

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, DECEMBER 10, 2023

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

'THIRD SUNDAY of ADVENT'

GATHERING

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP *(based on Psalm 126)*

One: The Lord has done great things for us,
All: and we rejoice.
One: Those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.
All: For the Lord has come to us.
Blessed be the name of the Lord!

***OPENING HYMN** "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" GtG 88 *(Verses 1, 6, & 7)*

**1. O come, O come, Emmanuel,
and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here
until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
shall come to thee, O Israel.**

**6. O come, thou Dayspring, come and cheer
our spirits by thine advent here;
disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
and death's dark shadows put to flight.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
shall come to thee, O Israel.**

**7. O come, Desire of nations, bind
all peoples in one heart and mind;
bid envy, strife, and discord cease;
fill the whole world with heaven's peace.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
shall come to thee, O Israel.**

(next page...)

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UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Gracious God, have mercy upon us as we make our confession. The afflicted await good tidings. The brokenhearted would have their wounds bound. The captives still yearn for freedom, and those who mourn remain to be comforted. Yet we have focused on ourselves and neglected to help others. We have been far more concerned for our own welfare than for the building up of Christ's body. We look for what we can gain more than for what we can give. Forgive us, we pray, for we have failed to follow Christ's call to faithful ministry. Restore us and re-establish your rule among us, that we may share the healing and loving words of Christ with all the world, and love our neighbors as ourselves. We ask this in Jesus' name, Amen.

SILENT CONFESSION

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

One: The One who comes in the Child of Bethlehem is the One who comes to redeem and restore.
All: **His name is Jesus, "for he will save his people from their sins."**
One: This is indeed "good news of great joy for all the people." So rejoice and be glad, for in Jesus Christ we are loved, in Jesus Christ we are accepted, in Jesus Christ we are forgiven.
All: **"Glory to God in the highest heaven!"**

THE PEACE

One: The peace of Christ be with you.
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: The first candle reminds us of the hope fulfilled in Christ's birth and the hope we have in him. The second candle reminds us of the peace that Christ brings to the world and shares with us by his presence. The candle that we light today reminds us of the great joy surrounding the birth of Jesus.

All: Angels sang of "good news of a great joy for all the people." The shepherds went to Bethlehem to "see this thing which the Lord had made known to them, ... and returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen." (Luke 2:10,15,20)

One: For behold, a child is born. Behold, the King has come. And his coming means joy for all the world.

Let us pray.

Unison: Blessed Lord, we rejoice in your coming in mercy and peace. You cared enough to come and live among us. You taught us the meaning of love. You showed us the way of life. You share with us joy in communion with you. Thank you, Savior Christ. May our lives be songs of praise as we sing of our joy to the world. Amen.

Sing: 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.

"Joy to the World" GtG 134
Words: Isaac Watts, 1719, alt.
Music: ANTIOCH, attr. George Frederick
Handel, 1742; arr. Lowell Mason, 1836
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SCRIPTURE READINGS Isaiah 61:1-4,8-11
John 1:6-8,19-28
I Thessalonians 5:16-24

ISAIAH 61:1-4,8-11 (New Revised Standard Version+)

¹ *The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
the Lord God has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim release to the captives,
and liberation to the prisoners;*
² *to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,
and a day of vindication for our God;
to comfort all who mourn;*
³ *to provide for those who mourn in Zion –*

*to give them a crown in place of ashes,
the oil of joy in place of mourning,
the mantle of praise in place of discouragement.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord, to display the glory of the Lord.*
4 *They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.*
8 *For I the Lord love justice,
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;
I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.*
9 *Their descendants shall be known among the nations,
and their offspring among the peoples;
all who see them shall acknowledge
that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed.*
10 *I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,
my whole being shall be joyful because of my God;
for the Lord has clothed me with clothes of victory,
wrapped me in a robe of righteousness,
like a bridegroom in a priestly crown,
and like a bride adorned in jewelry.*
11 *For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.*

JOHN 1:6-8,19-28 (Common English Bible+)

⁶ *A man named John was sent from God. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning the light, so that through him everyone would believe in the light. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify concerning the light.*

¹⁹ *This is John's testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him, "Who are you?"*

²⁰ *John confessed (he did not deny but confessed), "I am not the Messiah."*

²¹ *They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?"*

John said, "I am not."

"Are you the prophet?"

John answered, "No."

²² *They asked, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"*

²³ *John replied,*

*“I am a voice crying out in the wilderness,
Make the Lord’s path straight,
just as the prophet Isaiah said.”*

²⁴ Those sent by the Pharisees ²⁵ asked him, “Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” ²⁶ John answered, “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, ²⁷ the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the straps of his sandal.” ²⁸ This encounter took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

I THESSALONIANS 5:16-24 (New Revised Standard Version)

¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. ¹⁹ Do not suppress the Spirit. ²⁰ Do not despise the words of prophets, ²¹ but test everything; hold fast to what is good; ²² abstain from every form of evil.

²³ May the very God of peace sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ The one who calls you is faithful and will do this.

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON “Aligning with Joy” by Pastor Bill Vincent

There is joy in life.

Joy in knowing and doing the will of God: working together with God’s intent, being a part of God’s will, being in tune with God’s purposes and plan and life, for us and for the world.

Like the servant mentioned in Isaiah 61, who is called and sent to bring good news to the people; and the people, who will rebuild what is devastated and love justice – just like the Lord.

Like John the Baptist, who is clear about his calling – about who he is and who he is not – who is clear about his part in God’s plan: that it is not to draw attention to himself but to the Light that all need to see.

Like the Thessalonians – and us – who “*rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances*” and “*hold fast to what is good*” and “*abstain from every form of evil.*”

Not that life like this is without its difficulties, which may seem to preclude that joy.

For we can, and do, turn from God’s way and try to go our own way; which may work for a while, but not really, not for long.

But then there is joy in confession. Yes, you heard me correctly: there is joy in confession. Joy in “getting it off my chest”: the burden of sin. Relief in being over the deceit and secrecy, the hiding. Release by being out in the open: in the Light.

And, of course, joy in forgiveness and restoration of the broken relationship. Like the joy of the father in the return of the prodigal – and aren’t we all prodigals at one time or another...or many times?

And, again, not that this life – not that there isn't pain.

For we can experience resistance to this way of life – not only out there, from others, but also in here, within ourselves. The struggle between doing God's thing and doing our own, between going our way and choosing God's.

A struggle that can be severe, and very difficult to discern the way through that struggle.

But then, that is part of what Paul means when he writes to the Thessalonians, "*Test everything.*" Test out the words of the prophets and the 'spirits' that call to you and seek to draw you in one direction or another. For there are plenty of voices clamoring for you to "Do this!" or "Do that!", to follow this path or choose this direction. Test them, in order better to discern which voices and which words and which prophecies are calling you in the right direction: i.e., are actually God's voice and God's word and God's directing.

By what standard do we "test" these voices, these claims? We hear something of that standard when we hear the charge to "*bind up the brokenhearted,*" to "*comfort all who mourn,*" and to be about the work of righteousness and mercy. We hear it in the words "*to do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with our God*" (Micah 6:8). We see it in the life of Jesus Christ: in his reaching out to those on the margins; in his exercising his power for the welfare of the lowly and outcast; in his words of compassion and his deeds of grace. And in his reminder, "*by their fruits you will know them*" (see Matthew 7:15-20).

You may remember a TV show from a number of years back: "The A-Team." A group of military vets were on the lamb, running from the law for a crime they didn't commit. Along the way, they offered their services to others, to help right wrongs and find justice for others in need. In the midst of the work, sometime during each episode, their leader, 'Hannibal' Smith, would say, "I love it when a plan comes together."

"I love it when a plan comes together."

There is indeed a joy, a satisfaction, a sense of purpose fulfilled, when a plan – God's plan – comes together in my life, in the life of those around me, in the life of the world. When I know – when I can sense – that God's intention is working itself out in my life, and I am aware of that and in tune with that and working together with that. For maybe I too have been anointed by the Spirit of God and sent to share good news and to be good news.

For then I know I am doing what I need to be doing, and I am fulfilling what I need to fulfill – indeed, maybe even what I was created to fulfill.

Like the first Christmas story.

Remember: lives were changed and re-directed. Choices were made, and difficult ones at that.

And an infant was not what was expected – certainly not what most people were looking for when they sought to discern God's plan and purpose.

But those who could, and did, discern something of that plan – they knew joy. The joy of angels singing. The joy of God's plan coming together, and their being a part of it.

Oh yes, most of them needed help in discerning that this was God's plan. Help from an angel or two; or some strangers from far away; or even a lowly, unnoticed person right under their noses.

So, maybe we can help each other to discern and “*test everything.*”
Though please, please, please: let it not be in a glib “It’s God’s will” sort of way.
For cancer is not God’s will.
War is not God’s will.
Using another person for one’s own sick pleasure or power grab is not God’s will.
But trusting God to be with you during the cancer treatments – that is God’s will.
And working to bring a just peace, even in our own neighborhood – that is God’s will.
And teaching and exemplifying respect for others and affirming each person’s worth as a
child of God created in the image of God – that is God’s will.

Funny thing about writing sermons: all too often, somewhere in the midst of the reading
and writing and reflection and prayer – somewhere in the process, I come to find I’m speaking as
much to myself as to anyone else.

I was grumpy, feeling all the stress, with the busy-ness and expectations and deadlines
and things to do.

Then it hit me: “You know, I really think this is what I’m supposed to be doing. This is
God’s calling to me.” And the release and relief I felt, and the smile that came across my face.
Hearing that for myself, affirming that, and acting on that. And recognizing that I am in some
small way being aligned with God’s will for my life.

There is joy in life, even in the difficult circumstances, even in the painful situations.
Joy in aligning ourselves with God’s will.

Joy in the affirmation

-this is where we stand

-this is what we do

-this is how we live.

Because this – living in God’s will – this is where God is.

***HYMN** “Come! Live in the Light!” GtG 749

1. Come! Live in the light!
Shine with the joy
and the love of the Lord!
We are called
to be light for the kingdom,
to live in the freedom
of the city of God.
We are called to act with justice;
we are called to love tenderly;
we are called to serve one another,
to walk humbly with God.

(continued...)

**2. Come! Open your heart!
Show your mercy
to all those in fear!
We are called
to be hope for the hopeless
so hatred and violence
will be no more.
We are called to act with justice;
we are called to love tenderly;
we are called to serve one another,
to walk humbly with God.**

**3. Sing! Sing a new song!
Sing of that great day
when all will be one!
God will reign,
and we'll walk with each other
as sisters and brothers
united in love.
We are called to act with justice;
we are called to love tenderly;
we are called to serve one another,
to walk humbly with God.**

Words and Music (WE ARE CALLED): David Haas, 1988
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***AFFIRMATION OF FAITH** (from “*A Declaration of Faith*”)

**To worship God is highest joy.
To serve God is perfect freedom.**

**God has sent God’s people into the world
to worship God there and serve all humankind.
We worship God in the world
by standing before the Lord in behalf of all people.
Our cries for help and our songs of praise
are never for ourselves alone.
Worship is no retreat from the world;
it is part of our mission.
We serve humankind
by discerning what God is doing in the world
and joining in God’s work.**

(continued...)

**We risk disagreement and error
when we try to say what God is doing here and now.
But we find guidance in God's deeds in the past
and God's promises for the future,
as they are witnessed to in Scripture.
We affirm that the Lord is at work,
especially in events and movements
that free people by the gospel
and advance justice, compassion, and peace.**

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PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

One: Come, Light of the world...
All: ...shine for us; shine in us.

THE LORD'S PRAYER (Traditional)

**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;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
forever. Amen.**

OFFERING

Invitation

Reflection

**Unison Prayer of Dedication*

God of peace, in Christ you bring light to illumine the nations. He makes your will known to all who believe. We come in response to his call to us, seeking to follow and fulfill his commands. Accept the gifts we offer as symbols of our commitment to be used as you desire. Mold us and use us as instruments of your will. May all that we do be in accord with the good news of the Coming One of Bethlehem. For it is in his name that we pray. Amen.

SENDING

*CLOSING HYMN “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” GtG 119

1. **Hark! The herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn king.
Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled!"
Joyful, all ye nations, rise; join the triumph of the skies;
with th'angelic host proclaim, "Christ is born in Bethlehem!"
Hark! The herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn king!"**
2. **Christ, by highest heaven adored, Christ, the everlasting Lord,
late in time behold him come, offspring of the virgin's womb.
Veiled in flesh the God-head see; hail th'incarnate deity,
pleased in flesh with us to dwell, Jesus, our Emmanuel.
Hark! The herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn king!"**
3. **Hail the heav'n-born Prince of Peace! Hail the sun of righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings, risen with healing in his wings.
Mild he lays his glory by, born that we no more may die,
born to raise us from the earth, born to give us second birth.
Hark! The herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn king!"**

Words: Charles Wesley, 1739, alt.

Music: MENDELSSOHN, Felix Mendelssohn, 1840; arr.

William Hayman Cummings, 1855

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*CHARGE AND BLESSING

One: ...And let the gathered people of God say...

All: ...Amen.

POSTLUDE

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