

Welcome and Land Acknowledgement

*As we come to worship in Jesus' name we acknowledge with gratitude and respect the Lkwungen people – the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ – on whose traditional and unceded territory we gather. We commit ourselves to just and respectful relationships within our congregation and our neighborhood.*

Advent Candle Lighting

Joy is the celebration given by God.

**Joy is the celebration at the birth of the Christ Child.**

Joy is the celebration when the angels sing “Glory to God in the highest.”

**We celebrate the joy of Christ coming again.**

*(The candle is lit.)*

Let us pray: **Source of light, shine in our lives and in your world with your life-giving joy. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen**

➤ ***Christ be our light (verses 1 and 4)***

† Prayer and the Lord's Prayer / Words of Hope

God of Joy and Justice, we will always rejoice in you. You are our strength and our song. You gather those who have strayed and welcome them back to your side. You bring healing to those who are broken in body and spirit, and draw close to those who walk alone. Through your great love and mercy, you transform us all into more than we ever thought we could be. We will trust in you and not be afraid. With joy, we sing of your glory and proclaim your saving power to those near and far. Receive our prayers and praise this day.

All knowing God, we know perfect joy only comes through faith in you, yet we seek it out in lesser ways. In search of comfort, we indulge our desires. In search of love, we hide from our faults. In search of approval, we spend beyond our means. Forgive us, O God, for seeking satisfaction in the wrong places. Help us turn again to you, and be guided to discover what is honourable, just, and pleasing in your sight. We pray together in Jesus' name... ***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***

The scriptures say, “Do not worry about anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.” The forgiveness we seek is ours through the grace of Jesus Christ. May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, be with us all. Amen

**PWS&D Sharing Maternal Health Today and Tomorrow**

In Malawi, the rates of infant and child mortality are incredibly high.

For many pregnant women, access to health services like prenatal check-ups, delivery support and immunizations for their newborns and themselves are not easily accessible.

Through ongoing work, PWS&D is improving health services, encouraging their use and helping ensure the consumption of nutritious foods for mothers, newborns, pregnant women and children under five.

We are working to share necessary knowledge and information about maternal and child health practices while empowering pregnant women and mothers to make informed decisions about their own health and that of their children.

Additionally, construction and improvement of labour and delivery wards and maternity centres staffed with knowledgeable midwives are nurturing long-term, sustainable care for mothers and babies.

This Advent season, help give moms and babies the best chance for a healthy future by building support for maternal and child health care among families and communities.

† Prayer for Understanding

**God of truth and wisdom, send us your Holy Spirit to teach us through the scriptures, read and interpreted this day. Open our eyes to understand your truth more fully, and our hearts to live out your wisdom in the example of Jesus, your Living Word. Amen**

Scripture

**Zephaniah 3: 14-20** [OT 877]

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The 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. On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. The 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 as on a day of festival. I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. I 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. At 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.

**Isaiah 12: 2-6** [OT 641]

Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the LORD GOD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted. Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

**Luke 3: 7-18** [NT 60]

John 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? Bear 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. Even 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."

And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?"

In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."

Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?"

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

Soldiers 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."

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John 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. His 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."

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

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

***Message: Blown away***

*Way to begin a sermon John.*

*He begins by calling the crowd who has come out to see and listen to him a brood of vipers!*

No story. No joke. Nothing to draw his listener in. Just to the point .  
And pretty much on the rude side. It was a common expression used to describe those, shall we say, filled with malice.  
The contemporary translation would be closer to something like you Sons of ....well you know. I won't say the rest because 1. I'm not John, and 2. I prefer not to be beheaded.  
So why on earth is this the gospel passage assigned to the Sunday of Joy?

First of all the culture of the Middle East was a culture of honour and shame. So who your ancestors were largely determined where you stood in society, no matter what you did.

You may remember the beginning of Luke that tells us a bit of John the Baptist's genealogy, by saying he came from a line of priests, noting that his mother Elizabeth descended from the priest Aaron. This would give him the needed honour to be preaching as he did. The gospel of Matthew begins with a lengthy genealogy for Jesus, explaining that he was descended from David, the son of Abraham.  
All good credentials for both of them.

Now, to be a soldier in the inherently corrupt Roman Empire, or to be a tax collector were definitely not positions of honour in the Hebrew mindset. Tax collectors would generally need to use extortion in order to make a decent living.

It may be that John is applauding them in a back handed way for coming to be baptized and realizing; acknowledging their need.

And so John is pointing out what rotten condition the crowd before him is all in.

And that includes those in the crowd who are Jewish, as well as those who are Gentiles.

It was a bit shocking to be telling Jews that being Jewish and religious wasn't enough even though they were God's people. It was about their hearts needing changing.

Being a Gentile didn't mean they were condemned either. A baptism of repentance would begin to change that. This is incredible news - to hear John preaching that God wants all people to have access to God's saving love and grace; even a lowly peasant and farmer are eligible. But it still isn't a get clean quick scheme via baptism.

So John has pointed out where this crowd stands in the chart of honour and shame.

You know who you are, he tells them in essence, and you've come here with questions.

And so they ask him, "Well, what are we to do?"

Well, just being able to say that Abraham is our Father isn't enough to get you off the hook. Being religious isn't sufficient. Repentance is the place to start. But John the Baptist isn't trying to reduce his listeners to a pool of fear and regret. Rather, he sets responsibility before them.

If you are in the military - one of the Roman soldiers, don't intimidate the poor.

*If you are a tax collector - just collect the prescribed amount and no shenanigans.  
If you have in abundance - then share with those who don't . If you have two coats, share one of them with someone who has none. Be generous.  
He doesn't tell them they can't be soldiers or tax collectors anymore. He explains that what needs changing is their hearts.  
It is all about responding to God's love for us all, by showing that love to others.  
It's about responding to God's love with a generous Joy!  
The joy is about being transformed.*

*So they begin to wonder if John is the Messiah they have been expecting and he tells them no. Definitely not.  
John says he baptized with water, but He - the Messiah - will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.  
That sounds a bit dangerous.  
The words used can be translated in to Wind and Fire - both powerful symbols of the presence of God. The Greek word used here is pneumatic which can mean both wind and spirit. And that wind and fire is significant for the winnowing that John speaks of next.  
Luke may have meant to be a bit ambiguous here.  
John goes on to speak of winnowing.*

*Winnowing is when you take the harvested wheat and remove the useless chaff that is around the seed; the wheat berry. It releases what is important.  
At that time it would have been done by tossing the grain up repeatedly into a light wind over a threshing floor. The wind gradually blows the lighter chaff away leaving the wheat - the valuable part.  
You may have seen pictures or videos of people using baskets of the grain and tossing it up that way. One of my daughters who has lived and worked in Uganda says that it is still done that way by many farmers there. Or they might use large garden forks to lift it to the breeze, all until the chaff is removed.*

*Winnowing preserves what is valuable  
The Chaff can burn with an explosive combustion, and farmers know that a fire in a dry wheat field cannot be controlled or contained.  
While chaff can also be used to feed livestock, the primary aim is to save the wheat.  
Chaff, like bitterness, anger, or resentment can be blown away, leaving something better.*

*This passage is NOT about separating the saved and the unsaved, or condemning unbelievers. It does not say that some people are just chaff and will burn in hell.  
It is all about separating that chaff from the wheat within us, so that what is valuable remains.  
Fire I should point out can be used to cleanse and purify. And when the wind and fire of the Holy Spirit gets ahold of us the best part, the valuable part is saved, and made useful.*

*It is a refining fire if you will.*

*It is a joyful thing!*

*We have responsibilities to be generous and kind, responsibilities to show God's transforming and grace-filled love, but it is only possible because of the endless love and grace shown to us.*

*When we feel tossed or blown about; when we feel lost or unsettled, perhaps it is God's spirit removing the chaff, to reveal something more, something we didn't even know was there.*

*Or maybe we are fearful or fed up because of the pandemic, the floods and broken supply chains and broken hearts caused by imposed distances. Those feelings may try to get the better of us. It can feel overwhelming and hard to be joyful.*

*There is one other scripture passage assigned to today's readings that hasn't been read yet. It is from Paul's letter to the church in Philippi.*

*Paul wrote this letter while being locked up in jail and sent it to the church in Philippi where they were being persecuted. Their problems were very real.*

*"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice! Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry 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 minds in Christ Jesus."*

*And so I am left to wonder - what chaff is being blown away and what is about to be revealed in me, in you and in all of us.*

➤ ***O come, O come, Emmanuel***

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#### † Offering and Prayer

We make our offering today with joyful hearts, anticipating our celebration of God's gift to us in Christ Jesus. Know that our gifts may touch lives in deep need this season with the joy we have received in Jesus' name.

➤ ***Praise God from whom all blessings flow***

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**Just and joyful God, we bring our gifts with hearts that rejoice in your goodness to us, in Christ and in creation. Send your Holy Spirit to bless them and us with the power to shine the light of Christ into lives where Jesus can turn despair into joy. Amen**

#### † Pastoral Prayers

O God, our Strength and Salvation, we come before you with joy and thanksgiving as the beauty of this season unfolds, with faces that smile and generosity that grows even after a long, hard year of pandemic struggles and devastation due to flooding. With the kindness of

your Spirit, awaken opportunities for understanding to emerge among those who have differed, and refresh our community and congregation with joyful anticipation that your gift to us in Christ can change everything. Generous God, Send joy to the world again.

Tender God, we delight in the joy you bring into our lives and neighbourhoods through our life together in Christ, and through the love of family and friends. These gifts have sustained us through stressful times, and we thank you. We pray for those who are finding it hard to be joyful this year, remembering those facing illness in spirit, mind, or body, and those waiting for diagnosis or treatment, as anxiety grows...

We pray for those who are lonely or in mourning, and all who have been touched by tragedy and violence...

We pray for those searching for work, struggling with rising costs, worried deeply about their security...

And we pray for those working to bring justice to the discouraged and defeated – those doing their best to care for the earth you love, despite the challenges...

Use us to bring joy to others through our friendship, generosity and understanding. Generous God, Send joy to the world again. **Amen**

➤ *Joy to the world*

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#### **Blessing** (Philippians 4: 4-7)

*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry 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. And may the grace of the Living Christ, the love of God, and the nurturing community of the Spirit, embrace us all. Amen*

➤ *Go now in peace (round)*

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