

JANUARY 25, 2025

THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY



St. John United Church of Christ

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Ushers -

(NCH) New Century Hymnal - CCLI LICENSE #11164431

*Please stand if comfortably able.

Respond with words in **bold** print.

SUMMARY OF SCRIPTURE TEXTS

From “Preaching Through the Christian Year” Fred Craddock
Isaiah 9:1-4 Light shining in darkness is the central theme. Its depiction of the messianic king has become a symbol of hope.

Psalm 27:1, 4-9 The image of light is also the note on which the psalm opens, with its declaration “The Lord is my light and my salvation.”

1 Corinthians 1:10-18 Paul is exhorting the Corinthians to realize the unity that has eluded them.

Matthew 4:12-23 This begins the semi-continuous reading which runs through the next five weeks. Even so, Epiphany themes are dominant in the prophetic announcement taken from Isaiah 9:1-4 above.

ANNOUNCEMENTS AND PRAYER CONCERNS:

THE BELL IS RUNG:

PRELUDE: “He Leadeth Me” Jerry Ray

PENNIES FOR MISSION: Dubois Camp

*RESPONSIVE CALL TO WORSHIP:

Leader: Come, people of God—the dawn is breaking!
A new day rises where sorrow had settled in.

People: The dawn is breaking— and we rise with it.

Leader: Where burdens have bent us low, the Holy One draws near, steadyng our steps.

People: The Holy One draws near— and we gather our courage.

Leader: Where yokes have weighed on shoulders and spirits, God is loosening what has held us down.

People: What held us down is lifting— and we move toward freedom.

Leader: Come, all who yearn for justice; all who hope for healing; all who hunger for joy.

People: We come to the dawning way, we come to the hopeful way, we come to the way God makes glorious.

***INVOCATION:**

Holy One, Your light dawns where our shadows are deepest. You are never far, your presence remains with us. Awaken us to the glimmers of your glory breaking into our world's weariness. Shine upon the paths we walk— paths obstructed by fear, uncertainty, and the heavy burdens our communities carry. Yet, your compassion rises like morning light! Reveal in us the places where liberation is already taking root. As you drew near to Galilee's borderlands, Draw near to us today. Let us behold your radiance in overlooked places and in one another. Make us ready, alert, and courageous— a people who move with your Spirit, who join your work of release, and who make glorious the way where your justice and joy can flourish. Descend upon us, Spirit of the Living God. Remain with us.

Awaken us. And guide our worship into the brightness of your new day. Amen.

***OPENING HYMN: 164 “Arise, Your Light Is Come”**

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

Holy Companion of our difficult days, you call us toward what is new even when we feel worn or uncertain. We confess the weight we carry— worries we rehearse, the fears we nurture, the habits that hold us tight, patterns we cling to, the moments we turn from compassion, the truths we avoid.

Unbind what tightens around our hearts. Lift what has grown too heavy. Make room in us for generosity, justice, and the courage to begin again. Shape us for your healing work as this new day unfolds. Amen.

***WORDS OF GRACE:**

Hear the good news of the Gospel: People who have walked under heavy burdens have been met by the One who lifts them. People who have carried what felt unshakeable have felt the yoke break from their shoulders. Into every place of strain or sorrow, God's mercy draws near. God's compassion reaches out. God's grace opens a way forward. In this promise, receive your freedom. In this grace, begin again. Amen.

***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.**

SCRIPTURE LESSONS:

**OLD TESTAMENT: Isaiah 9:1-4 From “The Message”
A Child Has Been Born—for Us!**

9 But there'll be no darkness for those who were in trouble. Earlier he did bring the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali into disrepute, but the time is coming when he'll make that whole area glorious—the road along the Sea, the country past the Jordan, international Galilee.

²⁻⁷ The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. For those who lived in a land of deep shadows — light! sunbursts of light!

You repopulated the nation, you expanded its joy. Oh, they're so glad in your presence! Festival joy! The joy of a great celebration, sharing rich gifts and warm greetings. The abuse of oppressors and cruelty of tyrants— all their whips and clubs and curses— Is gone, done away with, a deliverance as surprising and sudden as Gideon's old victory over Midian. The boots of all those invading troops, along with their shirts soaked with innocent blood, Will be piled in a heap and burned, a fire that will burn

for days! For a child has been born—for us! the gift of a son—for us!

He'll take over the running of the world. His names will be: Amazing Counselor, Strong God, Eternal Father, Prince of Wholeness.

His ruling authority will grow, and there'll be no limits to the wholeness he brings. He'll rule from the historic David throne over that promised kingdom. He'll put that kingdom on a firm footing and keep it going with fair dealing and right living, beginning now and lasting always.

The zeal of God-of-the-Angel-Armies will do all this.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM: Psalm 27:1, 4-9 Page 637

EPISTLE: 1 Corinthians 1:10-18 (CEB)

Rival groups in Corinth

¹⁰ Now I encourage you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ: Agree with each other and don't be divided into rival groups. Instead, be restored with the same mind and the same purpose. ¹¹ My brothers and sisters, Chloe's people gave me some information about you, that you're fighting with each other. ¹² What I mean is this: that each one of you says, “I belong to Paul,” “I belong to Apollos,” “I belong to Cephas,” “I belong to Christ.” ¹³ Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you, or were you

baptized in Paul's name? ¹⁴Thank God that I didn't baptize any of you, except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵so that nobody can say that you were baptized in my name! ¹⁶Oh, I baptized the house of Stephanas too. Otherwise, I don't know if I baptized anyone else. ¹⁷Christ didn't send me to baptize but to preach the good news. And Christ didn't send me to preach the good news with clever words so that Christ's cross won't be emptied of its meaning.

Human wisdom versus the cross

¹⁸The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are being destroyed. But it is the power of God for those of us who are being saved.

***GOSPEL: Matthew 4:12-23 (CEB)**

Move to Galilee

¹²Now when Jesus heard that John was arrested, he went to Galilee. ¹³He left Nazareth and settled in Capernaum, which lies alongside the sea in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali. ¹⁴This fulfilled what Isaiah the prophet said:

¹⁵Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, alongside the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles, ¹⁶the people who lived in the dark have seen a great light, and a light has come upon those who lived in the region and in shadow of death.

¹⁷From that time Jesus began to announce, "Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!"

Calling of the first disciples

¹⁸As Jesus walked alongside the Galilee Sea, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew, throwing fishing nets into the sea, because they were fishermen. ¹⁹"Come, follow me," he said, "and I'll show you how to fish for people." ²⁰Right away, they left their nets and followed him. ²¹Continuing on, he saw another set of brothers, James the son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with Zebedee their father repairing their nets. Jesus called them and ²²immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

Ministry to the crowds

²³Jesus traveled throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues. He announced the good news of the kingdom and healed every disease and sickness among the people.

MESSSAGE: "What is the Kingdom of God"

With thoughts by Rev. N.T. Wright

I love Southern Illinois. I think we live in the best area. We can have small town life or, in 30 to 60 minutes we can have the best that a large city can offer. Professional sports and operas. Large research hospitals and many

top-notch universities or community colleges that offer classes on everything from nursing to auto mechanics.

There is one disadvantage to living in this region and that's frequent tornadoes. When we hear those sirens to warn us, we grab our shoes and head for the basement or an inside room or closet with no windows and we take a pillow or large blanket with us for protection.

Our scripture lessons today are giving us a different kind of warning, where we don't need basements for shelter. Jesus' warning is in verse 17 of our Gospel text; "Change your hearts and lives! Here comes, not a tornado, but here comes the kingdom of heaven." When we hear that, what are we supposed to do? Run and hide? And what is **the kingdom of heaven** anyway? What does it look like? Will it cause destruction? Will it raise our home insurance rates?

We need to know what the kingdom of heaven is that Jesus said was approaching, and what action he expected us to take.

Though this is central to everything Jesus was and did, and to everything that the gospels say about him, it is remarkable how few people really grasp what was going on. The author of the gospel of Matthew normally has Jesus speak of the "kingdom of heaven"; the other gospels normally use the phrase "kingdom of God". Saying "heaven" instead of "God" was a regular Jewish way of avoiding the word "God" out of reverence and

respect. You might have seen the word God written like G-d, again to avoid taking the name of God in vain.

We must clear our minds of any thought that "kingdom of heaven" means a **place**, namely "**heaven**" is seen as the place where God's people go after they die. That, after all, would make no sense here. How could this sort of kingdom be said to be "approaching" or "arriving"?

No. If "kingdom of heaven" means the same as "kingdom of God", then we have a much clearer idea of what Jesus had in mind. Anyone who was warning people about something that was about to happen must have known that the people he was talking to would understand. And any first-century Jew, hearing someone talking about God's kingdom, or the kingdom of heaven, would know. This meant revolution.

To help us better understand this whole kingdom thing, let's be a person who grew up with Jesus; about the same age, living in the same town, at the same time as Jesus. Let's look at what life was like back then.

Jesus grew up in the shadow of kingdom-movements. The Romans had conquered Jesus' homeland about sixty years before he was born. They were the last in a long line of pagan nations to do so. They had installed Jews such as Herod the Great and then his sons after him, as puppet monarchs to do their dirty work for them. Most

Jews resented both parts of this arrangement, and longed for a chance to revolt.

But they weren't just eager for freedom in the way that most subject people are. They wanted it because of what they believed about God, themselves, and the world. If there was one God who had made the whole world, and if they were God's special people, then it couldn't be God's will to have pagan foreigners ruling them. What's more, God had made promises in their scriptures that one day God would indeed rescue them and put everything right. And these promises focused on one thing in particular; God would become king. King not only of Israel but of the whole world.

A king who would bring justice and peace at last, who would turn the upside-down world the right way up again. There would be no king but God, the revolutionaries believed. God's kingdom, the kingdom of heaven, was what they longed for, prayed for, worked for, and were prepared to die for.

And now Jesus was declaring that God's kingdom, the sovereign rule of heaven, was approaching like an express train. (*Sovereign means independent, autonomous, free, supreme, absolute, dominant, superior.*) Those who were standing idly by had better take note and get out of the way. God's kingdom meant danger as well as hope. If justice and peace are on the way, those who have twisted justice or disturbed peace

may be in trouble. They had better get their act together while there's time. And the good old word for that is, "REPENT".

The trouble with that word, too, is that people have often not understood it. (*Lent is coming so it's a good time to talk about this word, repent.*) Many people have thought that repent means to feel bad about yourself. It doesn't. It means "change direction"; turn around ad go the other way; or stop what you're doing and do the opposite instead! How you feel about it isn't the really important thing. It's what you DO that matters.

Jesus believed that his contemporaries were going in the wrong direction. They were bent on revolution of the standard king; military resistance to occupying forces, leading to a take-over of power. Part of the underlying theme of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness was the suggestion that he should use his own status, as God's Messiah, to launch some kind of movement that would sweep him to power, privilege and glory.

The problem with all these movements was that they were fighting darkness with darkness, and Israel was called – and Jesus was called – to bring God's **light** into the world. That's why Matthew hooks up Jesus' early preaching with the prophecy of Isaiah that spoke about people in the dark being dazzled by sudden light, a prophecy which went on to speak about the child to be born, the coming Messiah, through whom God would

truly liberate Israel at last (Isaiah 9:1-7). Jesus could see that the standard kind of revolution, fighting, and killing in order to put an end to . . . fighting and killing, was nonsense. Doing it in God's name was a blasphemous nonsense. (*It sounds like what happened in the crusades.*)

But the trouble was that many of his contemporaries were eager to get on with the fight. Jesus' message of **repentance** was not, therefore, that they should feel sorry for personal and private sins (*though he would of course want that as well*), but that as a nation they should stop rushing towards the cliff edge of violent revolution, and instead go the other way, towards God's kingdom of light and peace and healing and forgiveness, for themselves and for the world.

What would happen if they didn't? Gradually, as Matthew's story develops, we begin to realize. If the light-bearers insist on darkness, darkness they shall have. If the peace-people insist on war, war they shall have. If the people called to bring God's love and forgiveness into the world insist on hating everyone else, hatred and all that it brings will come crashing around their ears. This won't be an arbitrary judgment or punishment; it will be what they themselves have been calling for. This is why they must repent while there is still time. The kingdom is coming, and they are standing in the way. (*Maybe that is why it is taking so long for*

peace to some in our world. There are too many of us bringing darkness and standing in the way.)

Matthew says to us that the kingdom which Jesus established through his own work, and his death and resurrection, now faces us with the same challenge. Are we working to extend God's kingdom in the world? Or are we standing in its way?

As you can see, Rev. Wright has much to say to us at this very moment in our country and right before the season of Lent. It's a lot to process. It's a lot to think about. It's a lot to pray about.

So, I would like to pause here and give us the opportunity to silently process, think, and pray about Rev. Wright's message before we hear our special music.

SILENT PRAYER:

OUR LORD'S PRAYER:

PRAYER RESPONSE: 772 "Nothing Can Trouble"

**Nothing can trouble, nothing can frighten,
Those who seek God shall never go wanting.
Nothing can trouble nothing can frighten,
God alone fills us.**

SPECIAL MUSIC: "Christ Be Our Light" video with words

INVITATION TO GENEROSITY:

Faithful Friends, when burdens are lifted and the way before us opens, gratitude rises in us like a new day. The God who breaks the yoke of despair also invites us to join the work of healing, justice, and joyful community. In thanksgiving for the mercy we have received, and in hope for the world God is shaping, let us offer our gifts—our resources, our commitments, our lives—so that the way of compassion may grow wide enough for all. Let us give with courage and with joy. Amen.

OFFERTORY: "We Are Called" David Haas***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 THANKSGIVING AND DEDICATION:**
O Way-Making God, You are the source of every mercy and every new beginning, we give thanks for the gifts gathered here and for the hope you are stirring among us. As you lift burdens from weary shoulders and open paths we could not see before, shape these offerings into acts of healing, deeds of justice, and lives of shared joy. Bless the giving and the givers, that generosity may

widen your way and strengthen the communities we touch. With gratitude for all you are doing in us and through us, we dedicate these gifts to the work of compassion you entrust to our care. Amen.

***CLOSING HYMN: "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus"**

I have decided to follow Jesus,
I have decided to follow Jesus,
I have decided to follow Jesus,
No turning back, no turning back.

The world behind me, the cross before me...
Though none go with me, I still will follow...
Will you decide now to follow Jesus?...

***BENEDICTION:**

Go now in the presence of the One who lifts what is heavy, breaks what binds, and opens the way before you. As a new day unfolds, may courage rise in you, may compassion guide you, and joy find room to grow. The Spirit who descends and remains goes with you, goes before you, and goes within you—making glorious the way you walk.

Go in peace, to begin again. Amen.

***BENEDICTION RESPONSE: 571**

“O God of Love, O God of Peace” First verse only

**O God of love, O God of peace,
Make wars throughout the world to cease.
The wrath of human wrong restrain;
Give peace, O God, give peace again!**

Pam and Syd Safrriet, Gloria Stephens, Yvonne Weber,
Sue and Dave in Florida.

THE BELL IS RUNG.

POSTLUDE: “Channels Only” Stewart Landon

Service Prayers for the Third Sunday after Epiphany was written by Rev. Michael Anthony Howard, who serves as the Minister of Faith in Action for the Living Water Association, Ohio North East, of the Heartland Conference, United Church of Christ. Michael's work supports congregations as they weave theology, justice, and place-based ministry into faithful action that bears prophetic witness to God's dwelling among us.

PRAYER LIST: Cheri Schutzenhofer, Hugo Lohman, Terry Thorpe, Grandson Landon, Lynne Knecht, Camille Abboud, Becky Ballard, Mary Lou and Urban Baum, Ronald Bopp, Private Ben Boyle, Geralyn Gammon, Sue Ganschinietz, Russ Hartmann, Marilyn Paul, Ella Perez,