

## Worship Resources - *Change in Vision*

Advent 3, Year C,

12<sup>th</sup> December, 2021

**Zephaniah 3:14-20 NRSV / Luke 3:7-18 NRSV**

**Prelude**                                **Jazz Quartet Group** (NW Jazz Orchestra)

**Welcoming Guests/Announcements**

**Pass the Peace**

**Call to Worship** (responsive)

Leader:        The joy of the season is upon us. The time is almost here.

**People:        We have come to praise the Lord!**

Leader:        We are here to sing praises to God, the Holy One in whom we place our trust. God opens our eyes and lifts us up.

**People:        Let us praise God who reigns forever.**

**Invocation**

We gather, O God, in this worship space mindful of your presence.

We are here to rejoice as we wait to see your glory.

Help us proclaim the joy you promise In this hour of worship we ask that you bless us through the inspiration of your Holy Spirit and through the stories of Christ's ministry among us. Amen!

**Opening Music        *God is Here Among Us*    16**

**Prophetic Reading:    Zephaniah 3:14-20 NRSV**

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[a] 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.

## Special Music

## Jazz Quartet Group (NW Jazz Orchestra)

### Lighting the Advent Candle

*Kristi Morris and Pastor Glenn*

**Pastor:** On this third Sunday of Advent, we seek joy in the change the arrival of the Christ child brings us.

**Kristi:** The prophets of old and new speak of the change that only God can bring. We joyfully reflect this morning on the hope and peace that offers, not only to us, but to a world so desperately in need of the light that event offers.

**Pastor:** As we light this third candle of Advent, let us search for the joy in the promise of the arrival of this messiah, as we celebrate the effects of that change in ourselves, and the potential for hope and peace only a child born in Bethlehem can provide.

*(Pastor lights candle)*

**Kristi:** May the joy we experience shine forth in a world that grows dim with despair.

## Hanging of the Greens

**Hymn**     *On Jordan's Banks the Baptist's Cry*

**183**

## A Time of Prayer

## Joys and Concerns

## Pastoral Prayer

God of our Highest Joy, we come to you this day as your servants, gathered to worship you and you alone. As we continue this Advent journey, help us to focus on you and the coming of your son, Jesus. Amidst the commercials, the cooking, and the company, help us to remember the true meaning of this season: that you would come to us in the flesh and forever live among us.

Even as we share the joy we find in you with one another, we are mindful of those for whom joy is hard to find, for those who don't have enough clothes, for those who don't have enough food, for those who don't have enough (or any) shelter, for those who don't have enough protection and justice. We confess that there really is "enough" for everyone, but it is our fault that the "enough" is hoarded by few at the expense of many. Help us to bear the good fruit that the Baptist called us to bear, being mindful of those around us without during this season of giving.

We pray this day for those longing for spiritual renewal. We would ask that your Holy Spirit invigorate us that we may provide for others first before expecting them to provide for us. Come to this place and encourage us to do the work to which we were baptized. Help us to proclaim the Good News in word and in deed.

We pray this day for the hope we have found, the peace we seek, and the joy we will receive in your Holy name. May we bring hope to the hopeless, peace to the Restless, and joy to those who crave it. We pray this day, either out loud or in our hearts, for those dear to us...

Gracious God, may the joy we find not be a commodity to be hoarded but a gift to be shared with one another. We thank you for your presence among us, your creation around us, and your providence within us, as we continue this blessed journey. Amen.

## Gospel Reading     **Luke 3:7-18 NRSV**

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.

## **Message - *Change in Vision***

So what does the future hold? On this third Sunday of Advent, what joy can we look forward to? A lot of Christians today spend an awful lot of time thinking about what is coming up, what promise they have in events to come. In fact, that's been a key selling point for evangelism since the time of Paul, the promise of a secure eternal future with Christ. Some scholars in the last century or so have even pieced together snippets of scripture from Daniel, Isaiah, and Revelation, among others, to develop elaborate potential timelines of future events, in an effort to try to describe in detail exactly what the future will look like. And while I could probably stand here and discuss the finer points of theories with names like Millennialism and Dispensationalism involving events like the Rapture and Tribulation for hours, this morning I'd like to keep my focus a little narrower on the dualism between the expectations of what change the messiah represents to those in the First Testament and the reality that we find in the ministry of Jesus.

In this morning's readings, we have the contrast of the hopes that Zephaniah brings to the people of Jerusalem, who are suffering from oppression both within and without, and the somewhat stern words of John the Baptist to those seeking redemption immediately prior to Jesus coming on the scene. Zephaniah was speaking to a people who were worn out and low. The Northern kingdom was destroyed and scattered by the Assyrians, who now were their overlords and exacted heavy tribute from them. Their own rulers and elite were corrupt and mistreated those on the lower rungs of society. Sounds familiar doesn't it?

Seems like everytime the Chosen People have a chance to run things on their own, it always seems to end up in the same place, with greed and oppression ruling the day.

Yet Zephaniah is saying that hope and joy are on the horizon for God's people. God is coming to redeem them. And not just from a distance, but "in your midst." Right there among them, incarnated. Those who oppress will be dealt with in judgment. The outcast will be lifted and shall be in shame no longer. But most importantly, they are not to fear and let their hands grow weak.

Prior to this passage, Zephaniah has been listing all the ways that the powerful in that time were corrupt and oppressing the people. Those who were being oppressed were fearful and ashamed. When you are ashamed and afraid, you hold back, you don't take risks, your initiative becomes weak. Yet the promise the prophet brings is that they are not to fear, so that their hands do not become weak. There is work to be done. When God comes among them, while it's cause for celebration, it also has expectations as well.

Which brings us to John the Baptist. As I mentioned last week, John is unique as a prophet in that he is on the cusp between the Testaments, on the turning from the old to the new. The crowd who journeyed out to the wilderness to hear him are very familiar with Zephaniah. They are looking for that joy that's been on the horizon for about 600 years now. They know the history. The corrupt society of Zephaniah was eventually subdued and exiled by the Babylonians, only to return and eventually make itself corrupt and oppressive again. Domination by the Assyrians and Babylonians was replaced by domination by Greek empires and later, the Romans. So they came to John looking for God incarnate, looking for the messiah that would come swooping in and set everything right.

Yet that wasn't the vision of redemption that John was promoting. John is defining for them why they mustn't let their hands grow weak. Being a descendent of Abraham isn't a golden ticket that gains you admission to God's redemption. There's work involved. There's genuine repentance, turning aside from the same old routine of taking advantage of others, of focusing on the riches of this world. God's chosen isn't about bloodlines, it's about covenant. It's about honoring the deal made with God. You live right, follow the Golden Rule and all that flows from that, in other words, live justly, and you get to benefit from the change to come.

But with Jesus, you become part of that change. You share your extra cloak with your neighbor that has none. You deal honorably with each other; you don't take more than your share. You don't use your privilege or advantage to favor yourself over others. You live the life to come in the here and now, without fear. Because you have the assurance that something better will come. In fact, something better is already here, waiting to break fully into this world, waiting to turn things upside down.

But do we seek that change breaking in around us? Or do we, like those in the wilderness crowd with John, think that we're owed a place in the chosen? Maybe because we've grown up in the church, or because we never miss a Sunday worship or a bible fellowship. Or maybe because we study our bibles every day, and pray every night. Now don't get me wrong, I'm not knocking those things. But that's not how you get on the right list. That's not how you avoid the winnowing fork. There's action required.

The expectation is you'll get your hands dirty doing some work. Not hold back and let them get weak. And there's plenty of work that needs done. Our society isn't much different than that of Jesus' or Zephaniah's time. We have oppression that leads to injustice and poverty. One only has to look at the tent cities spread throughout our city to see the need, the racial injustice in our community and country, even the inequity in vaccine distribution. The only question we have, is do we get our hands dirty? Or do we let our fear lead us to judgment and inaction?

British theologian David Prior once wrote, Justice and kindness are essential qualities of the nature of God Himself. They do not come down from heaven wrapped in parcels. They are expressed in and through people who walk humbly with God. Will we walk humbly and work with our God in the kin-dom that breaks in, or will we sit idly by, waiting for that far off day of redemption only to find we're not on the guest list?

For as much as we might want to treat Advent as a pass on discipleship, as permission to take a break from Kingdom activity if just for a bit, after all, we have plenty to do to prepare for the holidays. But is that really an option?

Maybe John's proclamation in our gospel lesson today is not just a reminder to take the focus outside of ourselves and our immediate circles, but is an urgent plea to do so. For these are the times when waiting can be replaced with complacency. Expectation can be substituted with inaction. Hope can be exchanged with self-righteous certainty. We are prone to such self-adulation. Our human propensity aligns with being an individual. We often convince ourselves that we are far more philanthropic than is actually true. A hoped-for selflessness is, more often than not, a veiled attempt to deny the impulses named by John: to keep our coats. To store our food. To strategize how best to maximize our money and ward off pleas that might reduce our wages in any way. To pretend that no one will notice if we stockpile our produce, if we amass our means, when all the while our neighbor shivers in the cold or wonders when the next meal will come. And then we look to find fault in those who suffer, seeking to find reasons to shift the blame away from ourselves for inaction. Too much of Advent yields to what has been determined as giving the most minimal attention to the season.

John reminds us of just how easy it is to lose sight of the event for which Advent waits. And so, John's warnings come at the right time. For our Christian inclination at Christmas is to sit

back on our laurels, to rest comfortably in our securities of our church and Christian culture, to sit idly by as if Christmas could come and go without upending the world once again. So, John calls us to attention in this Advent season.

Will we give in to social norms, to going along with the status quo, to accepting the stations by which our culture marks the upcoming birth of Christ? Or will we manifest a way of being in the world that truly bears the fruit of repentance, a way that is a recognizably distinctive way of anticipating December 25? That is demonstrably different when imagining what Advent really means?

As we look for the joy in this third Sunday of Advent, may we find it in acts of compassion for those in need of justice and relief, in looking for ways to participate in the change Christ calls us to and is already at work in this world at this time. Amen.

## **A Call to Serve**

The scriptures tell us that God will turn things around; there will be new life in the dry places; there will be a strengthening in those of us with fearful hearts. There will be joy. We have the opportunity to participate with God in turning things around in this world. The effort to do so requires a sharing of the gifts God has placed in our hands. Consider now, what part you wish to play in the work of creation.

## **A Time for Reflection**

### **The Prayer of Thanksgiving**

We present to you, O God, our gifts. May they be used to make a difference in the lives of people where hope is scarce. May our gifts be a reminder, to those who receive them, of your love. Amen

**HYMN**     *Lo, How a Rose e'er Blooming*     **211**

### **Commissioning/Benediction**

Gathering one! Embracing one!  
The one-who-bears-the-image-of-those-who-bear-God's.  
Open our hearts to find you in community,  
In the hopeful, peaceful, joyful work of your people.

## **Postlude**