

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, DECEMBER 11, 2022

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

3rd SUNDAY of ADVENT

GATHERING

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP

- One: Come once more, with eager longing, to receive the promises of God.
All: Out of the desert places of our lives, we gather with joy and gladness.
One: Come expectantly, with all your questions.
Bring to this place all your hopes and dreams.
All: Out of our weaknesses and fears, we assemble to gain new strength and courage.
One: Come to behold the majesty of our God.
Draw near to God's Holy Way.
All: Out of all circumstances that imprison us, we come to claim the joy of freedom in Christ.

***OPENING HYMN** "Angels, from the Realms of Glory" GtG 143

1. **Angels, from the realms of glory,
wing your flight o'er all the earth;
you, who sang creation's story,
now proclaim Messiah's birth:
come and worship, come and worship,
worship Christ, the newborn king!**
2. **Shepherds, in the fields abiding,
watching o'er your flocks by night,
God with us is now residing;
yonder shines the infant light:
come and worship, come and worship,
worship Christ, the newborn king!**
3. **Sages, leave your contemplations;
brighter visions beam afar;
seek the great desire of nations;
you have seen his natal star:
come and worship, come and worship,
worship Christ, the newborn king!** *(continued...)*

4. **All creation, join in praising
God the Father, Spirit, Son,
evermore your voices raising
to th'eternal Three in One:
come and worship, come and worship,
worship Christ, the newborn king!**

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UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION

**God of majesty and glory,
we are thirsty for your grace.
Our doubt and despair lead us to low and longsuffering places.
Our eyes downcast, we find no reason to rejoice.
We hide our eyes from your presence.
We do not listen to your word.
We are lifeless when we ought to dance
and speechless when we ought to sing.
Forgive us, O Lord.
Help us to resist the overwhelming forces that drag us down.
You call us to rejoice in a babe about to be born.
Lift up our eyes in hopeful anticipation of your coming.
Forgive us. Help us. Save us.
Speak peace to our fearful hearts,
strengthen our weak hands,
and make firm our feeble knees
as we seek to follow in your holy way. 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 and loved! “Glory to God in the highest heaven!”**

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

LIGHTING THE ADVENT WREATH: THE CANDLE OF JOY

One: The first two candles remind us of the hope and peace we have in Christ. Today we light the third candle to remind us of the joy we have knowing that Christ has come, that Christ comes to us still.

All: This is a season of great joy. We enjoy the fellowship of family and friends. The lights and candles and songs and music all help to create a festive, joyful mood as we celebrate the birth of a baby.

One: But this is no ordinary baby, for angels sing at his birth, and shepherds gather to see, and wise men come from afar to worship the baby proclaimed a King.

For the angel said, "Behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." (*Luke 2:10-11*)

God's salvation comes to us wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. God has come in the flesh to dwell in our midst.

Let us pray.

Unison: Dear God, we thank you for the joy we know in Christ. May this joy so permeate our lives that others may see it and join us in worshipping Christ the King. Amen.

Sing: "There's a Song in the Air" (*Verse 2*)

**"There's a tumult of joy o'er the wonderful birth,
for the virgin's sweet boy is the Lord of the earth.
Ay! the star rains its fire while the beautiful sing,
for the manger of Bethlehem cradles a King!"**

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SCRIPTURE READINGS Isaiah 35:1-10
Matthew 11:2-11

ISAIAH 35 (New Revised Standard Version+)

¹ *The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus ² it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.
They shall see the glory of the Lord,
the majesty of our God.*

³ Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.
⁴ Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
“Be strong, do not fear!
Behold, your God
will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense;
your God will come and save you.”

⁵ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
⁶ then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;
⁷ the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

⁸ A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it,
but it shall be for God’s people;
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.
⁹ No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.
¹⁰ And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

MATTHEW 11:2-11 (New Revised Standard Version)

² When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples ³ and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” ⁴ Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. ⁶ And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

⁷ As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸ What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. ⁹ What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is the one about whom it is written,
‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.’
¹¹ Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON “Rejoice...If You Can” by Pastor Bill Vincent

We have here in Isaiah a vision of God’s work in returning the people from their time of captivity and exile. A vision of immense joy and healing of the people. So that the blind see and marvel, and the deaf hear and rejoice, and the dumb speak and sing, and the lame leap for joy; all of which are signs that God's rule and dominion has come.

And in Matthew we hear an echo of Isaiah's dream.

John the Baptist is in prison because he was doing his job: he had been proclaiming the coming of God's kingdom. He was the forerunner of the coming Messiah who would inaugurate God's rule over people's hearts and the whole world.

And John has heard of this Jesus: heard of what Jesus has done and how he has affected people's lives. But John still has some doubts. So he sends some of his disciples to Jesus to ask,
“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see....”

Jesus answers John’s question by saying, “Look around you and see what is happening, and go tell John what you have beheld.” And what they see is reminiscent of the vision that Isaiah shared: of the blind seeing and the lame walking and the deaf hearing, and the joy that accompanies it all.

It's like putting two and two together and coming up with four and saying, “Yep, that's what I thought the answer was, but I had to be sure.” You put Isaiah's vision together with what is being done by this man Jesus, and the answer is, “Yes, he is the Messiah, the one who is to bring in God's kingdom. He is indeed the one.”

Or is he?

One can't help returning to John's question and wondering still: “Are you the one?”

Remember: John is in prison, trapped behind bars. He knows that salvation and deliverance are central to God's coming reign and rule: deliverance from physical infirmities and from spiritual infirmities as well; deliverance from all sorts of chains and situations of oppression and distress.

And so John asks, “*Are you the one who is to come?*” If God's kingdom means joy and release, deliverance and redemption, are you the one?

We must read between the lines to understand his question. In the words of another,
“If deliverance is truly the heart of the gospel of God then why am I in this wretched prison?” (William B. Oglesby, Jr., “Pastoral Implications,” *Lectionary Homiletics*, December 17, 1989)

Suddenly we realize that John's is a very good question, and is often our question. For, as David Howell observes,

There is a John who lives in all of us: we are disappointed in God. (David B. Howell, “Sermon Reviews,” *Lectionary Homiletics*)

We question out of our own experience with pain and suffering and those supposedly “unanswered” prayers. If you are the one, then why do the blind remain without sight? If you are the one, then why do the poor remain powerless? If you are the one, then why is my body overrun with cancer? If you are the one, then why do I suffer so unjustly? If you are the one, then what are we doing behind the bars of suffering and grief and agony?

As one person notes,

It is one thing to believe that the Messiah has come when life is full of promise and hope; it is another thing to believe that news while you are in prison. (David L. Bartlett, “Preaching,” *Lectionary Homiletics*)

And so we ask, “Are you the one?”

And what does Jesus answer? “Look around you,” he says, “and tell John what you have heard and seen.”

And Yes, we must admit, we have seen some glorious things; we have heard some wonderful things; we have experienced some things that, for lack of a sufficient word to describe them, can only be termed miracles. We have seen families who have been estranged for years finally work out their differences and live together in peace. We have seen people at the threshold of deepest despair bounce back again and regain the vigor of life. We have seen people healed through the miracle of modern medicine and the caring touch of trained professionals and the love and support of family and friends. We have seen those who were blind to their own self-destructive ways gain insight and grab hold of a new lease on life.

Look around you, says Jesus, and tell John – tell others – what you have seen and heard...and tell yourself as well.

The deliverance is there. It is full of promise.

But it is not complete.

As someone has noted,

The answer of Jesus to the disciples of John confirms the fact that the stories of deliverance are real. ... The deliverance is evident, but it is not universal. Not everyone in Judea and Galilee was cured. ... Every person that Jesus healed did eventually die. (Oglesby)

We can neither kid ourselves nor attempt to fool others. God's promised deliverance is not yet universal. We look at Isaiah's vision, we hear of Jesus' wondrous works, and we ask John's question; and here, more than anywhere else in this season of Advent, we perceive the

paradox between the promise and its completion, the tension between the beginning and the finalizing of the fulfillment.

So we need to face that reality. We need to face up to the fact that we live in an interim period, where we “see through a glass darkly, but not face to face”; where we live by the hopefulness of faith but not by the surety of sight.

We live, then, by hope, and a goodly one at that, for our hope does not disappoint us. For we see examples of God's deliverance, examples of the reality of God's kingdom in our midst – but not its fullness, not yet.

So where, then, do we find joy in this interim period? Can we truly rejoice?

We can rejoice, for and with others. I mean, our joy need not be limited to our own situation in life.

What is striking is that Jesus' response to John is full of promise, but not full of promise for John.

David Bartlett writes. Then Bartlett asks,

Could we risk...rejoicing in the mercy that comes through Jesus Christ even though that mercy may not save each of us from his or her deepest dilemma? Is it possible to have faith in the One who comes even though His coming may not rescue US from whatever imprisons us – to rejoice though we remain behind bars? (Bartlett)

We can live, and learn to rejoice in the good fortunes of others. We can truly reach beyond ourselves and share in the deliverance experienced and known by family and friends, and even by those whom we don't know, but whom we know of; for, as Doug Ottati reminds us,

...to follow Jesus is to share in a life devoted to something greater than self.
(Douglas F. Ottati, “Theological Reflections,” Lectionary Homiletics)

So we hear stories and share stories of reconciliation and hope, sharing and love, that broaden our horizons and expand our vision of God's working in the world: stories that help us reach out beyond ourselves and rejoice in the coming of God's kingdom as that is seen in the lives of others.

We can also rejoice in the healing that comes even when there is no cure for what ails us. William Oglesby writes,

The plain fact is that not every situation gets better, at least not on its own terms. We are creatures who are born, live and die. It is here that we are reminded that healing and curing, though often thought of as identical, are not the same. (Oglesby)

Even though the cancer remains unchecked, even though the cataract blinds the eye, even though reconciliation remains unaffected, there is a healing that we can know.

Paul knew that. In great distress, he besought the Lord that the "thorn in the flesh" be taken away. It never was. But he experienced real healing in discovering the deep meaning of the word of the Lord, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (II Cor. 12:9)

Oglesby then affirms,

at a deeper level, we know that we are channels of the grace of God that brings true healing even when there is no cure whether physical or situational. ... The true deliverance is the transformation of all of us...in the healing power of God's grace which is sufficient for us, [a healing power which] enables [us] by faith to know that nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom. 8:39) (Oglesby)

We can know inner healing, a healing of the spirit that can then soar above the suffering, and know joy and release in the presence of God. Joy that is known in affirming within our heart of hearts that God's grace is sufficient for us in all times and all situations. And this is a joy that no one and no thing can steal from us.

And we can also rejoice as we affirm together that the time will indeed come when joy and healing will be universal, and God's reign complete in every heart and every corner of creation: when we all

*shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.*

The victory is assured. We see that promise in the light of the resurrection. We hear that promise in the news of the birth of a child. We sense that promise in the affirmation that God is indeed with us, now and always.

And so we can rejoice, for even as we weep with those who weep, so too can we rejoice with those who rejoice, demonstrating the solidarity of Christ's body even now.

We can rejoice, for God's grace is sufficient for us, even when it comes wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.

And we can sing with a joy based on the God of our salvation, a joy that reaches beyond our outward circumstances and grasps hold of the very foundation of our existence.

So

*Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.
"Behold, your God...
...will come and save you."*

"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" And even before this question was posed to the adult Jesus, the question can be heard spoken to a newborn child, sleeping among the hay in a manger.

Are you the one?

Yes, the angels whisper. Yes, Jesus himself whispers. Yes, we too can whisper in our heart of hearts, in the once dark recesses of our lives where now his light shines.

Yes, he is the one.

And yes, we, too, can know the joy of his coming, the joy of his presence with us. Even though his reign is not complete, even in our own lives.

We know that he is indeed the one. And we can rejoice. And sing out loud, "Joy to the world, the Lord is come!"

***HYMN** “Joy to the World” GtG 134

1. **Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her king;
let every heart prepare him room,
and heaven and nature sing,
and heaven and nature sing,
and heaven, and heaven and nature sing.**
2. **Joy to the earth the Savior reigns!
Let all their songs employ,
while fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains
repeat the sounding joy,
repeat the sounding joy,
repeat, repeat the sounding joy.**
3. **No more let sins and sorrows grow,
nor thorns infest the ground;
he comes to make his blessings flow
far as the curse is found,
far as the curse is found,
far as, far as the curse is found.**
4. **He rules the world with truth and grace,
and makes the nations prove
the glories of his righteousness
and wonders of his love,
and wonders of his love,
and wonders, wonders of his love.**

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***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH**

**We trust in Jesus Christ,
fully human, fully God.
Jesus proclaimed the reign of God:
preaching good news to the poor
and release to the captives,
teaching by word and deed
and blessing the children,
healing the sick
and binding up the brokenhearted,
eating with outcasts,
forgiving sinners,
and calling all to repent and believe the gospel.**

(continued...)

**Unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition,
Jesus was crucified,
suffering the depths of human pain
and giving his life for the sins of the world.
God raised this Jesus from the dead,
vindicating his sinless life,
breaking the power of sin and evil,
delivering us from death to life eternal.**

**In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,
we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks
and to live holy and joyful lives,
even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth,
praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"**

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

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

One: God, hear us as we pray...
All: ...Grant us your strength and your mercy.

THE LORD'S PRAYER *(Contemporary)*

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and forever. Amen.**

OFFERING

Invitation

Reflection

**Unison Prayer of Dedication*

**Thanks be to you, O God, maker of heaven and earth—
giver of justice, lover of righteousness,
hope of the afflicted, and friend of the poor.**

Your faithfulness never fails.

**Take and use the gifts we offer
to bring joy to those most in need of Christ's mission and ministry;
to further your purpose in the world
and to fulfill the promise of the world to come.
Through Christ we pray. Amen.**

SENDING

***CLOSING HYMN** “Good Christian Friends, Rejoice” GtG 132

- 1. Good Christian friends, rejoice
with heart and soul and voice;
give ye heed to what we say:
Jesus Christ is born today;
ox and ass before him bow,
and he is in the manger now.
Christ is born today! Christ is born today!**
- 2. Good Christian friends, rejoice
with heart and soul and voice;
now ye hear of endless bliss:
Jesus Christ was born for this!
He has opened heaven's door,
and we are blest forevermore.
Christ was born for this! Christ was born for this!**
- 3. Good Christian friends, rejoice
with heart and soul and voice;
now ye need not fear the grave:
Jesus Christ was born to save!
Calls you one and calls you all
to gain the everlasting hall.
Christ was born to save! Christ was born to save!**

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***CHARGE AND BLESSING**

One: ...And let the gathered people of God say...
All: ...**Amen.**

POSTLUDE

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