

Mooretown Presbyterian Churches
December 11, 2022
Third Sunday of Advent: Joy



Reading the Edict of Ordination of Elders (*Knox*)

God calls us to worship

Advent reading and candle lighting (*Insert*)

Song: **A candle is burning, a candle of joy,
A candle to welcome brave Mary's new boy.
Our hearts fill with wonder, and eyes light and glow,
As joy brightens winter like sunshine on snow.**

We respond in praise, confession, and supplication

Prayer of Praise:

Creator God, Maker of heaven and earth,
with the sea and the stars, and everything in between,
we praise you for the wonders of this world and beyond it.
You set all creation in relationships both fruitful and fragile.
You make deserts bloom and refresh the earth with seasonal rain.
With your care for the vulnerable in our hearts,
we praise you with joy song this day,
Our God, who is the Source, Saviour and Spirit of life,
perfect in unity, splendor and truth.

Prayer of Confession (Unison):

**Gracious Judge,
we look around us and are not proud of what we see.
People criticize each other
and listen only to those who agree with them.
We are impatient for things to improve
but reluctant to change our own ways.
Forgive us and renew in us the joy and gratitude
that marks the life you offer in Christ Jesus.
Amen.**

Assurance of pardon:

Receive the Good News in joy. With great mercy, God forgives what we have confessed and offers us new life in Christ. Rejoice that you can make a new beginning and share the joy in mercy and forgiveness with others.

Hymn: #118 "Hark the glad sound"

God speaks to us

What are you looking for?

There are three attitudes we're invited to embrace during the season of Advent:

1. *Celebration.* The one probably most on people's minds is the attitude of celebration as we remember and praise God for Christ's coming in his historical incarnation as a baby born in a stable in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago.
2. *Anticipation.* We also during this season anticipate Christ's coming again with patience and endurance: yearning for his rule and judgment, learning his wisdom, discerning his ways, and yielding our body, mind, and emotions to his rule.
3. *Awakening.* Whereas the first attitude focuses on history and the second on the future, the third attitude is about awakening to Christ's coming in the present power of the Holy Spirit.

Readings: Isaiah 35:1-10
Psalm 146:1-10 (*read responsively*)
James 5:7-10
Matthew 11:2-11, 13-15

1. Jesus asked the crowds: "What were you looking for when you went out to see John in the wilderness?"

Were you looking for a reed shaken by the wind? Were you looking for someone who will affirm whatever is trendy or in-line with popular thought? Were you looking for someone who will say whatever scratches your itchy ears regardless of whether it conforms to the will of God?

No, that's not what you were looking for.

You knew that wouldn't bring you hope or peace or joy of any substance?

After all, if that's all you were looking for, you would have gone looking elsewhere. John's not a reed that can be shaken by whatever wind blows! He will speak on behalf of God and nothing will bend his resolve!

Were you looking for someone dressed in soft robes? Were you looking for physical comfort, pleasure, and leisure?

No, that's not what you were looking for.

You knew that wouldn't save the world. You knew that in princes there is no lasting help for "when their breath departs, they return to the earth!"

After all, if that's all you were looking for, you would have gone looking elsewhere. John lived out in the wilderness, ate locusts, and invited you to a life of repentance and obedience!

Were you looking for a prophet? Were you looking for someone who spoke for the God who delivered your ancestors from their exile? Were you looking for someone who spoke for the God who could not merely teach you how to behave, but who could rescue you?

Yes. That's who the crowds were looking for. They were looking for the prophet who would herald the advent of the Messiah.

For generations, the stories had been told of the prophet Elijah returning to prepare God's people to receive the divinely-anointed king (which is what is meant by "Messiah".) Elijah would come and prepare the people to receive the Messiah who would once more establish the Davidic line of kings and thus be the agent of God's reign and influence on earth as it is in heaven.

In fact, the last verses of the last book of the Old Testament (in our Bible) read thusly:

*Remember the teaching of my servant Moses, the statutes and ordinances that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel. Lo, I will send you the prophet **Elijah** before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. He will **turn** the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.¹*

Thus, Malachi ended his preaching, and, thus ends the Old Testament.

Elijah would return and call the people to repentance (as we discussed last week) before the Messiah ushered in the kingdom of God.

And, with his coarse and hairy robes of camel's hair cinched with a leather belt, and with his preaching in locations where Elijah was known to minister, and with his sermons of preparation: urging the people of God, the religious leaders, and even Herod himself to turn their hearts not only to one another, but to God and God's rule, John the baptizer, the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, completed Elijah's ministry: "...if you are willing to accept it, he *is* Elijah who is to come."²

The crowds went out into the wilderness to find the prophet who would announce the advent of the Messiah who would secure the Lord's reign for all generations to come.

With John, they had all the indications that God was visiting His people and was about to restore His kingdom on earth.

And yet, they couldn't see.

¹ Malachi 4:4-6

² Matthew 11:14

2. In the last book of the Narnia Chronicles: *The Last Battle*, shortly before the country of Narnia is extinguished and frozen-over, the kings and queens of Narnia have been pushed into a dark and smelly stable only to find themselves instead in what they would soon learn was the real Narnia of which the first was only a shadow. The first was glorious, yet it was still plagued by evil. In this new Narnia, the vibrancy of the colours defies our ability to imagine. The abundantly-laden trees produce fruit of indescribable sweetness. The grass is the greenest of green. The air is rejuvenating, and the sun pleasantly bright.

A group of dwarfs have also been brought through the stable from the soon-to-be extinguished old Narnia to this glorious country. They, however, sit sullenly in a circle, looking inward and complaining of the darkness all around them and the overpowering smell of the dingy stable.

“‘Aslan,’ said Lucy through her tears, ‘could you – will you – do something for these poor Dwarfs?’” To Aslan replied by producing for the dwarfs the most glorious feast imaginable with the finest wine ever tasted. The dwarfs, however, “thought they were eating and drinking only the sort of things you might find in a stable.”

“‘You see,’ said Aslan. ‘... **They have chosen cunning instead of belief. Their prison is only in their own minds, yet they are in that prison; and so afraid of being taken in that they cannot be taken out.**’³

During the season of Advent, as we prepare to celebrate the historic birth of Christ, and as we anticipate his coming again at the end of the age when this shadowland is resurrected to the glory of the true earth that is God’s undisputed home among mortals, we are challenged to believe what is almost unbelievable from the perspective of human logic and ability, challenged to be taken in by the proclamation: that there is a God who is real, good, and able, and that through the mystery of the Holy Spirit, the power of the King of kings and Lord of lords is with us here and now.

3. If you’re willing to accept it, John *was* the anticipated herald of the Messiah, he completed Elijah’s ministry which means that Jesus of Nazareth *is* the Messiah.

Humanity’s exile from God’s presence and power is over. With, by, and through Christ, we can be reconciled with our heavenly Father in fellowship with whom is life everlasting.

³ *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Last Battle*, C.S. Lewis, chapter 13 “How the dwarfs refused to be taken in”.

The ransomed of the Lord can come home to Zion. The signs of death and darkness are being reversed: the eyes of the blind are opened, the ears of the deaf are unstopped. Even the earth rejoices at the victory of its Lord: the dry, cracked, and burning sand gushes forth in streams and pools, the desert blossoms abundantly, and straight from exile to Zion a highway emerges on which there are no obstacles and no dangers.

The exile is over. The ransomed souls are coming home.

Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.⁴

4.

*Joy, we could call it the joy of heaven, or the joy of redemption, or the joy of salvation, is the relief you experience when you **realize** that you are home and safe; when you **realize** that evil cannot harm you.*

From his place in prison, while he awaited his own beheading, John the Baptist was at risk of missing that joy. He had heard stories of what this Jesus – whom he had baptized and proclaimed to be the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” – was doing.

And he wondered if it could be really true.

We can understand John’s skepticism. He was in prison and waiting to be beheaded because he had confronted Herod about divorcing his wife in order to marry his brother’s wife, Herodias. From his own perspective, it must have seemed, to John, like evil was winning! So, he wondered if Jesus truly is who he thought he was:

“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

In this present age, between the birth of the Messiah and his return, as was the case for John as well, Evil still vies for control of our beliefs, our emotions, our thoughts, and hence our actions.

We miss out on the joy of heaven, the joy of redemption, when, by preoccupying ourselves with only on our own prisons, our own circumstances, we fail to *believe* that Jesus is who the Bible says he is and that in him the kingdom of God has come near to our

⁴ Isaiah 35:10

hearts and minds. We miss out on joy when we fail to realize that our life is hidden with Christ in God.

Jesus didn't really try to sugar-coat his response to John.

In effect, his reply was simply: Wake up!

Open your eyes!

“The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.”

If you're looking for someone to scratch your ears, to tell you what you want to hear and what is accepted by the general public – regardless of its conformity to the will and word of God, then keep looking. Don't look for Jesus!

If you're looking for soft robes, for physical comfort, pleasure, and leisure, than keep looking. Don't look for Jesus!

If you're looking for the Messiah, the king who rules with perfect, righteous, and grace-filled justice; who doesn't merely teach us ethics and morality but who *rescues* us from the present darkness and *transfers* us into the kingdom of light; if you're looking for a *saviour* who will reconcile you to the God in whom life has its fullest meaning, then *believe* that the baby born 2,000 years ago in Bethlehem, who was named Jesus (“the Lord saves”), who died on the cross to forgive sin, who was resurrected, who reigns over the church from his heavenly throne, who will come again to restore once and for all his good kingdom on earth as in heaven, *is*, in the mystery of the Holy Spirit the Lord who continues to come to us here-and-now through the words of scripture, the sacraments, service, worship, and prayer.

For joy in your hearts and minds, for hope in society, and for the glory of God.

Amen.

We respond by affirming our faith, offering our tithes, and prayer

Hymn: #129 "Prepare the way, O Zion"

Service of Ordination of Elders (Knox) (*Book of Common Worship*, pgs. 390 – 397):

Offering:

(*Offering plates are presented at the Communion Table while congregation sings:*)

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;

praise him all creatures here below;

praise him above, ye heavenly host;

praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost

Prayer of dedication

Prayers of thanksgiving, intercession, and the Lord's Prayer:

God of all creation,

Every creature finds its way to rejoice in your presence.

The desert blooms, a mountain top glistens,

a stream makes music flowing over rocks.

We give you thanks for the joy in nature which can lift our hearts.

Thank you for the joy we can share with each other,

for familiar songs on our lips,

for greetings from old friends,

for the excitement of children in this season,

and for the promise born again in us as we anticipate Jesus' birth.

God who makes all things new,

Renew our life together.

God of the world, its wonders and its woes,

we know there are many people and places who cannot rejoice this year,

so we open our concerns for the world before you this day.

We remember those who have been silenced

by oppressive regimes

by shocking tragedy

by bullying and threats

or by illness that takes away speech.

Keep silence for 10-15 seconds.

Help us listen with care when words are not easy to find,

and show us when and how to speak when others cannot.

God who makes all things new,

Renew our life together.

We remember those who have grown weaker
Through months of isolation
Through changing economic circumstances
Through ageing or illness
Through hunger and homelessness.

Keep silence for 10-15 seconds.

Renew their strength and courage to engage life as they are able,
and show us when and how to offer our support and encouragement.

God who makes all things new,
Renew our life together.

We remember those whose days are filled with fear
because of war and conflict on their streets,
because of intimidation and discrimination,
because the security they relied on has disappeared.

Keep silence for 10-15 seconds.

Bring them protection and comfort in uncertain situations,
and make us wise and generous neighbours who can offer relief.

God who makes all things new,
Renew our life together.

We remember those whose lives seem empty
because their cupboards are bare while others shop for the season
because someone precious is absent
because choices made have not been fulfilling

Keep silence for 10-15 seconds.

Fill empty lives with meaning and purpose.
Show us how to share what we have in ways that are generous and dignified,
and let joy dawn again where it has died.

God who makes all things new,
Renew our life together.

Renew in us all the joy that comes from the assurance of your love for us in Christ
Jesus
for we gather our prayers together in the words he taught us:

The Lord's Prayer

God sends us with God's blessing:

Hymn: #135 "Christians, awake"

Benediction

Congregational Amen