

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, DECEMBER 8, 2024

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

SECOND SUNDAY of ADVENT

GATHERING

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP

One: A messenger from God is coming.
All: **Prepare the way of the Lord!**
One: A new day of mercy is dawning.
All: **Prepare the way of the Lord!**
One: A voice is crying in the wilderness.
All: **Prepare the way of the Lord!**

***OPENING HYMN** “Prepare the Way, O Zion” GtG 106

- 1. Prepare the way, O Zion,
your Christ is drawing near!
Let every hill and valley
a level way appear.
Greet One who comes in glory,
foretold in sacred story.
O blest is Christ who came
in God's most holy name.**
- 2. He brings God's rule, O Zion;
he comes from heaven above.
His rule is peace and freedom,
and justice, truth, and love.
Lift high your praise resounding,
for grace and joy abounding.
O blest is Christ who came
in God's most holy name.**

(continued...)

3. **Fling wide your gates, O Zion;
your Savior's rule embrace,
and tidings of salvation
proclaim in every place.
All lands will bow rejoicing,
their adoration voicing.
O blest is Christ who came
in God's most holy name.**

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American Lutheran Hymnal, 1930. *Public Domain.*

UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION

**Holy God, we confess we prefer the crooked paths
where we think we can hide from you.
We'd rather you didn't examine us too closely,
all we do and fail to do.
We grope in the maze of our tangled alliances,
and reap the pain of bad choices and ignorant gambles.
Yet you come not to judge,
but to save us from our sins and our love of sinning.
So come, Lord, to enter our aching hearts.
You promised that all flesh shall see your salvation.
In the certainty of your grace,
show us the straight path and the smooth way
that lead to your righteousness,
through Jesus Christ, who is the way. Amen.**

SILENT CONFESSION

ASSURANCE OF PARDON *(from Mark 1 & Matthew 1)*

One: Good news! "The right time has come, and the Kingdom of God is near!
Turn away from your sins and believe the Good News!"

All: **God has done great things for us. We are loved; we are forgiven; we
are claimed by God's grace.**

One: Believe the Good News of the Child born in Bethlehem: his name is
"Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

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.

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 OF THE ADVENT WREATH: The Candle of Peace

One: The angels sang of peace on earth, good will to all.

All: **Peace. We long for it. We disagree on it. We lack it. We need it.**

One: We must start somewhere in our quest for peace. But where? What is the beginning of our peace?

All: **The beginning of our peace, and our wholeness, is the confession of our brokenness. Only then can we be healed. Only then can our hearts and minds be filled with "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding."** (Philippians 4:7)

One: Jesus proclaimed, "The kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15): the good news of the forgiveness of our sins; the good news of our reconciliation to God and our restoration to wholeness; the good news that the fulfillment of our peace is in Jesus Christ.

All: **So let us join the angels in singing,
"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace...."** (Luke 2:14)

Sing: "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear" GtG 123 *(Verse 1)*

1. **It came upon the midnight clear,
that glorious song of old,
from angels bending near the earth,
to touch their harps of gold:
"Peace on the earth, good will to all,
from heaven's all gracious King":
the world in solemn stillness lay,
to hear the angels sing.**

Words: Edmund Hamilton Sears, 1849, alt.
Music: CAROL, Richard Storrs Willis, 1850
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SCRIPTURE READINGS Malachi 3:1-4
Luke 1:68-79
Luke 3:1-6

MALACHI 3:1-4 (New Revised Standard Version, updated edition)

¹ See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to the temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. ² But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner's fire and like washers' soap; ³ he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. ⁴ Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD, as in the days of old and as in former years.

LUKE 1:68-79 (New Revised Standard Version, updated edition)

⁶⁸ "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
who has looked favorably on the people and redeemed them.
⁶⁹ The Lord God has raised up a mighty savior for us
in the house of God's child David,
⁷⁰ as spoken through the mouth of the holy prophets from of old,
⁷¹ that we would be saved from our enemies and
from the hand of all who hate us.
⁷² Thus the Lord God has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors
and has remembered the holy covenant,
⁷³ the oath that God swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us ⁷⁴ that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve without fear, ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness
in God's presence all our days.
⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High,
for you will go before the Lord to prepare the Lord's ways,
⁷⁷ to give the people knowledge of salvation
by the forgiveness of their sins.
⁷⁸ Because of the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
⁷⁹ to shine upon those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace."

LUKE 3:1-6 (New Revised Standard Version, updated edition)

¹ In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³ He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of

repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴ as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord;

make straight the paths of the Lord.

⁵ Every valley shall be filled,

and every mountain and hill shall be made low,

and the crooked shall be made straight,

and the rough ways made smooth,

⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’ ”

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON by Pastor Bill Vincent

Amidst all the excitement and anticipation of Advent, there is heard a grating sound.

Like fingernails on life’s blackboard, we cringe and only want it to stop.

And it does not.

For faraway in the world’s wilderness a voice is tasked with crying out. And it does so, crying, “Prepare!” and “Repent!” And that call is meant for us.

The grating, cringe-worthy news of repentance: turning away from our sins and wrongdoings.

And as much as we might want it to stop – as much as we might want the church, and even our own worship service, to omit that news, that insistence – it will not.

For it is necessary.

To put it bluntly: what need have we for celebrating the coming of a Savior if we acknowledge no need for being saved?

Yet we do need to be saved...from ourselves, if nothing else: from our selfish and self-centered and self-serving and self-absorbed ways.

But in the midst of that grating call to repentance, note there is also heard an awe and wonder.

First of all, that of mercy: that God would – and does – receive us in our repentance, and our sincere cry for forgiveness; that God receives us in our sorrow for our sins, in our turning back – and returning – to God.

And that is occasion for joy.

And that is the meaning of reconciliation.

And that is peace: that renewal, that returning – like the Prodigal? – that knowing that we are back right where we are supposed to be in our relationship with God...

...Until the next time, when we have to repent again.

For, as Joel B. Green notes,

the repentance John proclaims...is not a one-time event. It refers to a continuing journey ... not so much the arrival at one's destination as it is the beginning of a journey. (*Connections C-1*, p.30)

A continuing journey that includes God's mercy.

But there is something else to that awe and wonder – subtle, it seems; almost an undercurrent – the awe and wonder that God would include us, and use us, and seek to partner with us in God's work.

The amazing grace that the holy God would seek to be seen in and be seen at work with this very unholy people – i.e., us.

Why would God deign to work through the likes of us?

And yet, God does.

And we see that awe and wonder when God's word comes, not to the powerful and seen – not to the Caesars and the Herods, not in Rome or Jerusalem or a palace – but to the insignificant, to the unseen, on the fringes, on the margins, across the tracks, even out in the wilderness, in the middle of nowhere.

To John. And to us.

That's who God blesses with the awe-inspiring task – and burden – of receiving and hearing and bearing God's word.

And it is in the juxtaposition of

-the call to repentance, and

-the call to 'task', if you will,

that we, in many ways, see most clearly the grace of the God who comes.

For the call to repentance is founded on the grating affirmation of our messing up, time and time again: our sinfulness. But also founded on the rock solid foundation of mercy and God's forgiveness.

And the call to 'task' extends that mercy to proclaim, to receive the word that comes, to partner with the God who comes: to be about that work of proclaiming and preparing for the salvation of our God.

And perhaps – oddly enough – Zechariah may be the best illustration of this grating, good news.

Zechariah: behind the scenes. Mentioned only once in our passages, and that almost as an aside.

Zechariah, who himself is found wanting, in need of repentance.

You see, Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, were older, beyond the time for having children. He was working in the temple when an angel – Gabriel – showed up and announced that Elizabeth would bear a child. And Zechariah's response was much like ours would have been: "Nah! You've got to be joking!"

And because of his unwillingness to believe the word of God, through the angel, he was struck mute: he could not speak for the entirety of Elizabeth's pregnancy; that nine months when Elizabeth, in her very body, bears witness to the truth of the word Zechariah would not believe.

It is only when what was spoken of by the angel comes true – John’s birth – that Zechariah’s tongue is loosed, and he can praise his God – and God’s work – with the ‘song’ we read.

But I imagine, too, that when he is done with his song, he stands amazed and awestruck, struck dumb again for a different reason: amazed that God would include him in the work of God’s will and grace and love.

As Robin Gallaher Branch remarks,

Zechariah’s prophecy exalts God, points to the dominant work of the [Coming One], and foretells God’s tender mercies on upcoming generations of God’s covenant people.

But then Branch notes this:

Zechariah conveys a sense of wonder that he is part of it. He – with all his arrogance and unbelief – basks now in the love, forgiveness, mercy of God.
(*Feasting on the Word C-1, “Exegetical Perspective”*)

He, who once disbelieved God’s word, now proclaims that very word.

He, who once dismissed his participation in God’s plan, has now become a very embodiment of God’s work.

Will we see ourselves in Zechariah, even as we prepare for the Child to come?

Even as we confess our failures to walk in the “straight and narrow,” will we seek to make broad and welcoming the pathway to our God, bringing low the mountainous egos of some and lifting up the rock-bottom esteem of others?

Even as we confess our entanglement/complicity in the injustice of systems and assumptions of our society, will we work to straighten out the paths to life’s opportunities, and to life itself?

Even as we confess our short-comings, relying on the mercy of God, will we prepare ourselves – and invite others also to be ready – to hear God’s word again, to see God’s work again, to receive God again and again and again?

This is that news that we hear: in the birth of a child, in the coming of another One.

This is the news that we hear and that we celebrate and that we embrace, even as it embraces us.

That, yes, we have fallen short. But God receives us in mercy.

And even more so: God wants to work God’s grace and mercy and life and love and peace in and through us...believe it or not.

I invite you to believe it.

***HYMN “On Jordan’s Banks the Baptist’s Cry” GtG 96**

**1. On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry
announces that the Lord is nigh;
awake and hearken, for he brings
glad tidings of the King of kings!**

(continued...)

~ 7 ~

2. **Then cleansed be every life from sin;
make straight the way for God within,
and let us all our hearts prepare
for Christ to come and enter there.**

3. **We hail you as our Savior, Lord,
our refuge and our great reward;
without your grace we waste away
like flowers that wither and decay.**

4. **Stretch forth your hand; our health restore,
and make us rise to fall no more.
O let your face upon us shine
and fill the world with love divine.**

Words: Charles Coffin, 1736; trans. John Chandler, 1837, alt.
 Music: WINCHESTER NEW, *Musikalisches Handbuch*, 1690;
 harm. William Henry Monk, 1847, alt.
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***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.**

(continued...)

**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

One: God of peace,
All: ...hear our prayers.

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*

**Generous God, we thank you for all our blessings.
Receive these gifts of gratitude,
and the offerings of our lives.
Purify them with your refining fire
so that they may serve your purposes
and shine your light into the world.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

SENDING

***CLOSING HYMN** “Blest Be the God of Israel” (Song of Zechariah) GtG 109

- 1. Blest be the God of Israel, who comes to set us free;
who visits and redeems us, who grants us liberty.
The prophets spoke of mercy, of freedom and release;
God shall fulfill that promise and bring the people peace.**
- 2. God from the house of David a child of grace has given;
a Savior comes among us to raise us up to heaven.
Before him goes the herald, forerunner in the way,
the prophet of salvation, the harbinger of day.**
- 3. On those who sit in darkness the sun begins to rise,
the dawning of forgiveness upon the sinner’s eyes.
God guides the feet of pilgrims along the paths of peace.
O bless our God and Savior with songs that never cease!**

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***CHARGE AND BLESSING**

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

POSTLUDE

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