

Sunday, December 12, 2021 – Third Sunday in Advent

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Prayer over the Advent wreath

Hope

Dear God,
As we begin our Advent pilgrimage,
grant us the courage to hope.
Hope for your presence,
Hope for your peace,
Hope for your promise. Amen.

Joy

Dear God,
In the height of our Advent walk,
grant us the courage to experience joy.
Joy in the face of apathy,
Joy in the face of sorrow,
Joy in the face of uncertainty. Amen.

Peace

Dear God,
As we journey down this Advent road,
grant us the courage to make peace.
Peace in our hearts,
Peace in our homes,
Peace in our communities. **Amen.**

Love

Dear God,
As our Advent pilgrimage draws to completion,
grant us the courage to share your love.
Love for the unexpected challenge,
Love for the vulnerable one.
Love for the presence of God. Amen.

Introduction

Christ's presence in our midst in the wonder of the holy supper is cause for singing. The nearness of the God in prayer, in every circumstance, is cause for rejoicing. The coming of one "more powerful" than John, even with a winnowing fork in hand, is good news—and cause for exultation—for us who are being saved. Great joy is the tone for the third Sunday of Advent.

Prayer of the Day

Stir up the wills of your faithful people, Lord God, and open our ears to the preaching of John, that, rejoicing in your salvation, we may bring forth the fruits of repentance; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

First Reading: Zephaniah 3:14-20

The prophet Zephaniah's message is mostly one of judgment for sin. This reading, however, which comes from the conclusion of the book, prophesies joy for Judah and Jerusalem. Judgment has led to repentance, and God's salvation is at hand.

¹⁴Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout, O Israel!

Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!

¹⁵The LORD has taken away the judgments against you,
he has turned away your enemies.

The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst;
you shall fear disaster no more.

¹⁶On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:

Do not fear, O Zion;

do not let your hands grow weak.

¹⁷The LORD, your God, is in your midst,

a warrior who gives victory;

he will rejoice over you with gladness,

he will renew you in his love;

he will exult over you with loud singing

¹⁸as on a day of festival.

I will remove disaster from you,

so that you will not bear reproach for it.

¹⁹I will deal with all your oppressors

at that time.

And I will save the lame

and gather the outcast,

and I will change their shame into praise

and renown in all the earth.

²⁰At that time I will bring you home,

at the time when I gather you;

for I will make you renowned and praised

among all the peoples of the earth,

when I restore your fortunes

before your eyes, says the LORD.

Psalm-reading Isaiah 12:2-6

²Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not | be afraid,

for the LORD GOD is my strength and my might, and has become | my salvation.

³**With joy you | will draw water**

from the wells | of salvation.

⁴And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the LORD, call | on God's name;

make known the deeds of the LORD among the nations; proclaim that this name | is exalted.

⁵**Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done | gloriously;**

let this be known in | all the earth.

⁶Shout aloud and sing for joy, O | royal Zion,

for great in your midst is the Holy | One of Israel.

Second Reading: Philippians 4:4-7

Despite being in prison, Paul is remarkably upbeat as he writes this letter. Here, he urges his friends in Philippi to trust God with all their worries and concerns with the hope that they will experience God's joy and peace.

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Gospel Reading: Luke 3:7-18

John the Baptist heralds the mighty one who is coming. John teaches that preparation for God's reign is not a matter of identity but of bearing fruits of merciful justice, radical generosity, and vocational integrity.

⁷John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

¹⁰And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" ¹¹In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." ¹²Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?"

¹³He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you."

¹⁴Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

¹⁸So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Prayers of Intercession

In this season of watching and waiting, let us pray for all people and places that yearn for God's presence, saying "Hear us, O God," and responding, "your mercy is great."

A brief silence.

Holy God, renew your church and raise up leaders who announce your good news. Grant peace to congregations and seminarians in the midst of transition. Guide the work of candidacy and call committees. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Creating God, your Spirit brought forth the earth and all that is in it. Breathe life into us, that we are inspired to live in harmony with one another and the planet. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Shepherding God, you lead your people in paths of righteousness. Raise up prophets in our own day who warn against captivity to greed and point us to the freedom found in generosity. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Nurturing God, you come near in times of worry and need. Cradle us in your arms, that we trust you and are not afraid. Attend to any who are hungry, imprisoned, or ill this day (*especially*). Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

Rejoicing God, you exult over us in singing. Enliven the song of this assembly and bless the ministry of church musicians (*especially*). With instruments and dance, join our voices to the song of all creation. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

We give you thanks for your servants who showed us your goodness and grace (*especially*). By the power of your Spirit, keep us steadfast in faith until we make our home with you. Hear us, O God. **Your mercy is great.**

God of new life, you come among us in the places we least expect. Receive these prayers and those of our hearts, in the name of Jesus.

Amen.

A reflection for the Third Sunday in Advent...

No More Business as Usual

Lutherans looking for gospel may hear John the Baptizer's preaching as primarily law. It can be difficult to reconcile his fire-and-brimstone style with the joy that traditionally belongs to the third Sunday of Advent. Yet despite John's harsh words for the crowds, the people seem eager for his teaching—"What then should we do?" They keep asking questions fervently, even when the answers call them to higher expectations of moral and selfless living.

It's the kind of teaching that people associate with the Messiah: good news that business as usual is on the way out and something new is on its way in. The status quo of greed, selfishness, scarcity, and complacency no longer has power. A new day of mutual sharing and justice is almost here. Images of the winnowing fork and the ax at the root of the tree suggest clearing out old habits and fears to make room for something new. In calling people to repentance, John invites them to turn away from the old life and turning toward God's new life.

John has even better news: The Messiah is indeed coming, one who will not only call people to high expectations, but also enable that faithful living. Because the Messiah is coming to baptize "with the Holy Spirit and fire," life will never be the same. Through baptism business as usual will be replaced by a fruit-bearing, joy-yielding, grace-filled relationship with God. It's an excellent reason to "rejoice always" (1 Thess. 5:16): The Lord is near!

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