

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, DECEMBER 14, 2025

Pacific Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

**THIRD SUNDAY of ADVENT**

**GATHERING**

**PRELUDE**

**LIGHTING OF THE ADVENT WREATH: The Candle of Joy**

One: *"Come, thou long-expected Jesus ... hope of all the earth thou art;  
dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart."*  
(*"Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus, Glory to God, #82*)

One: Children of God, what are we waiting for?

**All:** **We wait for joy that cannot be stolen,  
joy that wells up, even in wilderness places.  
We wait for laughter to ring out in mourning,  
for songs of gladness to rise in broken streets.  
We wait ...  
for joy that is more than happiness,  
to rejoice in God's unshakable love.**

One: Today we light three candles.  
Hope still shines, peace still glows,  
and now joy joins the chorus of light.  
Their glow reminds us that Christ is coming,  
filling our hearts with a delight no darkness can quench.

**All:** **We call this candle Hope.**  
*(Light the first candle.)*  
**We call this candle Peace.**  
*(Light the second candle.)*  
**We call this candle Joy.**  
*(Light the third candle.)*

One: O Giver of life, you turn mourning into dancing.  
You surprise us with beauty in unlikely places.  
Joy is your gift and an invitation  
to rejoice always, to pray without ceasing,  
to give thanks in all things.

*(continued...)*

May we carry this joy like a lantern,  
shining steadily through the waiting.

Hear the witness of the apostle Paul:  
“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.  
Let your gentleness be known to everyone.  
The Lord is near” (Philippians 4:4–5).

**All:           We delight in the joy of your presence,  
                  which no hardship can steal away.  
                  Come, Lord Jesus,  
                  and make joy our strength.**

**\*OPENING HYMN** “Prepare the Way, O Zion” GtG 106

- 1. Prepare the way, O Zion,  
   your Christ is drawing near!  
   Let every hill and valley  
   a level way appear.  
   Greet One who comes in glory,  
   foretold in sacred story.  
   O blest is Christ who came  
   in God's most holy name.**
- 2. He brings God's rule, O Zion;  
   he comes from heaven above.  
   His rule is peace and freedom,  
   and justice, truth, and love.  
   Lift high your praise resounding,  
   for grace and joy abounding.  
   O blest is Christ who came  
   in God's most holy name.**
- 3. Fling wide your gates, O Zion;  
   your Savior's rule embrace,  
   and tidings of salvation  
   proclaim in every place.  
   All lands will bow rejoicing,  
   their adoration voicing.  
   O blest is Christ who came  
   in God's most holy name.**

Words: Frans Mikael Franzen, 1812; rev. 1819; trans. Augustus Nelson,  
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## UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION

God of majesty and glory,  
we are thirsty for your grace.  
Yet we confess that we have closed our eyes to what you are doing.  
We hide our eyes from your presence.  
We prefer to concentrate on problems, bad news and violence.  
When we do,  
we miss all the healing, freeing and helping you accomplish in our world.  
We pass up opportunities to participate in your Good News.  
We rob ourselves of so much joy.  
Forgive us and give us eyes to see, ears to hear, minds to understand,  
and hearts to treasure your mission in the world.  
Fill us with unquenchable joy at the coming of Jesus. Amen.

## SILENT CONFESSION

### ASSURANCE OF PARDON *(from Matthew 1 & Luke 2)*

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.”  
All: **So let us rejoice and be glad,  
for in Jesus Christ we are forgiven and loved!  
“Glory to God in the highest heaven!”**

## 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

SCRIPTURE READINGS Isaiah 35:1–10  
Psalm 146:5–10  
Matthew 11:2–11

ISAIAH 35 (Common English Bible)

<sup>1</sup> *The desert and the dry land will be glad;  
the wilderness will rejoice and blossom like the crocus.*  
<sup>2</sup> *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! Do not fear!  
Here is 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 will not travel on it,  
but it will be for those walking on that way.*

*Even fools will not 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.*

PSALM 146:5-10 (Common English Bible)

*5 The person whose help is the God of Jacob—  
the person whose hope rests on the Lord their God—  
is truly happy!*

*6 God: the maker of heaven and earth,  
the sea, and all that is in them,  
God: who is faithful forever,*

<sup>7</sup> *who gives justice to people who are oppressed,  
who gives bread to people who are starving!*  
The Lord: who frees prisoners.  
<sup>8</sup> *The Lord: who makes the blind see.*  
*The Lord: who straightens up those who are bent low.*  
*The Lord: who loves the righteous.*  
<sup>9</sup> *The Lord: who protects immigrants,*  
*who helps orphans and widows,*  
*but who makes the way of the wicked twist and turn!*  
<sup>10</sup> *The Lord will rule forever!*  
*Zion, your God will rule from one generation to the next!*  
*Praise the Lord!*

MATTHEW 11:2-11 (Common English Bible)

<sup>2</sup> *Now when John heard in prison about the things the Christ [or “the Messiah”] was doing, he sent word by his disciples to Jesus, asking, <sup>3</sup> “Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?”*

<sup>4</sup> *Jesus responded, “Go, report to John what you hear and see. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> Happy are those who do not stumble and fall because of me.”*

<sup>7</sup> *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? <sup>8</sup> What did you go out to see? A man dressed up in refined clothes? Look, those who wear refined clothes are in royal palaces. <sup>9</sup> What did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. <sup>10</sup> He is the one of whom it is written: Look, I am sending my messenger before you, who will prepare your way before you.*

<sup>11</sup> *“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.”*

## PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON “Joy...and Sorrow?” by Pastor Bill Vincent

We begin in the middle of the ocean – the Atlantic Ocean to be precise...the North Atlantic Ocean to be even more precise – in late 1873, as Horatio Spafford looks across the waves and ponders and grieves and writes.

**Hortatio G. Spafford, a forty-three-year-old Chicago businessman, suffered financial disaster in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. He and his wife were still grieving over the death of their son shortly before the fire, and he realized they needed to get away for a vacation. ... Spafford decided to take**

the entire family to England. His wife and four daughters went ahead on the SS *Ville du Havre*, and he planned to follow in a few days.

But on the Atlantic Ocean the ship was struck by an iron sailing vessel and sank within twelve minutes. Two hundred and twenty-six lives were lost – including the Spaffords' four daughters. When the survivors were brought to shore at Cardiff, Wales, Mrs. Spafford cabled her husband, "Saved alone."

Spafford booked passage on the next ship. As they were crossing the Atlantic, the captain pointed out the place where he thought the *Ville du Havre* had gone down. That night, Spafford penned [these] words:

When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,  
when sorrows like sea billows roll;  
whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say,  
it is well, it is well, with my soul.

(*The One Year Book of Hymns*, Devotion for February 4; compiled and edited by Robert K. Brown & Mark R. Norton)

One does not write words like that without a firm foundation of the grace, and presence, of God...even in the midst of the most horrific experience, the most sorrowful of times.

A peace, a serenity, a contentment of resting in the hands and presence of God.

That is grace.

And that is the foundation of our joy.

It is interesting to note that the Greek words for 'joy' and 'grace' are related. They share the same root referring to "well-being."

And that is a profound insight: the connection of joy and grace.

For it also distinguishes this joy from the often simple (or simplistic), the superficial, often fleeting 'happiness' we all-too-often espouse and seek.

So I was a little concerned that even our psalm used the word 'happy'.

Until someone noted the word can just as easily be translated 'Blessed'.

Ah ha! There it is: blessed. Blessed by the grace of God. Blessed by God. Blessed because I know and reside in the grace of God, come what may.

Blessed. Joy-ed.

A joy that does not overlook or ignore or try to dismiss the sorrow or the frustration or the despair, but tempers them. For we know, even in our deepest sorrow, even in our greatest frustration, even in our most damning despair, we are not alone. God is with us.

"*Here is your God!*" Isaiah proclaims.

Now I know that today's worship, and time, is tinged with some sorrow of its own – 'bittersweet' we have said to one another – with my upcoming retirement; our parting; the end of one chapter and the beginning of a new, unknown, chapter.

Now please, by bringing this up, I am not meaning to toot my own horn or call attention to myself.

Quite honestly, I experience this bittersweet-ness myself: I will miss you, and this experience of ministry and working together and being together. So yes, there is a sorrow, a grieving. I mean, let's be honest about that and put it out there; not sweep it under the rug.

But I bring it up because what I find – or maybe simply search for, in hope – and what I want to affirm for us all, is that there is also a joy – a great joy – even in the midst of this grieving and sorrow and parting.

I mean, the sorrow of parting: is it not related to the joy we have experienced together? and the grace?

But the sorrow that is our parting does not in any way suggest the departure of God's grace and God's presence, from any of us.

Remember: Immanuel - God with us...always. That's crucial to what we celebrate this season: that God has come to dwell in our midst; that God is with us: *"Lo, I am with you always even to the close of the age"* (Matthew 28:20)...and the beginning of the next one.

So that even in the sorrow of whatever parting we may experience, we know the presence of God. And so we know joy, because we know God.

All because of grace.

Yes, the grace we have experienced together. The grace we can call to mind and recount and share. And the presence – even in and through one another – of God and God's grace that holds us and sustains us and opens us up to that joy...even as we may be sad in our parting.

And yes, I know that can be hard.

But I also know it is possible – because of Horatio Spafford, and others.

And when we find it difficult to experience that joy, maybe we just need to be encouraged to look, and to listen.

That's precisely what Jesus was offering when John's disciples came to him.

John, who somehow, it seems, was beginning to doubt that Jesus was the Messiah: *"Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?"*

And what does Jesus say but, "Look and listen. See and hear."

The invitation to perceive the wondrous works and the grace-filled presence at work and present in Jesus himself.

And see and hear that, Yes, he is the one: the one prophesied and proclaimed, expected and anticipated; the one hoped for who has come; the one in whom God is at work to bring about God's realm in life, in the world, in creation, in you and in me. The one in whom we see and hear and experience the amazing grace of God; and so the one who is the basis of our joy, for he is our experience of God's grace.

See and hear what is happening in this Jesus: the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, the dead are raised, the poor have good news proclaimed to them. And "blessed is the one who takes no offense at me," says Jesus. Why? Because the ones who take no offense at him – they see the grace of God at work in his work. They discern the presence of God in his presence. And they give thanks. And they know that joy. And they pass it on and share it, because they have experienced it themselves.

Maybe John was initially looking for, and expecting, something different...as many were expecting something different when it came to the Messiah – certainly not looking for him to be born in a manger.

And maybe we, too, are looking, and expecting, something different.

But maybe this experience of God's grace and presence does not always come to us in times and ways we expect...or even want.

So Horatio Spafford experienced it in the midst of the loss of life.

How might we experience it, in ways we do not expect?

Maybe this grace comes, not as a parade of strength or a stiff upper lip, but as a show of weakness and vulnerability.

Maybe this grace comes, not as a wall of protection against the world, but as a promise of provision within the world.

Maybe this grace comes, not in the famous and the beautiful, but in the unknown and the unseen.

Maybe this grace comes, not in having it all together, but in sharing our brokenness...and being made whole by being broken together.

And when we can begin to see that, perhaps then we can also hear, and receive, Tracey Davenport's encouragement to take it a step further. She writes,

**Not only does joy explode when we witness these things, -- i.e., these unexpected "signs of God at work among us" -- but joy grows in us as we allow ourselves to be used by Jesus to bring them about.** ("Looking into the Lectionary," *The Presbyterian Outlook*, published December 1, 2025)

We can be a part of that: part of experiencing and sharing and offering that grace. Stranger things have happened.

We can be a part of that. Not only to experience the grace, but to offer it to another.

-by working to bring the homeless in from the bitter cold;

-by lending a helping hand;

-by sharing our presence so that another will not be lonely;

-by offering healing through our words of grace spoken and a touch of grace that is offered.

We not only can experience and know that grace ourselves, we can offer it – we can be it – for one another.

So that together we can say,

*Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say Rejoice!*

Words that so often come to mind when we want to speak of joy. They can almost seem 'happy go lucky' with a cursory reading. But remember he also 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. (Philippians 4:4-7)*

*"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice!"*

And he also says, for "*the Lord is near!*"

We might just as easily say, "The Lord is here." For that is the grace, and the presence, and the joy, we experience.

The joy that we know because we know the grace of God, and we know it in and through one another. The joy we know because we can share that grace of God, not only with one another but with the world. The joy we know because God's grace has come and been born in our midst and born within us, and we know that we rest in the very hands of God.

The Lord is near!

The Lord is here!

And we are ...[cup hands together]... here: in the hands of God.

Need I say anything more?

**\*HYMN** "Good Christian Friends, Rejoice" GtG 132

**1. Good Christian friends, rejoice  
with heart and soul and voice;  
give ye heed to what we say:  
Jesus Christ is born today;  
ox and ass before him bow,  
and he is in the manger now.  
Christ is born today!  
Christ is born today!**

**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!**

**3. Good Christian friends, rejoice  
with heart and soul and voice;  
now ye need not fear the grave:  
Jesus Christ was born to save!  
Calls you one and calls you all  
to gain the everlasting hall.  
Christ was born to save!  
Christ was born to save!**

*(next page...)*

Words: Medieval Latin; trans. and para. John Mason Neale, 1853, alt. *Public Domain*.

Music: IN DULCI JUBILO, German folk melody, 14<sup>th</sup> cent.; harm. David Hugh Jones, 1953. *Public Domain*.

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**\*AFFIRMATION OF FAITH** (from *A Brief Statement of Faith*)

**We trust in Jesus Christ,  
fully human, fully God.  
Jesus proclaimed the reign of God:  
preaching good news to the poor  
and release to the captives,  
teaching by word and deed  
and blessing the children,  
healing the sick  
and binding up the brokenhearted,  
eating with outcasts,  
forgiving sinners,  
and calling all to repent and believe the gospel.  
Unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition,  
Jesus was crucified,  
suffering the depths of human pain  
and giving his life for the sins of the world.  
God raised this Jesus from the dead,  
vindicating his sinless life,  
breaking the power of sin and evil,  
delivering us from death to life eternal.  
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:** Come, Lord Jesus, come.  
**All:** Come to us with joy.

## **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:* "Comfort and Joy" (An Advent Carol)

Words and music by Pepper Choplin  
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*\*Unison Prayer of Dedication*

**We thank you, God,  
for all the ways you work and heal and bless and free us.  
Accept these gifts given in great gratitude  
and in anticipation of Christ's return.  
Multiply them for your glory  
and for the good of all people.  
May these gifts bring joy  
to those most in need of Christ's mission and ministry.  
Amen.**

## **SENDING**

**\*CLOSING 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.**

*(continued...)*

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.
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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#### **\*CHARGE AND BLESSING**

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

#### **POSTLUDE**

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