

Worship at home
December 13, 2020

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT: Joy



<https://www.epaumc.org/home-page/inform/2015/12/what-is-advent/>

If you are using this liturgy at home you may wish to begin with two lit candles symbolizing the hope and peace that Jesus' birth and life brings to the world. The third candle is lit during the opening prayers.

Lighting the Advent Candles:

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

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

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

God of transformation,
we rejoice that you lift up the lowly and fill the hungry with good things.
We marvel at your power to change hearts and lives.
We give you thanks and praise that you remember your mercy,
and the promises you made of old.
Fill us with your Spirit this season
so that our voices declare your goodness
and our lives proclaim your mercy in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Hymn: #122 “Oh come, oh come, Emmanuel”
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7xtpJ4Q_Q-4

God’s Word read and interpreted:

The story opens on Zechariah in the temple ministering at the altar of incense. He’s visited by the angel Gabriel who announces that his wife, Elizabeth will conceive and give birth to a son named John (“The Lord has shown favour”). John will, in time, play the role of herald preparing the people for the Lord. The opening scene closes in Zechariah’s home and Elizabeth in her fifth month of pregnancy.

Scene two opens on Mary in an undisclosed location within the village of Nazareth in the Roman province of Galilee. The angel Gabriel approaches and announces that she, too, will conceive and give birth to a son whom she will name Jesus (“The Lord has saved”). Mary is perplexed; yet, something about the angel allows her to trust his words. She ponders the message while yielding to the power of the Most High. The scene closes on Mary’s prayer of obedience and the departure of the angel.

Today we watch the third scene unfold. It opens on the trail between Nazareth and an undisclosed town in Judea. Mary is travelling to visit Elizabeth who Gabriel has said is now into her 6th month of pregnancy. As Mary travels to Judea, we begin to see the two storylines converging. When Mary greets Elizabeth the two storylines meet.

READ LUKE 1:39-56.

1. Luke didn’t tell us why Mary chose to go and visit Elizabeth. What he thought was necessary to relate was that, soon after Gabriel’s visitation, Mary went *with haste* to visit Elizabeth.

Upon arriving in the undisclosed Judean town, we learn that Elizabeth and Mary were reasonably close relatives because Mary was familiar enough to not stand on ceremony but to walk right into the house and call out her greeting.

Elizabeth has yet to see Mary. Nevertheless, when she heard Mary’s greeting, she felt the baby move in her womb. Now, we know that Elizabeth was in her 6th month of pregnancy. And, it is not uncommon for first-time mothers to begin to feel their baby’s movement during the 5th or 6th month. However, this was no ordinary movement. Luke wrote that “The child leapt in her womb!”

The baby's movement was so intense it caused Elizabeth to exclaim with a loud cry: From Mary's lips through Elizabeth's ears to the jumping baby within.

There are a few questions that can be raised by Elizabeth's exclamation:

(i) "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb."

Remember, Luke was careful to record that Mary 'set out and went with haste' to visit Elizabeth. She didn't take time to send a message ahead. And, she left soon after Gabriel's announcement. We can infer from that this was within the first month of her pregnancy. And, Elizabeth has yet to see her. How then did Elizabeth know Mary was pregnant?

(ii) "Why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?" How did she know Mary's child was to be Lord?

(iii) "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

Again, how did Elizabeth know that Mary had received any message from the Lord?

Luke didn't provide any answers to any of these questions. He wanted us to understand that all Elizabeth had on which to base her song was the sound of Mary's greeting, the movement in her womb, ... and the dot-connecting ministry of the Holy Spirit.

2. From Gabriel's appearance to Zechariah in the temple to the Holy Spirit overshadowing Mary to the unborn child leaping in Elizabeth's womb, this is a story that transcends human endeavours. It's not about our human efforts to try and build a just and peaceful society – as much as working in that direction can be a faithful response. This is about the supernatural power and the real, living presence of the Creator. It's about the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob showing that He hadn't forgotten his promises of the covenant; that He is true to His word, and now, by the mystery of the Holy Spirit, He has decisively bisected the trajectory of the human story and changed the narrative arc forever.

The season of advent is a liturgical tool developed to help us prepare for the coming of Jesus. That means remembering his coming in his nativity; it means expectantly looking forward to his coming as judge at the marriage feast of heaven and

earth; and it means his continual coming to us here-and-now through his Word, through prayer, and through the sacraments in the mystery of the Holy Spirit.

3. As we continue such preparations during this advent season in the privacy of our homes, our hearts, and our minds, it behooves us to pay attention to the actions of the people and the actions of God.

Zechariah strove to *obey* the commandments of the Lord.

Mary *yielded* to the Power of the Most High.

Elizabeth *paid attention* to the Holy Spirit within her.

God *re-wrote* the storyline.

John *leaped* for Joy.

The best description I've heard for joy is an emotion of relief. In the song Mary sang in response to Elizabeth's cry, she expressed such joy; such relief. Relief that by God's power and by God's grace, and by God's mercy He has diverted the storyline away from a catastrophic end and toward an eternity of hope, peace, and joy.

Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, and even the unborn John bore witness to what God was doing. They sought to let God be God. They were willing to yield to the Holy Spirit. And they allowed God to bless the world in His way.

4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor as well as an active and vocal anti-Nazi dissident. He was executed by the Nazis in 1945. Among his various writings he wrote:

Who among us will celebrate Christmas correctly?

Whoever finally lays down all power, reputation, honour, vanity, arrogance, individualism beside the manger. Whoever remains lowly and lets God alone be high; whoever looks at the child in the manger and sees the glory of the God precisely in his lowliness.

When that becomes the theme of our life's story, our story and God's story of creation and redemption merge and become one.

If we could scatter the thoughts of our proud hearts, lay down our honour, our reputation, our vanity beside the manger, we too might begin to hear Mary's greeting; we too might begin to hear the glad notes of the angels singing that the Kingdom of

Jesus has come; we too might awaken to the Holy Spirit already within us; we too might leap for joy in the fellowship of God our Saviour.

And to Him belong all honour and glory now and forevermore.

Amen.

Hymn: #123 “My soul gives glory to my God”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sWZ92Rqo4M4>

Prayers of intercession and thanksgiving:¹

Come, Christ Jesus, be our guest

and enter our lives today with your blessing.

We are lonely for you and the peace you bring.

Draw near to us in friendship and faithfulness

so that in this season which combines celebration in the face of uncertainty, we may know your presence...

and sing with all your people:

Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

Come, Christ Jesus, be our guide

and show us the way to wisdom and gratitude.

We are thankful for the kindness we know in friends and good neighbours, in warm houses and warm smiles,

which hold off the darkness and fear for the future.

Encourage us to reach out to those who need your embrace and ours...

so that together we may sing of your presence:

Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

Come, Christ Jesus, be our hope

and touch us with your healing and grace.

We remember before you all those we know and those known to you alone who are living with loss or illness this season,

those who face depression or discouragement,

and all who will find it hard to be merry this year.

(Keep a silence for 15–20 seconds)

Shine the light of your comfort into their lives...

as we sing of the hope that dawns in your love:

Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

¹ Adapted from worship resource for December 13, 2020 available at <https://presbyterian.ca/worship>

Come, Christ Jesus, be our king
and claim your rightful place in our hearts.
Our world is struggling for the justice and mercy you bring.
Draw near to our leaders and all citizens working for peace and justice,
and those striving to contain and heal the effects of the pandemic.
Encourage honourable action and co-operation on all sides.
Give hope to people under oppression
and to those who live with fear or hunger day by day.
Hasten the day when the world's peoples will live as neighbours
reconciled in your truth and freedom.

Benediction:

May the Wonderful Counsellor guide you,
The Mighty God protect you,
The Everlasting Father be with you,
The Prince of Peace inspire you.
And the blessing of God – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit be upon you,
now and evermore.
Amen.²

² David Adam, *The Rhythm of Life: Celtic Daily Prayer*, 59.