

Welcome and Land Acknowledgement

As we gather in the name of Jesus to we acknowledge with gratitude and respect the Lkwungen people – the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ – on whose traditional and unceded territory we gather.

Advent Candle Lighting

In this season of Advent, we celebrate God's joy.

Knowing that Christ is coming to bring healing and wholeness to the world is a source of delight!

*When we gather for worship it is a celebration,
an opportunity to rejoice in all that God is doing among us and beyond us.*

We welcome our neighbours and celebrate God's goodness.

*Even when we face difficulty and trouble, we sing a song of faith,
confident that Jesus is able to redeem our suffering world.*

Together, we are a sign of God's joy for the world. (The candle is lit)

Let us pray... God of transformation, we rejoice that you lift up the lowly and bind up the broken hearted. We marvel at your power to change hearts and lives. Fill us with your Spirit this season so that our voices declare your goodness and our lives proclaim your mercy in Jesus Christ. Amen

➤ ***Prepare the way of the Lord***

112 (repeat)

† Prayer

Holy One you approach us with such kindness and tenderness – you look kindly on us, no matter what our state or condition – your care for this world is greater than we could ever ask or imagine: you bring order from chaos – turn weeping into laughter. You turn sorrow into joy and death into new life. You redeem all that appears lost – making all things new – and so we come to you in joy, resting from our work and responsibilities, trusting you to bring peace amid our anxiety and hope into these uncertain times.

*Receive our worship this day and forgive us for the smallness of our love – the narrowness of our concern. These days we easily become preoccupied with statistics and case numbers. Opportunities to say thanks – to offer encouragement – to remember each other in friendship slip by. Anxiety turns us inward and anger can make us lash out. Forgive us for neglecting the joy at the heart of the Advent season. Turn our hearts back to you and inspire us with your love made flesh in Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray... ***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, for ever. Amen****

Words of Hope

In Jesus Christ, we are a new creation. There is nothing we have done, nothing we could ever do, that can separate us from the love of God shown to us in Christ. Know that you are forgiven, and with this joyful truth, have the courage to forgive one another.

➤ *People in darkness*

124

† Prayer for Understanding

God of wisdom, by the inspiration of your Spirit, open our hearts so that we may hear and understand your Word, speaking in the scriptures. Open our minds to your renewing grace, at work in Jesus Christ, your Living Word. Then open our eyes to see what you are doing in the world. Amen

Scripture **Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11**

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion – to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.

They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory. 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.

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. 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.

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

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.

Psalm 126

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.

Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy;

Then it was said among the nations, *“The LORD has done great things for them.”*

The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.

Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses in the Negeb.

May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Message

I read about Syrian refugees recently – a novel set in 2016 called “The Beekeeper of Aleppo”. Nuri, the main character, narrates the story. He is the beekeeper who once lived in Aleppo. He is fleeing Syria with his wife, Afra – an artist who has become blind as a result of bombing and tragedy. They had a full life doing work they loved in a place they loved with people they loved. Beautiful. The war brought devastation. The fields and the bees and the hives were torched – gone in the blink of an eye – the beat of a wing. Their son was killed and Afra got stuck – couldn’t leave.

Their beautiful life became filled with sorrow – despair – tears – filled with emptiness. We meet them in the United Kingdom as they are seeking asylum and hoping to reconnect with family who fled much earlier in the conflict. They are both lost – suffering. Afra shut down and unseeing. Nuri stoic but haunted by dreams and nightmares. Through him we learn of their journey in which their dignity, health, fortune, grip on reality are all imperiled if not lost altogether.

The book doesn’t end with shouts of joy and the carrying of sheaves but there is a sense of a future and redemption. They begin to see again – to connect – to welcome the possibility of joy. They begin to sew seeds of hope in ground that is wet with their tears.

I see much of this psalm in their story. And it reminded me of a true account I read some years ago by Paul Salopek, a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist and National Geographic Fellow who is walking the migratory path of the world’s first peoples. Eventually – if all goes well – he will walk more than 33,000 km in this trek called the *Out of Eden Walk*. Right now he is about five or six years in and is somewhere around Myanmar. The story I remember is from his time in the Middle East where he found kindness in conflict zones and witnessed extraordinary scenes of thousands fleeing Syria on foot.¹

He met some Bedouins and joined them in their tent. He and his guide are offered *glasses of syrupy tea and a platter of fresh tomatoes, pickled green tomatoes, fried broccoli. They are tomato pickers – Bedouins from Syria – fleeing unspeakable horrors and conflict in their own country to try and eke out some kind of living in a camp in Jordan. And they are not the first to arrive. Jordan has been staggered over the years by throngs of Iraqi refugees, by long-homeless Palestinians, by émigrés fleeing troubled Egypt. Syrians are just the latest neighbors to*

¹ OUT OF EDEN WALK, Dispatches from the Field from Paul Salopek, <http://outofedenwalk.nationalgeographic.com/>

arrive in exodus. They are a breaking wave of war-displaced people that ripples back millennia, to the conquests of Babylon, to the wanderers led by Moses through the wilderness.

And I can't help but think of the novel I just finished and the psalm we read today – a psalm that recalls exodus and exile and restoration. A psalm that recognizes desperate sorrow and suffering yet expresses confident hope for a joy-filled future. And I wonder if the people encountered in this story, like Nuri and Afra – those who are sowing in tears – will they reap with shouts of joy one day?

As Paul and his guide prepare to continue their journey the next day they heft their saddlebags onto the mules. The animals have gorged overnight on too-ripe tomatoes. The fields around the camp are garish with them...

And he wonders if the medieval pilgrimage adage from Diogenes: "It is resolved by walking" rings true. Do you actually believe that grief can be walked away? He says it is like these tomatoes. Given the hands that picked them for \$11 a day, you would think they would be inedible – too bitter to swallow. Toxic with pain. But they aren't. They are good tomatoes. They taste just fine.

Much of what Paul Salopek recounts in his true account resonates with the fiction of Nuri and Afra. They are running for their lives and yet they are so tired that they seem stuck – first in Turkey and then in Greece and now in the UK. Stuck in their sorrow and grief. Their story is a way of putting a personal face on the magnitude of the refugee crisis that continues unabated today. Millions of *Syrians hunkered, simmering, homeless and unmoored from normal lives, from hope. The total number of destitute, uprooted people in the Middle East is staggering. Paul warns that if we think this exodus won't touch us, we are fools. Our grandchildren will be grappling with the fallout from this calamity.*

This is the Advent Sunday of joy and I confess that it is challenging to find joy amid the tears of our broken world. It used to be I could just ignore much of it but this global pandemic thing has made that increasingly difficult!

Thank God for this psalm! It helps me get past the bitterness – seeds sewn with such pain that they should bear toxic fruit if they bear any fruit at all.

These few verses tell two parts of a story – a time of restoration, of salvation, is recalled and then a hopeful future is anticipated, a release from the present anxious situation. The contrast between the current state of uncertainty and suffering and the expected time of singing and laughter is clear. The theological issue has to do with the relation between tears and joy – how do we construe their connection?

There are several options. We can associate the tears with repentance and contrition – those who repent will be saved – those who show remorse may be shown mercy in return.

Alternatively we can interpret the tears as symbolic, not of repentance but of ordinary trials and sorrows of life. Our existence entails suffering – life is hard but if we bear it patiently there will be compensation in the end.

A variation on this line of thinking has to do with the tears symbolizing the sufferings of Christ on behalf of humanity. We are all called to share in Christ's suffering – to die with him and rise with him.

Finally, a fourth option is to understand the connection between tears and joy as the steadfast love of God. Human vulnerability is evoked by the image of sowers weeping and it is that same vulnerability that is addressed by the psalmist's confident closing words – God's promise.

It is this final interpretation that gives me strength amid human brokenness. Those who weep – Syrians, Jordanians, Canadians, Paul, Nuri, Afra, you, me – weep because we are afraid. We are trying to sow a hopeful future – to plant for abundant harvest – in unpromising soil and unfavorable conditions, not knowing what to expect. God will turn those tears – the suffering of refugees, the frustration of neighbouring countries, our own sense of futility and despair – God will turn our tears into laughter – into joy. God will do this not because we have been properly penitent or properly diligent – nor because we have grown spiritually through adversity (even if we might do so) – God will bring us to joy because we are needy creatures and God is God – God loves us.

May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

They are good tomatoes. They taste just fine.

Thanks be to God.

➤ *When God restored our common life*

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† Prayer

Loving God, receive our thanks and praise for all who maintain their joy and express it through attitudes, hard decisions, and long-term commitments. We pray that you would bless those who joyfully serve in our midst– those who care for the mentally ill with respect and all who cheerfully nurse those whose miseries seem relentless.

Sustain and encourage those who dare give thanks even for their severest setbacks, and all whose laughter refuses to be suppressed by misunderstanding, abuse, or persecution. Nourish

all who, in times of spiritual dryness, commit themselves to positive deeds of justice and compassion – those who can laugh at themselves without becoming cynical.

Above all we thank you for Jesus – for the joy that flowed from Bethlehem and Nazareth, from Galilee to Jerusalem. We rejoice in his gracious humour that drew souls to him and spread mercy and hope.

We thank you for the vindication of Christ's joy. For Easter and the laughter that has echoed through the centuries. We thank you for the joy that is our inheritance, and pray that we may be possessed by it, lifted up through it, and share its wonder always.

God of joys that have no boundary, and of grace which transcends all limits, we pray for our sisters and brothers in this community of faith... We bring to mind those who are enjoying successes, and those who are taking stock after painful defeats. We pray that success will not bring selfishness and that defeat will not breed bitterness.

We think of those who are celebrating a birth, and those who are mourning a death. May your Spirit minister to each according to their need... We bring to mind those who are just and compassionate. May injustice be brought down and mercy blessed with even greater mercy. We think of those who seek peace. May your Spirit meddle in human affairs and teach us the way of justice and peace.

We remember our relatives, friends, or others we know who are right now going through distressing experiences. May they be blessed by your enabling and guiding Spirit. Holy God, what we have prayed for others we now pray for ourselves. May we be blessed with that good humour which flows from a faith founded on Christ and nurtured by your Holy Spirit. **Amen**

➤ *Oh come, oh come, Emmanuel (verses 1, 3, 6, 7)* **122**

PWS&D Sharing **Boosting Bodies and Minds in Haiti**

Little Seraphin was light in the arms of her mother when they arrived at Hôpital St. Marc. At only fifteen pounds, the two-year-old was severely underweight and in need of immediate treatment for malnutrition and its many complications.

With persistent droughts and a continuously changing climate, many families in Haiti are left without sufficient food for their children and almost half of the population is malnourished.

After her mother brought her to the hospital, Seraphin was enrolled in a program supported by PWS&D and Canadian Foodgrains Bank, providing therapeutic nutrition support to malnourished children. In the program, Seraphin was given milk, food, antibiotics and vitamins to help her regain her strength. Within a few months, Seraphin weight had doubled and she was able to leave the program happy and healthy!

This Advent season, help make sure children have access to nutritious food, allowing them to lead healthy lives from childhood to adulthood. Go to www.werespond.ca / (416) 441-1111

† Offering and Prayer

Today, the Advent theme is Joy. Our scriptures remind us to rejoice in Lord. Think of this offering as our opportunity to spread joy in God's world, even though that world may seem dark these days. Continue to rejoice in the Lord and give thankfully as you have been doing for Christ's sake.

God of justice and joy, we bring our gifts to you in gratitude for your unfailing goodness to us. Bless these gifts and use them to create justice and bring joy into the world in Jesus' name. Amen

Blessing [1 Thessalonians 5: 16-24]

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing – give thanks in all circumstances; this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets – hold fast to what is good – abstain from every form of evil. May the God of peace sanctify you entirely – may your spirit, soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of Christ – and may the grace of Jesus, the love of God and the nurturing community of the Holy Spirit embrace us all.

➤ *We will go out with joy*

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