

DECEMBER 11, 2022
3RD SUNDAY OF ADVENT



St. John United Church of Christ
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Rev. Rosemary Captain

Liturgy – Rev. Mia M. McClain

LITANY OF THE ADVENT CANDLES:

One: So many of us feel grief in this advent season. Blue Christmas. Long nights. Missing lost loved ones. Even annual holiday parties can make joy elusive.

All: We are tempted to be overwhelmed by our grief.

One: And yet, today, God offers something else to us. God seeks to add joy after joy to our lives.

All: We have come to be overwhelmed with joy.

One: This morning we light three candles: the candles of hope, peace, and today's candle, joy. This candle reminds us of God's will that there might be joy in our lives- from the cozy sound of rain on a window to baby giggles at peek-a-boo, to the wonder of a mountain sunset, we know what joy is even if it is too often fleeting. Today, we allow ourselves to be overwhelmed with joy. Amen.

***RESPONSIVE CALL TO WORSHIP:**

One: Our souls magnify the Lord.
Our spirits rejoice in God our Savior!

All: We come today with eager hope, awaiting God's new revelation.

The mighty One has done great things!
God's mercy covers generations.

We come today with ready peace, trusting with anticipation.

The One who lifted up the lowly
And filled the hungry, dwells with us.

We come today with fervent joy, we worship with great expectation. (*Inspired by Luke 1:46b-55, The Magnificat*)

***INVOCATION:**

God of Mary, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Rahab—
God of us all, your children here and your children
afar— We enter this moment of worship with eager
anticipation. We know that even before a child would
come to lead the way, You were leading our way.
From the valleys of the shadows of death to the
tables in the presence of enemies, you have never
left us nor forsaken us. You rod and your staff have
guided us. Guide us now, O God. Make your presence
known as we worship you in spirit and in truth.
Amen.

***RESPONSIVE PRAYER OF CONFESSION:**

One: God calls us to be people of joy. And yet so
often we are not. Let us invite God's Spirit of love and
grace to draw us back again.

**All: Holy God, sometimes we steal joy from our own
lives as we rush on without gazing up to the stars.**

One: Sometimes we steal joy from others with cruel
words said in anger or an icy silence withholding
reconciliation.

**All: Sometimes we steal joy from everyone as we
collectively build systems that oppress. We protect
our own lies and pass down pain to the next
generation.**

One: Gracious God, forgive us and remind us again
that you created us for joy. Amen.

***WORDS OF ASSURANCE:** The news of Advent is
good news! Tidings of comfort and joy! God's gift of
the Christ child is for life, and love and joy. May that
joy overwhelm us. Amen.

FIRST TESTAMENT READING: Isaiah 35:1-10

Fertile wilderness

1 The desert and the dry land will be glad; the
wilderness will rejoice and blossom like the crocus.

2 They will burst into bloom, and rejoice with joy and
singing. They will receive the glory of Lebanon, the
splendor of Carmel and Sharon. They will see
the LORD's glory, the splendor of our God.

3 Strengthen the weak hands, and support the
unsteady knees. **4** Say to those who are panicking:
"Be strong! Don't fear! Here's your God, coming with
vengeance; with divine retribution God will come to
save you."

5 Then the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the
ears of the deaf will be cleared. **6** Then the lame will
leap like the deer, and the tongue of the speechless
will sing. Waters will spring up in the desert, and
streams in the wilderness.

⁷ The burning sand will become a pool and the thirsty ground, fountains of water. The jackals' habitat, a pasture; grass will become reeds and rushes. ⁸ A highway will be there. It will be called The Holy Way. The unclean won't travel on it, but it will be for those walking on that way. Even fools won't get lost on it; ⁹ no lion will be there, and no predator will go up on it. None of these will be there; only the redeemed will walk on it.

¹⁰ The LORD's ransomed ones will return and enter Zion with singing, with everlasting joy upon their heads. Happiness and joy will overwhelm them; grief and groaning will flee away.

THE MAGNIFICATE: Luke 1:46b-55

Mary praises God

⁴⁶ Mary said, "With all my heart I glorify the Lord!

⁴⁷ In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior. ⁴⁸ He has looked with favor on the low status of his servant. Look! From now on, everyone will consider me highly favored because the mighty one has done great things for me. Holy is his name.

⁵⁰ He shows mercy to everyone, from one generation to the next, who honors him as God. ⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations. He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones

and lifted up the lowly.⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty-handed.

⁵⁴ He has come to the aid of his servant Israel, remembering his mercy, ⁵⁵ just as he promised to our ancestors, to Abraham and to Abraham's descendants forever."

EPISTLE READING: James 5:7-10

Courageous patience

⁷ Therefore, brothers and sisters, you must be patient as you wait for the coming of the Lord. Consider the farmer who waits patiently for the coming of rain in the fall and spring, looking forward to the precious fruit of the earth. ⁸ You also must wait patiently, strengthening your resolve, because the coming of the Lord is near. ⁹ Don't complain about each other, brothers and sisters, so that you won't be judged. Look! The judge is standing at the door!

¹⁰ Brothers and sisters, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord as an example of patient resolve and steadfastness.

***GOSPEL LESSON: Matthew 11:2-11**

Question from John the Baptist

² Now when John heard in prison about the things the Christ was doing, he sent word by his disciples to

Jesus, asking, ³“Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?”

⁴Jesus responded, “Go, report to John what you hear and see. ⁵Those who were blind are able to see. Those who were crippled are walking. People with skin diseases are cleansed. Those who were deaf now hear. Those who were dead are raised up. *The poor have good news proclaimed to them.* ⁶Happy are those who don’t stumble and fall because of me.”

Appeal of John’s ministry

⁷When John’s disciples had gone, Jesus spoke to the crowds about John: “What did you go out to the wilderness to see? A stalk blowing in the wind? ⁸What did you go out to see? A man dressed up in refined clothes? Look, those who wear refined clothes are in royal palaces. ⁹What did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰He is the one of whom it is written: *Look, I’m sending my messenger before you, who will prepare your way before you.*

Significance of John’s ministry

¹¹“I assure you that no one who has ever been born is greater than John the Baptist. Yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

This is the Word of God. It is true and can be trusted.

Thanks be to God. Amen

MESSAGE: “The Question”

When I read our Gospel lesson we have today, I thought Matthew was giving us a chance to be privy to a conversation between Jesus and John the Baptizer. Well, they weren’t really talking to each other in person. And with John in prison now, I’m sure they were texting or emailing each other. (pause) I’m kidding of course.

Let’s go back to when these two men first met. John was preaching and baptizing people in the Jordan River. (Matthew 3) John tells the people, “I baptize with water those of you who have changed your hearts and lives. The one who is coming after me is stronger than I am. I’m not worthy to carry his sandals.” So that certainly praise for this person, the one to come.

And then Jesus comes to the Jordan River to be baptized. I believe John recognized Jesus right away, because John says, “I need to be baptized by you, yet you come to me?” Jesus answers, in the NRSV it reads “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” (*Matthew uses the term righteousness frequently. Here it means right conduct, correct observance, in accord with God’s will as revealed in scripture.*)

Returning to our reading today in chapter 11:2-3.
² Now when John heard in prison about the things the Christ was doing, he sent word by his disciples to Jesus, asking, ³ “Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?”

I’m wondering why John is asking that question? I thought John knew who Jesus was when he came to be baptized. Didn’t it sound like that to you? So why is John questioning the identity of Jesus now?

Some people think that the question was asked, not for John’s sake at all, but for the sake of John’s disciples. It may be that John’s disciples questioned if Jesus was the Messiah and should they follow him. John answers them, “If you have any doubts, go and see what Jesus is doing and your doubts will be at an end.”

Others think that the question had to do with impatience. Maybe John was thinking, “when is Jesus going to start on action? When is he going to blast his enemies? When is the day of God’s holy destruction to begin?” It may well be that John was impatient with Jesus because Jesus was NOT what John expected him to be. We’ve heard that before. Even Jesus’ disciples thought that the Messiah would be a warrior with a sword to chase away the Romans.

Some have thought that this question was all about hope and faith. John DID know who Jesus was

and now he put all his hopes to the test in this one question. Can you imagine this man who lived in the desert and now stuck in a very small damp? John probably knows that he will never get out and will soon die. He has been ministering to everyone in the region to change their hearts and ways. Was all that time wasted? Is he going to die and all his hopes die with him? How frustrating?! If John could be reassured that Jesus was the one who could continue this mission, his hopes could be confirmed. Even if he died, his hopes would not die with him.

John’s disciples go to Jesus with the question and Jesus invites them to watch what he does. They see him cure people and teach the people a better way to live. All the deeds he does are done with love. John’s disciples return to John in jail with their report. After they left, Jesus spoke to the crowds about John and praised him. Then Jesus asked the crowd why they had gone out to the wilderness to see John? What were they searching for?

As we continue reading through the Gospel of Matthew, hopefully we will find what each of us is searching for. But first you must decide what that is for you. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER: Beginning with silent personal prayer
We rejoice and shout for joy, splendid God, the your
glory is being revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ.
We read that good news with delight: the eyes of the
blind are opened, the ears of the deaf unstopped, the
lame leap like deer, and the dumb shout and sing.
The living water of the gospel brings flowers and
fruits of faith to the desert of unbelief and meaning-
lessness. All praise to you, Creator of the human
spirit, healer of the human body, renewer of the
broken spirit. Thank you.

As your Son Jesus came to us in great humility, so
may your church serve you with the same mind,
taking the form of servanthood and obedience.

We bring to you, gracious God, our thoughts and
concerns. We worry about those around us. We
worry about injustices we see. We worry about our
country and the ground it is built on. We worry about
climate change. We place all of these issues at your
feet, loving God. If we can't fix all our problems, we
can certainly pray.

We pray for all those who are hurting, physically
or emotionally. We pray for those who are searching
for solutions for their pain or disease or illness. And
we are extremely thankful when your servants in our
medical professions, and mental health professions,
and social services reach out to help those in need.

All these things we pray to you and to your Son
Jesus who taught us to pray . . .

**THE LORD'S PRAYER: 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. Lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.**

PRAYER RESPONSE: Third verse of

“Away in a Manger”

**Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask you to stay,
close by me forever, and love me, I pray.
Bless all the dear children in your tender care,
and fit us for heaven, to live with you there.**

INVITATION TO GENEROSITY: The path through
Advent, makes this stop on the third Sunday, a pause
for joy. So many people don't pause for joy. So many
can't pause for joy. The good news is for them most
of all. We share what we have now for all who need a
pause for joy.

***BENEDICTION:**

God forth with great expectation
Waiting for God's mercy to fill us

Wait for the God's grace to surround us
Wait for God's child to lead us
And in that waiting,
May God bless and keep you
May God's face shine upon you
May God be gracious to you
And give you peace.
Amen

PRAYER LIST: Urban Baum, David Seneczyn, Cheri Schutzenhofer, Becky Ballard, Rosemary Williams, Larry Wagner, Melvin Wagner, Alister and Garrett Pickens, Floyd Lorenz.