

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, DECEMBER 15, 2024

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

THIRD SUNDAY of ADVENT

GATHERING

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP

One: O come, all you faithful people!
All: **Come to worship Christ the King!**
One: Worship the King, born in a manger.
All: **Worship the Christ-child, Lord of all.**
One: Rejoice in the coming of Emmanuel!
All: **Rejoice, for the Lord is in our midst!**

***OPENING HYMN** “O Come, All Ye Faithful” GtG 133 (*Verses 1, 3, & 4*)

1. **O come, all ye faithful,
joyful and triumphant;
O come ye; O come ye to Bethlehem!
Come, and behold him,
born the King of angels!**

Refrain:

**O come, let us adore him;
O come, let us adore him;
O come, let us adore him,
Christ, the Lord!**

3. **Sing, choirs of angels;
sing in exultation;
sing, all ye citizens of heaven above!
Glory to God, all
glory in the highest!**
(Refrain)

(continued...)

4. **Yea, Lord, we greet thee,
born this happy morning;
Jesus, to thee be all glory given;
Word of the Father,
now in flesh appearing!**
(Refrain)

Words: John Francis Wade, ca. 1743; trans. Frederick Oakeley, 1841, alt.
Music: ADESTE FIDELES, John Francis Wade, ca. 1743; harm. *The English Hymnal*, 1906
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UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Righteous and merciful God: you come to us in the stuff of human experience, yet we too often miss you. We fail to hear your voice when we are overly concerned with our own problems. We fail to perceive your leading when we are overly convinced that we must be right. We fail to sense your presence when we do not stop to look around us. Forgive us for missing you and not paying attention. Help us to recognize you in the face of everyone we meet. Help us to glimpse your guiding hand in our everyday affairs. Help us to listen for your voice in the gentle stillness of silence. Come to us, O Lord, and help us to worship and serve you with everything we have and all that we are. Amen.

SILENT CONFESSION

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

- One: The angel tells Joseph that the child forming in Mary's womb is to be named Jesus.
All: **"Call him Jesus," the angel says, "For he will save the people from their sins."**
One: From his birth through his resurrection, from age to age, Jesus is about salvation. This is good news!
All: **In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven!**

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 Joy

One: "Rejoice in the Lord, always; again I will say, Rejoice." (Philippians 4:4)

All: Joy seems synonymous with Christmas. Yet sometimes it eludes us or seems shallow and fleeting.

One: So what is the foundation of our joy?

All: The foundation of our joy is in the sorrow of a cross.

One: Even in the birth of Jesus we can detect the shadow of a cross. Mary was told "a sword will pierce your own soul too" (Luke 2:35), foreshadowing her coming sorrow at his coming death.

Yet even though he was killed, by the power of God he is alive. For

"The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.

This is the Lord's doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes."

(Psalm 118:22-23)

All: This is "good news of great joy for all the people." (Luke 2:10)

One: So "rejoice in the Lord, always; again I will say, Rejoice."

Sing: "Good Christian Friends, Rejoice" GtG 132 (*Verse 2*)

**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!**

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SCRIPTURE READINGS Zephaniah 3:14-20
Isaiah 12:1-6
Philippians 4:4-9

ZEPHANIAH 3:14-20 (New Revised Standard Version, updated edition)

¹⁴ *Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout, O Israel!*

*Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!*

¹⁵ *The Lord has taken away the judgments against you;
has turned away your enemies.*

*The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst;
you shall fear disaster no more.*

¹⁶ *On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:
“Do not fear, O Zion;*

do not let your hands grow weak.

¹⁷ *The Lord, your God, is in your midst,
a warrior who gives victory;*

*the Lord will rejoice over you with gladness;
will renew you in God’s love;*

the Lord will exult over you with loud singing

¹⁸ *as on a day of festival.”*

*I will remove disaster from you,
so that you will not bear reproach for it.*

¹⁹ *I will deal with all your oppressors
at that time.*

*And I will save the lame
and gather the outcast,
and I will change their shame into praise
and renown in all the earth.*

²⁰ *At that time I will bring you home,
at the time when I gather you;
for I will make you renowned and praised
among all the peoples of the earth,
when I restore your fortunes
before your eyes, says the Lord.*

ISAIAH 12:1-6 (New Revised Standard Version, updated edition)

¹ *You will say on that day:
“I will give thanks to you, O Lord,
for though you were angry with me,
your anger turned away,
and you comforted me.*

² *Surely God is my salvation;
I will trust and will not be afraid,
for the Lord is my strength and my might,
and has become my salvation.”*

³ *With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.* ⁴ *And you will say on that day:*

*“Give thanks to the Lord;
call on God’s name;
make known God’s deeds among the nations;
proclaim that the name of the Lord is exalted.*

*⁵ Sing praises to the Lord, who has done gloriously;
let this be known in all the earth.*

*⁶ Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion,
for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.”*

PHILIPPIANS 4:4-9 (New Revised Standard Version, updated edition)

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵ Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸ Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹ As for the things that you have learned and received and heard and noticed in me, do them, and the God of peace will be with you.

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON “The Joy of Presence” by Pastor Bill Vincent

Do you know the joy of presence? (Not ‘nts’ but ‘nce’.) The joy felt simply being with someone you know and care for, and who knows and cares for you: a sense of contentment, well-being, and satisfaction. There is something about the simple presence of someone to help dispel isolation and drive away fear. As they used to say, a long distance phone call may be the next best thing to being there, but there is no substitute for someone's presence.

How well the biblical writers knew that. As Zephaniah wrote,

*Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!*

...

*The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst;
you shall fear disaster no more.*

And Isaiah said,

*Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion,
for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.*

The joy of presence.

Now joy, in and of itself, is not such an easy subject to speak about. In some ways, it seems it is easier for us to speak about sorrow and hurt than about joy. The examples regarding sorrow and pain seem more real, more concrete. But joy is ... well... harder to put a finger on.

In fact, it may be almost impossible to define joy in and of itself. We can point to it. We can direct people toward it. We can suggest what it is. But it may be hard to really pin it down. Like one of those old glass thermometers with mercury in it; and you drop it and it breaks, and the mercury skitters about on the floor, extremely difficult to pick up.

At the same time, I think I know – and maybe we all know – where to find joy. For we all know the sense of satisfaction and well-being of being in the presence of another human being. How much greater is that sense of contentment when we acknowledge we are in the presence of the Almighty God who loves us and carries us and cares for us.

Now it is important to clarify further, though, what we're calling 'joy'.

It is much more than 'happiness'. I would identify happiness as an emotion, one that comes and goes, up and down, depending upon the circumstances of the day and one's situation.

But joy runs far deeper than that. Joy is not always having a smile on your face no matter what happens. It is not a perverse 'happy-go-lucky' attitude which laughs inappropriately in the face of some disaster or tragedy. Joy is not based on things going 'our way' in life. Joy is a sense of thanksgiving that God is with us even in the midst of trouble.

And joy is not based on material things, like the presents we receive for Christmas. For when the toys are all broken – the 'little kid' toys or the 'big kid' toys – when the toys are all broken and discarded and the clothes are worn and tattered, when the turkey is finished and forgotten and the tree stored and tucked away for yet another year, joy will remain. A joy based on the warmth of human friendship and companionship; a joy based on the conviction of the presence of the Holy One of Israel in our midst.

We need to remember that Paul's letter to the Philippians was written while he was in prison. Yet even in that confined and oppressive situation, Paul found reason to rejoice. In fact, this letter exudes more joy than any he wrote.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ... The Lord is near.

One translation has it, "The Lord is at hand." Nearby. Like the sense of expectation we celebrate in this season of Advent. "The Lord is near." Close to us, so that the Lord's very presence impinges upon our lives. Then Paul says,

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

I find it interesting to note that the words Paul uses for "rejoice" and "thanksgiving" are derivatives of the word translated as "grace." The joy and thanksgiving we experience are based on God's grace: the grace of God's presence with us, the grace of that "peace of God, which surpasses all understanding." Such joy Paul felt knowing the presence of the Lord with him, even as he sat in prison. He affirmed the depth of that joy which cannot be taken away no matter what the circumstances. A joy to be had even in the midst of affliction and adversity. For even in the midst of such difficulties, God is with us, to comfort and carry us, to guide and lead us, to nurture and strengthen us.

The prophet Habakkuk spoke of such a joy. In the final verses of the book of his writings, we find these words:

*Though the fig tree do not blossom,
nor fruit be on the vines,
the produce of the olive fail
and the fields yield no food,
the flock be cut off from the fold
and there be no herd in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the Lord,
I will joy in the God of my salvation. (3:17-18)*

The scenario he paints is bleak: the failure of the crops, the cattle devastated, his livelihood and means of survival severely threatened. Yet even in that situation he can speak of joy. And his words can speak powerfully to us today. The crops may not have been great this year; or the economy, you may think. Other problems – floods, fires; storms, war – tragedies of varying magnitudes may assault us in our lives. Yet we can still "rejoice in the Lord ... joy in the God of our salvation." For we know the sure foundation of our joy: the presence of the God who saves us; the presence of the one who comes to us, lying in a manger, even hanging on a cross, and greeting us in the garden where once he lay dead in a tomb.

You see, this joy does not ignore or treat superficially the pain and suffering of human experience. Nor is this joy negated by tears of sorrow. Instead, this joy undergirds us in the midst of pain, sorrow, and suffering, giving us strength and comfort, even through the valley of the shadow of death. For, as the psalmist wrote,

*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me. (Psalm 23:4)*

Here is a joy which knows no bounds. Isaiah, in our passage for this morning, paints a beautiful picture when he says,

With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.

A well that does not run dry, for the infinite, almighty, all-merciful God is its source. And the joy derived from such a source knows no end, no limits, not even the limits of life and death.

Here is a joy based on the sure foundation of the promise of Emmanuel – God with us – the sure foundation of the presence of God.

And we acknowledge and we affirm this presence through our worship and prayers, reminding ourselves that God is here in the midst of us when we gather to worship, and calling upon the God who is here with us as we join in prayer.

This presence is mediated to us through the wonder of creation as God touches our hearts through the stillness of a crystal clear winter night or the miracle of birth.

But most importantly, I suggest, the presence of God is mediated to us through the depth and honesty – the closeness and genuineness – of human relations.

Yesterday I was at a Special Called Meeting of the Presbytery. Yes, some people think presbytery meetings are nothing but dry, and sometimes that is true. But this meeting was painful and agonizing, for various reasons, and necessary. And as the meeting drew to a close

and people began to mingle, I had that experience of connecting with friends, with people there in the room. That connection, that bond, that relationship: affirming it, acknowledging it, embracing one another. That was the joy that I needed, that we all needed. To celebrate that life, that goodness, that joy, that presence, one with another.

For part of the mystery and wonder of the incarnation is our meeting the divine in one another, our experiencing God in each other's flesh and blood. So that we become an incarnation one to another. We become a re-presenting of the Word made flesh. We become for one another a renewed experience of the coming of the Christ-child.

In this season of Advent, we remind each other – not only verbally, but also simply by our presence – that God has come and dwelt in our midst...and dwells in our midst. We see it in the babe lying in a manger. We see it in the glint of love in the eye of our neighbor. We see it in the smile of recognition between sisters and brothers in Christ. The foundation of our abiding joy.

And so we sing,

Joy to the world! The Lord is come!

For the Holy One of Israel – the Lord God Almighty – is in our midst.

Let us celebrate the joy of God's presence with us always.

***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.

(continued...)

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.**

Words: Isaac Watts, 1719, alt.

Music: ANTIOCH, attr. George Frederick Handel, 1742;

arr. Lowell Mason, 1836

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***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH**

**In life and in death we belong to God.
Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit,
we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel,
whom alone we worship and serve.**

**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!"**

**With believers in every time and place,
we rejoice that nothing in life or in death
can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

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

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

One: God in our midst...

All: ...renew us in your presence and life.

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.**

(continued...)

**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*

We rejoice, O God, that you come to us daily with blessings too numerous to count. You are the Holy One whose presence relieves our anxieties, feeds our hungers, and stirs our compassion. Through our offerings, we express our gratitude. As we give of ourselves, we respond to your call to bear fruit and to make your name known among the nations. Use our offerings, even as you use us, to accomplish your purposes in Jesus Christ, our coming Lord, in whom we rejoice! Amen.

SENDING

***CLOSING HYMN** “Angels We Heard on High” GtG 113

- 1. Angels we have heard on high,
 sweetly singing o'er the plains,
 and the mountains in reply
 echoing their joyous strains.
 Gloria in excelsis Deo!
 Gloria in excelsis Deo!**
- 2. Shepherds, why this jubilee?
 Why your joyous strains prolong?
 What the gladsome tidings be
 which inspire your heavenly song?
 Gloria in excelsis Deo!
 Gloria in excelsis Deo!**

(continued...)

**3. Come to Bethlehem and see
him whose birth the angels sing;
come, adore on bended knee
Christ, the Lord, the newborn King.
Gloria in excelsis Deo!
Gloria in excelsis Deo!**

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***CHARGE AND BLESSING**

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

POSTLUDE

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