

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 14, 2025
THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT
ISAIAH 35:1-10
"CALLED THE HOLY WAY"



ST. JOHN
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
10207 Lincoln Trail
Fairview Heights, IL
Telephone 618-397-6323
e-mail– stjohnuccfairview@gmail.com
Website: www.stjohnfairview.org
Rev. Rosemary Captain
Organist – Sharon Banjavcic
Liturgy – Maria Mankin
Ushers –

(NCH) New Century Hymnal - CCLI LICENSE #11164431
Unless otherwise noted, all scripture texts
are from the **Common English Bible (CEB)**
*Please stand if comfortably able
and respond with words in **bold** print

SUMMARY OF SCRIPTURE TEXTS

From “Preaching Through the Christian Year” Fred Craddock

“As the church anticipates celebrating the Incarnation, the readings for the day highlight eschatological themes. (*eschatological means the doctrine of ‘last things’.* However this word in Christian theology is the basis for hope and joy. Eschatology is the expectation and the assurance that in the end God and God’s love will prevail. From “Essential Theological Terms” by Justo L. Gonzalez.

This effect is to recall that the birth of a particular baby is an event of the end times, of the culmination of God’s will for the world and human history. (*Personally, I never thought of the birth of Jesus as a prelude to the end.*)

Isaiah 35:1-10 celebrates the transformation of the wilderness into a fertile land; the healing of the blind, the deaf, the lame, and the dumb; and the restoration of Zion (Israel).

Luke 1:47-55 Praises to God for acts of salvation.

James 5:7-10 affirms that the coming of the Lord is at hand and counsels patience.

Matthew 11:2-11 John the Baptist is confirmed as the one who prepared the way of Jesus, and Jesus is confirmed as the Messiah through his healing of the sick and preaching of good news to the poor.

ANNOUNCEMENTS AND PRAYER CONCERNS:

THE BELL IS RUNG:

PRELUDE: “In the Bleak Midwinter” Bill Wolaver

PENNIES FOR MISSION: The Christmas Fund

***RESPONSIVE CALL TO WORSHIP:**

One: Joy is the gift God gives us upon waking in the morning to see beams of sun dance in dusty corners or hear much needed rain, even on a leaky roof.

Many: Joy is in the delight of tiny precious things.

One: Joy is the magnificence of the Redeemer when the tests come back clear, or when a school test is finally passed, or when the spirit is tested and chooses faith over fear.

Many: Joy is in the hands that hold our own while we sit silently and wait.

One: Joy is the patience of Emmanuel when petty disagreement turns into great injustice and change is slow to bend towards what is right and good.

Many: Joy is in the small actions we take each day to help righteousness and peace abound.

***INVOCATION**

Beloved, we come now seeking to recognize moments of delight when we feel connected to you. We bring our fragmented hearts filled with good cheer, gentle reverence, and utter amazement; we share our secret hopes, dependable comforts, and cozy moments of

advent peace. Rise up within us as we cherish the divinity of all that is good.

***OPENING HYMN: 122 “Come, O Long-Expected Jesus”**

***UNISON PRAYER FOR TRANSFORMATION AND NEW LIFE:**

Great Redeemer, too often we allow the idea of absolute happiness to block the existence of joy from our daily lives. Our hopes are crushed under the weight of the world’s sorrows, and our peace is disturbed by the agonies of an interconnected existence. We race toward solutions without pausing to meditate on the greater good. We lay bare the sorrows we carry without acknowledging the small delights that make the fight against injustice worthwhile. Relieve us of the pain we wear as a badge of honor, ignoring your love, even as it surrounds us.

***WORDS OF GRACE**

Our loving God does not spare us from pain, as empathy is born from suffering; but neither does God remove joy from our lives as a punishment for our indiscretions. We are bound together with a sacred braid of hope, peace, and joy designed to hold fast against the greatest adversities. In faith, no anguish can take hold

completely; no sorrow completely outweigh the possibility of joy. Praise be to God!

***GLORIA:**

Glory to the Creator, and the Christ and the Spirit so near. As it was from the start so it shall be forever, One God always here. (Repeat two more times.)
(end) **One God always here. One God always here.**

LIGHTING THE CANDLE OF JOY:

Today we light the pink Candle of Joy. Joy is often considered the easiest of these four weeks before Christ's holy birth.

We may cling to hope, and pray for peace, but in joy, we delight. In joy, our struggles are released. In joy, we find relief and comfort, a connection to friends and family and God. In joy, we find innocence within that has not been ground out.

The lighting of this candle is joy, and it reminds us of candles lit in our lives. No matter the size or color of the wax, no matter what room it is lit in, the act itself is exquisite. While the flame dances, we are one in the miracle and beauty of its light.

SCRIPTURE LESSONS:

First Testament: Isaiah 35:1-10 From "The Message"
The Voiceless Break into Song

35 ¹⁻² Wilderness and desert will sing joyously,
the badlands will celebrate and flower—
Like the crocus in spring, bursting into blossom,
a symphony of song and color.

Mountain glories of Lebanon—a gift.

Awesome Carmel, stunning Sharon—gifts.
God's resplendent glory, fully on display.
God awesome, God majestic.

³⁻⁴ Energize the limp hands,
strengthen the rubbery knees.

Tell fearful souls, "Courage! Take heart!

God is here, right here,
on his way to put things right

And redress all wrongs.

He's on his way! He'll save you!"

⁵⁻⁷ Blind eyes will be opened,
deaf ears unstopped,

Lame men and women will leap like deer,
the voiceless break into song.

Springs of water will burst out in the wilderness,
streams flow in the desert.

Hot sands will become a cool oasis,
thirsty ground a splashing fountain.

Even lowly jackals will have water to drink,
and barren grasslands flourish richly.

⁸⁻¹⁰ There will be a highway
called the Holy Road.

No one rude or rebellious
is permitted on this road.
It's for God's people exclusively—
impossible to get lost on this road.
Not even fools can get lost on it.
No lions on this road,
no dangerous wild animals—
Nothing and no one dangerous or threatening.
Only the redeemed will walk on it.
The people God has ransomed
will come back on this road.
They'll sing as they make their way home to Zion,
unfading halos of joy encircling their heads,
Welcomed home with gifts of joy and gladness
as all sorrows and sighs scurry into the night.

New Testament: Luke 1:46-55 From the NRSVue
The Magnificat Mary's Song of Praise

⁴⁶ And Mary said,
"My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowly state of his 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 his name;

⁵⁰ indeed, his mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly;
⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ He has come to the aid of his child Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

New Testament: 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: 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?”

⁴ Jesus responded, “Go, report to John what you hear and see. ⁵ *Those 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. (Isaiah 35:5-6, 61:1)* ⁶ Happy are those who don’t stumble and fall because of me.”

Appeal of John’s ministry

⁷ When 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? ⁸ What did you go out to see? A man dressed up in refined clothes? Look, those who wear refined clothes are in royal palaces. ⁹ What did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ He is the one of whom it is written: *Look, I’m sending my messenger*

before you, who will prepare your way before you. (Malachi 3:1)

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.

MESSAGE: “Is Jesus the Messiah?”

The ministry of John had ended not in the way he imagined. It was not John’s habit to soften the truth for anyone; and he was incapable of seeing evil without publicly criticizing it. He had spoken too fearlessly and too definitely for his own safety. King Herod got tired of John telling the world about Herod’s sin of seducing and then marrying his brother’s wife, so John was thrown into a dungeon.

For a man who was used to the wide open spaces of the wilderness, it must have been terrible. He began to question what he had said about Jesus. He had been so sure that Jesus was the one who was to come. That was one of the most common titles of the Messiah for whom the Jews waited with such eager expectation. Chained in a cold, damp and dark prison made him have second thoughts. Those who face death cannot afford to have doubts; they must be sure; and so John sent his disciples to Jesus with the question: “Are you he who is to come,

or shall we look for another?” There are many possible things behind that question.

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 when John and his disciples talked in prison, the disciples questioned whether Jesus was really he who was to come. So, John told them to ask Jesus. “If you have any doubts, go and see what Jesus is doing and your doubts will be at an end.” Perhaps John worried that he would die leaving his disciples without a shepherd.

It may be that John’s questions was the question of impatience. (*I believe many of us suffer from impatience,*) John’s message had been a message of doom. The axe was at the root of the tree; the winnowing process – the separation of grain from chaff, good from bad- had begun; the divine fire of cleansing judgment had begun to burn. (*Frightful images don’t you think?*) John was one of those fire and brimstone preachers that you’ve heard about.

It may be that 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 he was not what he expected him to be. We’ve talked about that before. The Jews expected the Messiah to be a warrior who would get rid of the

Romans; a knight in shining armor on a white horse with a big sword to save the day. That’s what we have seen in the movies, right?

Another thought about John’s question could have been nothing less than the question of losing faith and hope. (*Another thing we frequently do.*) John had seen Jesus at the baptism; in prison he had thought more and more about him; and the more he thought, the more certain he was that Jesus was he who was to come; and now he put all his hopes to the test in this one question. It may be that this is not the question of a despairing and an impatient man, but the question of one in whose eyes the light of hope shone, and who asked for nothing but confirmation of that hope.

Then came Jesus’ answer; and in his answer we hear the hint of confidence. Jesus’ answer to John’s disciples was; “Go back, and don’t tell John what I am saying; tell him what I am doing. Don’t tell John what I am claiming; tell him what is happening.” Jesus thought that the biggest acid test should be applied to him, Jesus. And that test was the deeds of Jesus. Jesus was the only person who could ever demand without qualification to be judged not by what he said but by what he did.

The things that Jesus did in Galilee he still does. In him, those who were blind to the truth about themselves about their neighbors and about God have their eyes opened;

in him, those whose feet were never strong enough to remain in the right way are strengthened;
in him, those who were tainted with the disease of sin are cleansed;
in him, those who were deaf to the voice of conscious and of God begin to listen;
in him, those who were dead and powerless in sin are raised to newness and loveliness of life;
in him, the poorest people inherit the riches of the love of God.

Finally comes the warning; “blessed is he who takes no offence at me.’ This was spoken to John, and it was spoken because John had only grasped half the truth. John preached the gospel of divine holiness with divine destruction. Jesus preached the gospel of divine holiness with divine love. So Jesus says to John, “Maybe I am not doing the things you expected me to do. But the powers of evil are being defeated not by irresistible power, but by unanswerable love.” Sometimes people can be offended at Jesus because Jesus cuts across their ideas of what faith and conviction to God should be.

There is no doubt, however, about Jesus’ estimate of John. He was, said Jesus, no weather vane, running with the wind, nor was he a fashion setter. John was not just a prophet, but more than a prophet. “More than a prophet” apparently refers to John’s introduction of the

One toward whom the other prophets pointed and to John’s unique place at the door of the messianic age.

P.S. I admit that verse 11:11b is puzzling to me. “Yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” After looking through many study Bibles, the only explanation that I found was that in the kingdom of God, there is a reversal of status for those who enter.
Amen.

SPECIAL MUSIC: “Welcome to Our World” Video

PASTORAL PRAYER:

We rejoice and shout for joy, splendid God, that your glory has been revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ. We read that good news in our scriptures in today’s liturgy. The eyes of the blind are opened, the ears of the deaf unstopped, the lame shall leap like deer, and the dumb shout and sing. The Crucified is raised from the dead and the living water of the gospel brings flowers and fruits of faith to the desert of unbelief and meaninglessness. And we are very grateful.

It is with joy that we know we can come to you, dear God, with petitions for our world and all people. 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 to the point of death. Cleanse your church from proud pretensions that parade

earthly power so contrary to the birth, life, and death of Jesus Christ. Grant to all your churches everywhere a watchful spirit, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, laying aside the works of darkness and putting on the garments of light, living honorably every day.

Preserve our nation with the salt of Christian disciples, called to lead us, to promote good order, public health, sound education, useful industry, and upright living, setting a good example for the general citizenry in good faith and mutual service.

We commend to you our loved ones, pregnant women and nursing mothers, the unborn and infants, the elderly frail and all who are dependent on others for life. Heal the sick, calm the anxious, comfort the bereaved, and prepare the dying with resignation and trust in your parentlike kindness. We pray for all those on our prayer list and all those we hold dearly in our hearts.

We pray as your son has taught us, . . .

OUR LORD'S PRAYER:

PRAYER RESPONSE:

**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:

There is a simple joy to be found in sharing what we have. Regardless of how much or how little that may be, a portion belongs to God. What God desires is not an altar of sacrifices, but an outstretched hand. Give what you can, and delight in the joy your gift will bring.

OFFERTORY: "What Child Is This?" Rob Roy Perry

DOXOLOGY:

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;

Praise God, all creatures here below;

Praise God above you heavenly host;

Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen

***UNISON PRAYER OF DEDICATION AND THANKSGIVING:**

Precious God, take these gifts in the spirit they were given, with joy and love for our siblings around the world. Let us remember that we all have times of trouble. We will each stand before you, hands clasped in prayer, begging for relief. Use what we have here to bring that relief where it is needed most. Amen

***CLOSING HYMN: 104 "We Hail You God's Anointed"**

***BENEDICTION:**

God, lead us from this time of prayer and reflection with dancing! Allow the joy within each one of us to shine

upon those who suffer. Let our light be magnified by your grace each and every day! May we leave this time of worship refreshed, ready to take your radical ministry of extravagant hope, everlasting peace, exuberant joy, and abundant love into the world. Amen.

***BENEDICTION RESPONSE:**

“Let There Be Peace on Earth”

THE BELL IS RUNG:

POSTLUDE: “Lift Up Your Heads, O Mighty Gates”

Franklin Ritter

PRAYER LIST: Camille Abboud, Becky Ballard, Mary Lou and Urban Baum, Ronald Bopp, Private Ben Boyle, Lorraine Brown, Geralyn Gammon, Marilyn Paul, Ella Perez, Pam and Syd Safriet, Gloria Stephens, Yvonne Weber, Sue and Dave in Florida, Russ Hartmann.