate that you love justice;
why, then, do we persist in wrongdoing
and every form of evil?
You have given us the gift of your Spirit;
why, then, do we quench the Spirit among us?
You have given us the words of the prophets
and the Word himself;
why, then, do we despise and ignore
what we have heard from you?
You have sent the light into the world;
why, then, have we loved darkness rather than light?
Forgive us. Restore us.
Till and tend us as your garden
until righteousness and praise spring up,
for the sake of Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.
Amen.

***SILENT CONFESSION**

***ASSURANCE OF PARDON** *(from Matthew 1 & Luke 2)*

One: The One who comes in the Child of Bethlehem is the One who comes to
redeem and restore.
All: **His name is Jesus, “for he will save his people from their sins.”**
One: This is indeed “good news of great joy for all the people.”
All: **So let us rejoice and be glad, for in Jesus Christ we are forgiven!**
Alleluia! Amen!

***THE PEACE**

One: The peace of Christ be with you.
All: **And also with you.**

*(From your seat, a brief sign of peace may be shared: a wave of the hand, a nod
of the head, etc.)*

THE WORD

SCRIPTURE READINGS Isaiah 61:1-4,8-11
Psalm 126
Luke 1:46-55

ISALIAH 61:1-4,8-11 (New Revised Standard Version)

- 1 *The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me:
has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;*
- 2 *to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;*
- 3 *to provide for those who mourn in Zion --
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, to display the glory of the Lord.*
- 4 *They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.*
- 8 *For I the LORD love justice,
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;
I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.*
- 9 *Their descendants shall be known among the nations,
and their offspring among the peoples;
all who see them shall acknowledge
that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed.*
- 10 *I will greatly rejoice in the LORD,
my whole being shall exult in my God,
who has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.*
- 11 *For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.*

PSALM 126 (New Revised Standard Version)

- 1 *When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
 we were like those who dream.*
- 2 *Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
 and our tongue with shouts of joy;
 then it was said among the nations,
 “The LORD has done great things for them.”*
- 3 *The LORD has done great things for us,
 and we rejoiced.*
- 4 *Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
 like the watercourses in the Negeb.*
- 5 *May those who sow in tears
 reap with shouts of joy.*
- 6 *Those who go out weeping,
 bearing the seed for sowing,
 shall come home with shouts of joy,
 carrying their sheaves.*

LUKE 1:46-55 (New Revised Standard Version)

- 46 *And Mary said,
 “My soul magnifies the Lord,
47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
48 who has looked with favor on the lowliness of God’s servant.
 Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
 and holy is the name of the Lord.
50 God’s mercy is for those who revere God
 from generation to generation.
51 God has shown strength with God’s arm,
 and has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
52 The Lord has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
 and lifted up the lowly;
53 has filled the hungry with good things,
 and sent the rich away empty.
54 God has helped God’s servant Israel,
 in remembrance of the mercy of the Lord,
55 according to the promise God made to our ancestors,
 to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”*

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON by Pastor Bill Vincent

There is this curious, powerful, profound notion of the reversal of fortunes in our passages for today.

As Walter Brueggemann notes regarding our passage from Isaiah,

This wondrously lyrical poem anticipates a massive reversal of fortunes....

(Texts-22)

With good news for the oppressed,
binding up the broken,
liberty for the captives,
release for the prisoners;
a garland instead of ashes,
gladness instead of mourning;
justice, not robbery;
sowing in tears vs. reaping with joy;
the powerful brought down and the lowly lifted up,
the hungry filled and the rich sent away empty.

A reversal of fortunes.

Sometimes it seems so obvious, with the disparities we observe in life: the haves and the have nots, the rich and the poor, the insiders and those on the outside, those with a voice and those with no voice.

Who would disagree with such a need for a reversal of fortunes?

Well, probably the powerful and those with the most to lose.

But surely we can agree

-that those who sorrow need to be comforted and experience joy.

-that those who are broken need to be mended and healed.

-that those who are shackled in depressive lives and chained in oppressive situations and even those imprisoned in unjust circumstances need to be set free.

And there's a lot of that work that needs to be done.

Oh, I am sure we would disagree on particulars of exactly who needs to be liberated and who needs healing the most and who is 'justifiably' depressed.

And we would probably disagree on the particulars of how to accomplish these things effectively: through legislation or grass roots social movement, by the government or the private sector.

But all of that simply highlights the truth that this reversal of fortunes is tricky, complicated, and, all too often, a complete failure.

Not to suggest that God is a failure.

But that we are. Our attempts to implement this plan reversing these fortunes – our attempts all too often fall short, and fall flat on our face.

We have a tendency to go too far. You know, the swing of the pendulum, from too far one way to too far the other way.

Or we go about things the wrong way. You know what they say, ‘You can’t legislate morality.’

Or simply our own self-interest gets in the way.

History demonstrates that such reversals of fortune rarely fare well.

For all too often, those who had no power, when they finally get power, turn out to be just as ruthless as those who had power before them.

All too often, those who were the poor, when they become rich, are just as haughty as those who were rich before them.

All too often, those who were oppressed become the next oppressors.

I’m not sure we can do this reversal of fortunes properly.

There are too many examples of revolutions gone awry, of *coups* gone to the extreme, of legislation gone nowhere.

Which leads me to wonder:

Perhaps we’re looking for the wrong reversal.

Perhaps, at root – to make the change lasting, authentic, effective – the reversal we need is not a reversal of fortunes, but a reversal of people.

Now, where have we heard that before?

Repent! “Change your heart and life” (Common English Bible).

Turn around. Change direction. Reverse course, because we were on the wrong course to begin with.

For lasting change to take place,

for true reversal – or should I say – transformation of life,

we need a reversal of people: a change of heart and mind, a change of direction and life.

Only problem is: I’m not sure we can do that either.

(This is getting depressing!)

But note in our passages for today, it is God who is doing it: the work, the work of transformation.

*For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.* (Isaiah 61:11)

The LORD has done great things for us.
(Psalm 126:3)

for the Mighty One has done great things for me,

...
God has helped God's servant Israel.
(Luke 1:49,54)

The question becomes: How can we be a part of this God's work of transformation?
How do we open ourselves up to God doing this?
How do we engage God in accomplishing this transformation?
How do we participate in God's work at work in us?

Well, for one thing, I'd point to the Spirit that anoints and sends, as we read in Isaiah.
Be open to that Spirit: attentive to it; alert to its movement in us and among us; allow it to work within us.

And then there's something about that 'reversal of *fortune*'.
Not simply good fortune, or even reversal of fortune, or your fortune or my fortune.
But true fortune.
What is the fortune you seek?

Jesus speaks about that in the Sermon on the Mount when he says,
For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:21)

Treasure. Fortune. Focus. Goal. Center of attention...and of life.

And what is the treasure – the fortune – we are to seek?

strive first for the kingdom of God and God's righteousness (Matthew 6:33)

In other words, to do what we say we want to do and be a part of every week when we pray,
hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

Your will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven.

(Matthew 6:9b-10)

And that is our joy, our life, our purpose and fulfillment.

As Jesus mentions when he shares one of his parables, and speaks of a

"treasure hidden in a field, which someone found...and...then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field." (Matthew 13:44)

Our joy – our fortune, our treasure – is not a present under the tree,
but the Child under a star.

And when we realize that – when we grasp and engage and participate in that truth and that life – then I believe we have come full circle.

For it is

-in our claiming and reclaiming, in our finding – or being found by – our treasure, this fortune

-that our lives are reversed – that we are transformed –

-and we seek to walk in the way of God.

We walk in the way of God, which is

love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Galatians 5:22-23)

We walk in the way of God, which is

doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with our God (Micah 6:8)

We walk in the way of God, which includes

mending the brokenhearted

and comforting the sorrowful,

sharing good news with the poor and oppressed;

and release for the restricted and constricted,

the captive and imprisoned and shackled in life.

All so that “*righteousness and praise*” will sprout and “*spring up*” and blossom “*before all the nations*” ...and within every heart and life.

The only way truly to worship and kneel before the Child in the manger is to be willing to walk with him and follow in his way.

And it turns out he will speak of that way.

He will speak of that way in a synagogue at the beginning of his ministry when he is handed a scroll and reads,

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor;
has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”* (Luke 4:18-19)

And he tells the people,

“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4:21)

He shares those very words from Isaiah that we read this morning. And he says, “This is why I came, and this is what I came to do.”

Words echoed in his mother’s words before he was even born.

This reversal, this transformation, this treasure,
it is our fortune, it is our joy, it is our life
as we come to the manger and claim him
and he claims us.

***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH**

We trust in God,
whom Jesus called Abba, Father.
In sovereign love God created the world good
and makes everyone equally in God's image,
male and female, of every race and people,
to live as one community.
But we rebel against God; we hide from our Creator.
Ignoring God's commandments,
we violate the image of God in others and ourselves,
accept lies as truth,
exploit neighbor and nature,
and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care.
We deserve God's condemnation.
Yet God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation.
In everlasting love,
the God of Abraham and Sarah chose a covenant people
to bless all families of the earth.
Hearing their cry,
God delivered the children of Israel
from the house of bondage.
Loving us still,
God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant.
Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child,
like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home,
God is faithful still.

(from *A Brief Statement of Faith*, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Book of Confessions)

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Pastor: Restore us, O God, ...
People: ...and do great things among us.

THE LORD'S PRAYER *(Traditional)*

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
forever. Amen.

OFFERING

Invitation

Reflection

**Unison Prayer of Dedication*

**Gracious God,
teach us to give thanks in all things,
for you are always with us.
Thank you for the privilege
of sharing what we have with others,
of giving ourselves away in love,
and of receiving the gifts that others share with us.
With our whole being,
spirit and soul and body,
we rejoice in you even as we give ourselves to you.
Mold us and use us as instruments of your will,
that all we do may be in accord
with the gospel of the Child who comes.
In his name we pray. Amen.**

SENDING

***CLOSING HYMN** “Gentle Mary Laid Her Child” GtG 146

One: Gentle Mary laid her child
lowly in a manger;

**All: there he lay, the undefiled,
to the world a stranger.**

One: Such a babe in such a place,
can he be the Savior?

**All: Ask the saved of all the race
who have found his favor.**

One: Angels sang about his birth;

All: wise men sought and found him;

One: heaven's star shone brightly forth,
glory all around him.

**All: Shepherds saw the wondrous sight,
heard the angels singing;**

One: all the plains were lit that night;

All: all the hills were ringing.

One: Gentle Mary laid her child
lowly in a manger;
he is still the undefiled,
but no more a stranger.

**All: Son of God, of humble birth,
beautiful the story;
praise his name in all the earth;
hail the King of glory!**

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***CHARGE AND BLESSING**

Pastor: ...And let the gathered people of God say...

People: ...Amen.

POSTLUDE

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