

Welcome / Announcements / 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.

➤ *Prepare the way of the Lord* (seated) 112

Call to Worship / Advent Candles Use the ppt from PWS&D

As we prepare for Christ's coming, we remember your calling to be filled with joy.

We come knowing that our actions can help alleviate the burdens of others.

We light the third candle of Advent, a symbol of joy that uplifts the spirit.

May the warmth & brightness of this candle encourage us to act with compassion & courage.

Holy One, strengthen us by your Spirit to commit ourselves to being people of joy and justice. Fill us with all joy and peace as we trust in you, so that we may overflow with hope. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen

Songs of Advent¹ Joy

"O sing to the Lord a new song, for the Lord has done marvelous things. God's right hand and holy arm have won the victory."

These words, from Psalm 98, are the basis for one of the most famous Christmas carols of all time. It's a song that stirs up the heart and prepares the way for Christmas celebrations every year. And some people call it an "accidental Christmas classic."

Christians have sung the song for more than three hundred years. If I were to hum the tune right now, you'd know it instantly.

The Reader clears their throat then energetically hums the first lines: "Joy to the world, the Lord is come!" Any guesses? Wait for someone to answer.

Joy to the World. But did you know that it wasn't written as a Christmas song? Isaac Watts, a great name among hymnwriters, wrote it as a poem to highlight how Christ fulfills Old Testament scripture. He wrote it to help people imagine Christ's return at the end of time.

The song helps us to herald our King, but not in the way the writer intended. And isn't that sort of perfect? That a favorite Christmas carol is an unexpected hit – a surprise that no one could have planned for.

It sounds like the story of Christmas itself. God's people awaited a Saviour. They imagined a conquering King. But he didn't arrive with a host of soldiers, their armor shining, weapons ready,

impressing the nations with power and might. Their Messiah didn't come to them from a famous family whose wealth and influence impressed the world. And he didn't fall from heaven in a flame of light, the whole world turning to the sky, aware of his arrival.

No, Jesus came to a humble stable, born to a poor and unknown family, a helpless baby. He was easily overlooked. His heralds were humble shepherds. His welcome committee donkeys and sheep: King of Kings and Lord of Lords who rules the world with truth and grace. As a humble servant, obedient to God, he makes the nations prove the glories of his righteousness and the wonders of his love. As we prepare this advent, let every heart prepare him room...

➤ *Joy to the world*

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Gathering Prayer / Words of Hope (PCC Resources)

God of joy you are our strength and our song. You gather those who have strayed from you and welcome them back to your side. You bring healing to those who are broken in body and spirit – you accompany those who walk alone. Through your great love and mercy, you transform us all into more than we ever thought we could be. We trust in you and will not be afraid. With joy, we sing of your glory and proclaim your saving power.

All knowing God, we know that perfect joy only comes through faith in you, yet we seek it elsewhere. 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, our true source of joy, and guide us to discover what is honourable, just, and pleasing in your sight. Amen

Friends, 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.

➤ *Emmanuel soon will appear* (repeat / seated)

Prayer for Understanding

What should we do, O God, to open our lives to you? What changes of mind do you desire? Break open to us the good news of your coming that we may open wide the way for your grace and justice – for deeper relationship with you. In Christ Jesus we pray. 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

This third Sunday of Advent is traditionally called Gaudete or Joy Sunday. As we watch the flickering light of the Candle of Joy let's consider what it means to embrace the joy of our faith.

The Apostle Paul as he tells the folks at Philippi to, *Rejoice in the Lord always. I say it again - rejoice!* Isaiah tells the people to *sing aloud and sing for joy*. Even in the words of John the Baptist we can hear joy because he gives his listeners a way forward. He gives them hope for the future, tells them what they should do, fills them with expectation – his words are called **good news** – surely there is joy in that despite the harshness of his tone. John the Baptist's words keep in our minds the truth that the God who is coming is not Santa Claus *"who knows whether you are naughty or nice"*, but Jesus, God with us, the one who calls to us to turn around and follow him.

Joy is not about empty platitudes and hollow advice to "Be Happy" no matter what is happening in our life – in the world. In Scripture we are told that joy is what happens when we respond to that which God demands of us; and what God demands is a change of heart. We are called to a new way of being that releases us from the counterfeit joy of commercial, secular society. Real joy is what happens when we confront our sin, face up to what keeps us unhappy, and turn toward God's redeeming love.

Our scripture is overflowing with joy – overflowing with its call to hold on to the joy of our faith – the prophet Zephaniah says, *Be glad and rejoice with all your heart*. It sounds just like what this season of Yuletide is supposed to be about – good cheer and holiday exuberance and all that, but you and I know that Zephaniah knew nothing of our Christmas festivities.

Zephaniah wrote during a terrible time in Israel. Assyrian cruelty dominated the nations. Israel had tried to accommodate, to buy off Assyria, to cooperate as best she could through compromise. The prophet announces that the game is over, that doom is coming.

Zephaniah offers a long series of judgmental prophecies against Israel and its neighbours for their worship of gods other than Yahweh. He harshly condemns his society – is convinced that a high price will have to be paid by the whole nation – yet he points to the presence of God among them – the abundant spiritual resources in their midst. Zephaniah promises a day of great rejoicing when God is present in Israel to judge and to save.

His prophecy comes in the voice of Yahweh speaking as a wise and gentle counsellor. There are important things for the people to realize – things that can be important for us to hear as well.

Sing aloud... shout... Rejoice and exult. The first thing the counsellor says is calculated to surprise, to jolt those listening out of the grip of their anxiety. There must be some reasons for singing – some reasons to be filled with joy. Perhaps they aren't obvious things – perhaps we can't see them all the time. There are six reasons for singing and rejoicing presented in this passage – six reasons for joy in spite of the pressing agenda we may feel.

The first reason for embracing joy is that we are linked to God in relationship – a special, intimate, personal connection to our divine creator. This reminder comes to us in the phrase from verse 14: *O daughter Zion... O daughter Jerusalem!* We are children of God – bound in covenant – linked by love with our living Lord.

The second reason for singing and rejoicing is that, in spite of the difficulty we have in believing it, we are always forgiven and accepted by God. We are surely not always deserving and yet *The LORD*, says the prophet to his people, *has taken away the judgments against you.*

The third reason is that God is actually with us. *The LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more.* In spite of the insistent assumption of our culture to the contrary – the "each one is an island" mentality – in spite of all we might hear around us, we have the joy of knowing that we are not alone. Perhaps statements like this are so familiar they have lost their power to reassure and strengthen. Can we embrace the presence of God in small ways all the time so that we never lose sight of this awesome truth?

The fourth reason for expressing elation is that God has the power to renew us if we are prepared to be open to that power. *The LORD, your God... will rejoice over you with gladness... will renew you in divine love... will exult over you with loud singing.* God

delights in us – delights in the world – delights in each part of creation. Think about that – God delights in you! In spite of the reasons why we may be unable to delight in ourselves – and on the occasions when we struggle to delight in one another – God delights in you and in me – be renewed and filled with joy.

The fifth reason for rejoicing is that each of us has an ally in our efforts to deal with the many things that oppress us as very human beings. God says, *I will deal with all your oppressors*. God assures us that we are not alone in our struggles – in fact, God is not only present but involved. The words here express particularly the healing nature of God – the lame will not be forgotten, nor will the outcast. When we hear this on a personal level, we can understand that even the wounded, weak parts of our selves will know the grace of God. Even those things in us of which we are ashamed will be offered God's grace. God *will change our shame into praise*.

The sixth reason for song is that God can be grace to us in our efforts to bring the torn and fragmented parts of our lives together. This brokenness in us can make us feel like exiles – make us feel disconnected from who we want to be, from others, from God. In this passage, God speaks to us some of the loveliest and joyous words we can hear: *I will bring you home*.

The words of the prophet offer Israel – offer us – the promise that the coming Day of the Lord will not only bring forgiveness and security from oppression, but prosperity and recognition among all people. God's divine purpose is to bring all things into united harmony that is motivated by the love envisioned in God's covenant with Israel, fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ and brought to completion by the work of the Holy Spirit in all who believe.

The prophet calls for singing and shouting, jubilation and delight – this is joy that we are called to embrace with intensity. "To embrace is to accept with gusto," says Marva Dawn author of *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, "to live to the hilt, to choose with extra intentionality and tenacity." Sometimes we are just too calm and orderly for our own good! It is part of the weakness of our contemporary Christian witness – we are often lacklustre and uninspiring – anything but joyful.

The early Christians set their world on fire with the exuberance of their joy – a joy that came from their focus on the resurrection as an accomplished fact – a joy that came from knowing that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. These are things we know too! We too can embrace the joy of living in the light of Christ.

The Good News of Advent – the joyful news – is that God is coming to us, not to destroy us but to refine us, to help us to become what we were meant to be. It is God's great gift

to us: to own up to what we have been and done, to express our sorrow and be relieved of the terrible burden of having to think that we are right all the time.

May we all be filled with the freedom of knowing that we are not right all the time – and the joy of knowing that we don't have to be! Christ has come to set us free – to forgive and to show us God's love. *Sing aloud... shout... Rejoice and exult with all your heart...*

➤ *Hope is a star*

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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 turns despair into joy. Amen

Pastoral Prayers and the Lord's Prayer

O God, our Strength and Salvation, we come to you with joy and thanksgiving as the beauty of this season unfolds. 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 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, and those doing their best to care for the earth you love, despite the challenges...

Use us to bring to joy to others through our friendship, generosity and understanding.

Generous God, send joy to the world again.

We offer our prayers in the name of your Jesus Christ, our hope, our peace, and our joy, who encourages us to pray together ...**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 Texts Behind the Tunes²: In the ancient context: **Isaiah 44-45**

❖ **Isaiah 44:24 – 45:3** [OT 674]

Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb: *I am the Lord, who made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who by myself spread out the earth; who frustrates the omens of liars, and makes fools of diviners; who turns back the wise, and makes their knowledge foolish; who confirms the word of his servant, and fulfills the prediction of his messengers; who says of Jerusalem, "It shall be inhabited," and of the cities of Judah, "They shall be rebuilt, and I will raise up their ruins"; who says to the deep, "Be dry—I will dry up your rivers"; who says of Cyrus, "He is my shepherd, and he shall carry out all my purpose"; and who says of Jerusalem, "It shall be rebuilt," and of the temple, "Your foundation shall be laid."*

Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him and strip kings of their robes, to open doors before him—and the gates shall not be closed: *I will go before you and level the mountains, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron, I will give you the treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places, so that you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who call you by your name.*

❖ **Hark the glad sound**

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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 Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen

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² An Advent Program created by the Rev. Dr. Patricia Dutcher-Walls, Moderator of the 2024 General Assembly/Professor of Hebrew Bible, Emerita, Vancouver School of Theology © 2024.