

## Worship Resources “*Course Correction*”

Advent 2, Year A, 4th December, 2022

Isaiah 11:1-10 NRSV / Matthew 3:1-12 NRSV

Prelude                  Jazz Quartet                  Northwest Jazz Orchestra

Opening Music                  [Prepare Ye, the Way of the Lord](#)

written by Stephen Laurence Schwartz and John Michael Tebelak,  
from the musical *Godspell*. Performed by members of the Gallery Choir of  
St. Columba's Episcopal Church, Washington, DC

Welcome Guests / Announcements

Pass the Peace/Hanging of the Greens

Opening Hymn                  *Come, Thou Almighty King*                  41

Call to Worship [responsive]

One: A voice cries out, “Prepare the way of the Lord.

**All: Make a path, direct and straight through: a way for our God.**

One: Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain made low.

**All: The uneven ground shall become level, the rough places a plain.”**

One: God is restoring what has been unequal, uneven, unjust;

**All: God’s glory shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together.**

One: For God has spoken through the prophets:

**All: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”**

Invocation

Hope of the World, You rise like a shoot from a stump.

You are the Resurrection and the Life,

springing forth from what was dead and forgotten.

You are making all things new.

May Your new life spring inside us when we are numb from the world’s despair.

May Your new life shine a path for us when we cannot perceive taking the next step. May

Your hope spark in us like a match struck that cannot be put out,

and may we shine bright, for the world desperately needs it.

We pray in the name of Christ, who is coming. Amen.

## **Prophetic Reading: Isaiah 11:1-10 NRSV**

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear;

but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.

The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

## **Special Music      Jazz Quartet      Northwest Jazz Orchestra**

### **Lighting The Advent Candle**

On the second Sunday of Advent, we listen for the word of peace. We listen for stories where people stop hurting each other and start helping. We listen for words of peace from leaders, and we remember that Christ is the Prince of Peace. We light this second candle for the peace we listen for that sings in our hearts, that God's reign is near.

**(Sung to the tune of Away in a Manger - Hymn 194)**

“Come quickly, shalom, teach us how to prepare, for a gift that compels us with justice to care. Our spirits are restless till sin and war cease. One candle is lit for the reign of God's peace.

## A Time of Prayer

### Joys and Concerns

### Pastoral Prayer

God, when the time was ripe and the hour had come, you sent your servant John into the wilderness to proclaim the coming of the one true Messiah: Make way! Repent and be baptized! For the salvation of God is at hand.

John came to bear witness to the true light, the Messiah, the Son of God. And he told them, wake up! Watch and wait, for the hour is near when the Son of God will arise.

God, on this second Sunday of Advent we have heard your servant crying out to us in the wilderness. We have heard the call to repentance and restoration, and we want to respond.

We have heard that you are offering forgiveness of sins, and we want to hear your mercy spoken over us. We have heard that you are baptizing with water, and with the Holy Spirit and with fire: cleanse us and make us new. We have heard that you are ushering in a reign of peace, and we want to see your kingdom when it comes.

God, our sins are many, but your mercy is great. Our vision is dim, but your coming is at hand. Our hope is feeble, but your promises stand forever.

God, your world stands in need of you. Everywhere we look we see need of you: for your coming, your restoration, your peace, your transformation.

On this second Sunday of advent we pray for the nations to know your truth and your light. We pray for the poor, the hungry, and the needy. We pray for those who are spiritually hungry and poor in spirit: may they come to know the living water, and to drink deeply from your well. We pray for those who face Christmas alone,

or sick, or homeless, or destitute: Jesus Christ, Light from true Light, be a light in the darkness.

God, the hour of your coming again draws near. Make us ready: in our hearts, in our minds, in our souls. Lord Jesus Christ, come to us again this Advent.

Come and do not tarry. Even so, come Lord Jesus! **Amen.**

### Gospel Reading: Matthew 3:1-12 NRSV

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.' "

Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.

Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan,

and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

Bear fruit worthy of repentance.

Do not presume 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.

"I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

## **Message - *Course Correction***

So this morning we lit our second Advent candle, the one that represents peace, or more precisely, shalom in Hebrew. When you hear the word "peace," what's the first thing that comes to your mind? For some it may mean calmness and tranquility. For others, the cessation or lack of violence may be what first comes into their minds when hearing that word.

These common definitions of peace all refer to the absence of something. When we think of quiet tranquility, it is essentially the absence of noise, of confusions, or distractions. It's a state of a mind, clear of those things that pull us to and fro and cause us stress. Likewise, in the context of violence and conflict, peace means an absence of those aggressive actions; a truce where each side ceases to take offensive action. From a Judeo-Christian perspective, however, peace has much more depth than just an absence of distraction or aggression. Both words widely translated as "peace"

in the Old and New Testaments, eirene in Greek and particularly shalom in Hebrew, have a strong relational meaning. When you wish someone "peace" using this terminology, you are not just wishing them calmness and tranquility. Shalom implies wishes for completeness, success and fulfillment, wholeness, harmony and well-being for both parties. It's much

more than “let’s just stop fighting” or getting rid of what distracts us. It’s action. It’s caring about the well-being and wholeness of not only another, but also of yourself. It’s individual and communal. From a scriptural and faith perspective, it’s reconnecting with the cosmic order ordained by God through creation, and established with God’s people through God’s covenant and promises to them. In creation each part has meaning and functions to promote the best, most just outcome for the individual and the created community as a whole. Yet as we are well aware, humans have a knack for trying to do things our own way, of going against God’s created order and causing the whole system to get out of whack; leading to discord, injustice, and imbalance.

You may have heard the term for this before, sin. Which brings us to our gospel lesson this morning introducing our friend John the Baptist. Matthew’s writer paints quite the colorful picture of John. Camel hair tunic with a big leather belt, wandering in the wilderness eating locusts and honey, all the while calling people to “repent!” And while many of us may take this descriptive imagery to be a metaphor for being an outsider, of not conforming to the religious structures of the day, the symbolism goes much deeper than that.

Matthew’s gospel goes to great lengths to tie the good news that Jesus brings to the hopes and promises of God’s people in the past. Matthew’s gospel opens with the extensive genealogy placing Jesus as the direct descendent of the Patriarchs and the heir of King David. Matthew’s gospel has the story of the slaughter of all the first born of Bethlehem, which sounds an awful lot like the story of baby Moses. Jesus’ parents flee with him in exile to the desert and eventually to Egypt for refuge, paralleling not only Joseph’s journey, but also a paralleling Moses being exiled to the desert, as well as a metaphor for the exodus of Israel in the wilderness.

Which leads us to John in the wilderness himself, sounding an awful lot like the story of the prophet Elijah in the Old Testament. Elijah spent most of his time as a prophet in the wilderness, on the margins, dressed as a bedouin which was typically a camel hair tunic cinched with a leather belt. So Matthew’s gospel neatly connects all these dots between the history of God’s promises and actions in Israel’s history with the events of Jesus and his time. John was Elijah returning to usher in the new messianic reign that was just around the corner. He, like Elijah, was calling the people of his day to “repent.” The word “repent” often has negative connotations for us. We often associate repentance with guilt, with the need to atone for our personal transgressions and shortcomings in order to obtain absolution. However, there is a difference between repentance and confession.

Repentance literally means to “turn around or change course.” Repentance for John requires action, a change in course. Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder understands clearly what repentance looks like. He states, “To repent is not to feel bad, but to think differently, and therefore to act differently.” In the account of John the Baptist in Luke’s Gospel, John highlights quite clearly the change in action called for: “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; whoever has food must do likewise.”

In Matthew, we see the difference repentance should make by understanding the kingdom of heaven better. The dominion of heaven has been contrasted with the reigns of worldly leaders from the beginning of Matthew. Based on this contrast, Matthew shows us the ways of this new kind of rule, God's rule, and its transforming presence. First, the clash between God's reign and Herod's makes it clear that God's rule challenges the current political and religious authorities. Being an insider of the status quo in Matthew is not a comfortable, safe position, and insiders seem to know this.

Herod acts against the child Jesus in fear and paranoia, rather than in humility, admiration, or worship. Our text this morning points out the Pharisees and Sadducees coming together to witness John's work. Normally these two groups had little to agree upon, coming from differing social classes and schools of religious thought. But as insiders relying on the status quo for their legitimacy, they made strange bedfellows in this challenge to both their places in the status quo of that culture. It is unlikely they were there for repentance and redemption; more likely their intent was to challenge John or gather intel for his eventual persecution. Yet the writer of Matthew points out that people were coming in droves from Jerusalem to hear John, to seek repentance, and to be baptized and start anew.

What was it that attracted so many? Peace, plain and simple. They were seeking shalom, that wholeness and harmony that was missing in their lives. Most of them were not insiders. They participated in the status quo that kept their world rolling along yet they saw firsthand its shortcomings. They knew life on the outside, they saw the misery of those on the margins, or were on the margins themselves. They could feel the imbalance, that something wasn't right about the way their part of the world worked. There needed to be a change of course, action needed to be taken. They were ready to step away from the status quo into a new reality, leaving the world of earthly rulers for the kingdom of God; a restoration of Creation as it was meant to be.

John offered them a different path to take; a new path for them which was actually the original path God always intended, one of justice and equity, not the self-serving paths of the world. Yet John merely started them down the path; one would come after him to take them the rest of the way, one who was baptized with fire and spirit.

This morning, I wonder how many of us are just going along with the status quo, plodding along in our place on the inside. While we may not be in positions of political or religious power, we like to fit in with the world, with the worldly rulers and states of our time. We like to think it makes life simpler, easier. But does it?

How much does our inaction and going with the flow and inaction support the "brood of vipers" of our day? And more importantly, do we find peace, shalom, in a life living the status quo? Or is something missing? This week, let's give time for reflection and meditation to the repentance each of us needs to seek. What changes and actions do we need to take to be more in line with the kingdom of God that draws near, and less in step with the status quo of this realm.

In the coming week, how will you share peace for yourself, and what can you do to seek peace, or the well-being and fulfillment of others? What can we as the body of Christ do to encourage peace and repentance and change among the greater community? As we enter into our call to service and listen to our special music, give some thought as to at least one specific way you can seek a different course in your own life this week, and one way we can seek to improve the course of those in the community around us. I hope and pray we all seek a change in course, repentance, to bring us closer to the kingdom that draws near and enters this world at Christmas. Amen.

## **A Call to Serve**

We believe in the God of justice and righteousness, and God believes in us to carry forth the mission of loving and caring for the community. Let us now share our gifts and resources so that we may continue to walk humbly with God and with neighbors.

## **A Time for Reflection - *Musical Interlude***

### **The Prayer of Thanksgiving**

God of hope and wonder, even surrounded by confusion and trouble we look for you. Take these gifts and use them for acts of justice, peace, mercy, and hope. Receive also the gifts of our time and our actions that are just as precious to you as silver and gold. Amen.

**Hymn**                      ***Comfort, Comfort, O My People***                      **176**

### **Benediction**

Go in peace—

love and care for one another in the name of Christ;  
—and may the power of the Holy Spirit  
make the rough places in your journey smooth,  
—may the dark valleys of your hearts  
be filled and the rugged mountains leveled  
and the way of the Lord be made ready in you,  
—and may He come unto you  
and bless you and shine forth from you  
both now and forevermore. Amen.