



GRACE LUTHERAN CHURCH

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**Third Sunday of Advent
December 13, 2020
Tree of Life**

“Rejoice always,” begins the reading from 1 Thessalonians. Isaiah and the psalmist make clear that God is turning our mourning into laughter and shouts of joy. “All God’s children got a robe,” go the words of a spiritual. It is not so much a stately, formal, pressed outfit as it is a set of party clothes, clothes we are happy to wear. We receive that robe in baptism, and in worship we gather for a foretaste of God’s party.

A warm welcome to those who are here worshipping on-line with us today! Here at Grace Lutheran we believe God is active in your life. Even you being here now is testament of God’s calling and leading in your heart, which you have faithfully heeded. So we welcome you, and pray that today you will be nurtured and that the gifts that God has graciously given you will be stirred for the sake of God’s mission in the world.

GATHERING

ANNOUNCEMENTS

LIGHTING OF ADVENT WREATH

We praise you, O God, for this wreath symbolizing your victory that becomes more full at the time of Christ's advent, for which we are prepared.

So as we light the candles on this wreath, strengthen our hearts as we await the Lord's coming in glory.

Enlighten us with your grace, that we may joyfully serve our neighbors in need.

Grant this through Christ our Lord, whose coming is certain and whose day draws near.

Amen.

Light One Candle to Watch for Messiah (#240) verses 1-3

THANKSGIVING FOR BAPTISM

And we also give thanks for baptism, which we look at today with one of the earliest baptizers that we know of. But just as John claims that he baptizes with *only* water, we see that the water in itself is a gift. While carrying no mystical magical powers, water does sustain life. Water restores, refreshes, and energizes. Water cools, relaxes, and calms. Water cleanses, purifies, and renews. And water is used, as it was by John, to remind us of the welcome we are given into God's kingdom, the belonging we have in God's family, and the inclusiveness offered to us by God's love and grace.

So those of you with water in front of you, feel free to dip your fingers in. Feel the refreshing coolness, the energizing purity, the calming cleanliness of it. And when you're ready, use the water to make the sign of the cross on your forehead and on the foreheads of those in your homes. Allow the water to remind you of who you are, whose you are, and the joy that we have in knowing that God is good.

Amen. Thanks be to God.

GATHERING HYMN: Beneath the Tree Of Life (p. 3)

GREETING

The life-giving grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the welcoming love of God, and the joyous fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

And also with you.

KYRIE (p. 4)

HYMN OF PRAISE (p. 6)

PRAYER OF THE DAY

We thank you, O God, for all those we learn and read about and meet who point to Christ. May our witness of Christ's love serve as a testimony of the joy found in your grace and mercy by the power of the Spirit. **Amen.**

WORD

FIRST READING: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

A reading from Isaiah.

Though the people had returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon, they continued to face hardship and oppression. In the language of the jubilee year described in Leviticus 25, the prophet, moved by the spirit of God, announces deliverance for those who are oppressed and comfort for those who mourn.

- ¹The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
²to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
³to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.
⁴They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.
⁸For I the LORD love justice,
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;
I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.
⁹Their descendants shall be known among the nations,
and their offspring among the peoples;
all who see them shall acknowledge
that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed.
¹⁰I will greatly rejoice in the LORD,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
¹¹For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,

so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

PSALM: Psalm 126

¹When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
then were we like those who dream.

²**Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy.
Then they said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them."**

³The LORD has done great things for us,
and we are glad indeed.

⁴**Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like the watercourses of the Negeb.**

⁵Those who sowed with tears
will reap with songs of joy.

⁶**Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed,
will come again with joy, shouldering their sheaves.**

SECOND READING: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

A reading from 1 Thessalonians.

Paul concludes his letter to the Thessalonians by encouraging them to live lives of continual joy, prayer, and thanksgiving. The closing blessing is grounded in the hope of Christ's coming.

¹⁶Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray without ceasing, ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. ¹⁹Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰Do not despise the words of prophets, ²¹but test everything; hold fast to what is good; ²²abstain from every form of evil.

²³May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION (p. 10)

GOSPEL: John 1:6-8, 19-28

The holy gospel according to John.

Glory to you, O Lord.

John's gospel describes Jesus as the "light of the world." John the Baptist is presented as a witness to Jesus, one who directs attention away from himself to Christ, the true light.

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

¹⁹This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" ²⁰He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." ²¹And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the

prophet?" He answered, "No." ²²Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" ²³He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said.

²⁴Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. ²⁵They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" ²⁶John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, ²⁷the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." ²⁸This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

The gospel of the Lord.
Praise to you, O Christ.

SERMON

Holy God, you give us life and light and may your Word illumine our hearts and minds as we bear witness to your glory, through the power of the Spirit. Amen.

One thing that I've noticed throughout this pandemic is that in the midst of the social distancing, throughout all the self-isolating and quarantining, even after what people have been calling "Zoom fatigue" from all the online video conferencing meetings, I've found that people really seem to miss just talking with other people. And it makes sense that this is the case, I mean we have been deprived of social interaction and casual conversation for like 9 months now. Over the equivalent of a typical grade school year, we have been told to stay mostly in our homes, refrain from visiting friends and family who don't live with us, and avoid the indoors with others as much as possible. In the time that it takes for babies to grow in their mother's womb, we have been starved of warm hellos from strangers, random run-ins with friends while out and about, and perhaps above all, just the platform of a listening ear upon which we can unload our rants and ramblings. And it's really starting to show.

When all of this started, I remember going to meetings with great ease and efficiency. We enter, talk about what we need to talk about, and then we leave. There were days when I'd be able to have back-to-back-to-back meetings without even batting an eye. But as time progressed, as we continued to meet exclusively online, as people grew tired of only interacting with those in their homes, which were usually either small kids or a spouse that has been a spouse for many years, and as people felt more and more disconnected with their colleagues and friends... I found that suddenly people began to look forward to our online meetings and everyone wanted to chat and chat and chat. It's like the floodgates have opened and give anyone half a chance and they'll tell you their life story.

It's almost as though everyone is thinking, "gasp, someone's listening to the words coming out of my mouth!" so they go on and on and share as much as they could while that window for talking to others is open. I was in a few meetings this past week that didn't go overtime per se, but it sure went off track much more often than usual as people just want to talk, want to share, want to connect with other people.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not complaining at all. In fact, if I were being honest, I kind of like hearing people's life stories (I'm weird that way) and I miss the talking and chatting as well. And so it's nice that people are feeling more comfortable in opening up, exposing their inner

selves more, and taking the time to communicate more than they have before. It's just a shame that it took us 9 months of a pandemic to get here. And I really hope that after this pandemic, we won't all shift back into our default of, not necessarily anti-social behaviour, but back to our less chatty and perhaps more reserved selves. It's been cool to see people more as themselves than just the show and the masks that so many of us are used to.

Perhaps one of the most anti-social characters we read about in our bibles is highlighted in today's gospel lesson. Good ol' John the Baptizer, the Baptist, the son of Zechariah as he's been labelled in all the other gospels, but in this gospel, the gospel according John, he is just referred to as "John" (a different John, by the way). This guy John lived out in the wilderness, ate strange food and wore strange clothing. I always thought of him like one of the Tusken Raiders from Star Wars, except without the banthas to ride on or the need to walk in single file to hide his numbers. Because there were no numbers, it was just him. Just John. All by his anti-social self.

And John didn't really seem all that talkative. Or at least, he didn't seem to be much of a conversationalist. Which I guess would make sense as there might not be too much opportunity for a conversation living by yourself out in the wilderness. But as the priests and Levites very clearly interrogate him about just who he thinks he is to be doing all the things that he is doing, John was only about the cryptic one word answers. And I guess we can't really blame him, as these guys were all up in his face and making him feel bad just for being who he is. Anyone would be a little standoffish at this point.

But once anti-social John was given that half a chance? He went on and on about this light that was coming into the world. He made it known that he wasn't the light, but he was to point to this light. And point to it, or I should say "him", he did.

See John had a message inside him that needed to come out. He had a great tale that needed to be told. He had in him some good news, and he was anointed by God's Spirit to proclaim it to all people. He was anointed, as are we anointed to do the same.

Whoa whoa wait, we might think, we aren't qualified to do what John did. We can't make straight the way of the Lord! We don't even know what the way of the Lord is, let alone know where it needs straightening. And no way are we leaving suburbia to live in the woods, not in this climate at least.

But you see, John's testimony, his witness didn't come from a fancy schmancy education, it didn't come from years and years of ministry under his leather girdle, it didn't come from a special exclusive knowledge that no one else had. Rather, his witness came from his experience, an encounter that he had with the light, with the good, with God. And once that experience happens, wild locusts wouldn't be able to keep you down. It is something that needs to be told.

Like how the great social commentator (i.e. comedian) Chris Rock said in one of his routines, if you were to find 50 dollars on the street, you'll remember that spot for the rest of your life. Every time you walk past it, you'd be like, "This spot I found 50 dollars! Right here!" And it's true, when we have good news, we can't help but remember it, share it, post it on social media or whatever, and proclaim it even when people may or may not ask about it.

Be it some great vacation you had, your first award for a job well done, or a literal 50 dollars you found on the street, you'll remember it. Or maybe it was the day you were married, your first promotion, or the greatest movie you've ever seen, you'll want to tell others about it. Or maybe it was you getting engaged or pregnant, a significant purchase like a car or a house, or the miraculous birth of a child in the most humble of settings, you'll testify to it because the joy within you just cannot be contained.

This is the life that John was called to. This is the life that we are called to. This is the life that has been touched by and infused with the good news of this light that has entered the world, the light which darkness cannot overcome.

This isn't to say that we all must become preachers, we don't all have the gifts for that (present company included). This isn't to say that we must all step up on our soapboxes with a megaphone and "Jesus loves you" sandwich boards around our bodies. This isn't even to say that we have to talk about God with everyone we ever talk to.

But it is to say that we have been given a gift. We have been given good news. We have been given the experience of love and joy and life by the grace of God. And this experience drives us to tell. It drives us to testify. It drives us, anointed by the Spirit, to proclaim this good news through our lives of joy, through our actions of grace and mercy and love, and when necessary, through our words.

In this season in which we prepare ourselves for the Advent of Christ, may we be reminded of and be strengthened to testify to the joy of community, relationship, and the love of God, a joy that no pandemic can overcome. Thanks be to God. Amen.

HYMN OF THE DAY: Awake! Awake, and Greet the New Morn (#242)

APOSTLES' CREED (p. 11)

Joined together by the love of God, let's confess the Christian faith with the Apostle's Creed:

**I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.**

**I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.**

**I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.**

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

Called to be witnesses to God's love, let us pray for the church, the world, and all those in need. Each petition will end with "God of our joy," and you are all invited to respond with **hear our prayer**. God of our joy, **hear our prayer**.

O Lord, you have restored us from our sinfulness and we rely on your strength and wisdom for what is real and true. Continue to fill us with the joy found in your name, that we might faithfully testify your grace and mercy to all the world. God of our joy, **hear our prayer**.

O Lord, you have done great things for us and filled our mouths with shouts of joy, that we cannot help but bear witness to all that you have done. Strengthen our ministry to our neighbourhood and beyond, that even in time of pandemic, this Christmas can be a joyous time for all. Especially we pray for our neighbouring faith communities; our partner Anglican Church of Canada; our bishop Greg, assistant to the bishop Kathy, and national bishop Susan; and our companion churches of the BC Synod. In particular, we pray for Chetwynd Shared Ministry in Chetwynd and all the leaders and pastors that serve there; and for Christ Lutheran Church in Chilliwack and their pastor Dean Andersen. God of our joy, **hear our prayer**.

O Lord, you have indeed done great things for us and your creation that you have entrusted to us is beautiful and wondrous. May our stewardship of it be pleasing to you, that it might continue to serve as our home for generations. God of our joy, **hear our prayer**.

O Lord, you have restored us to good fortune, for you have shown us your ways of truth and justice. Increase the wisdom of our world leaders and politicians, that peace might be known throughout the nations. We offer a special prayer for Solyana Amanuel, that she be able to enter our country and safety soon. God of our joy, **hear our prayer**.

O Lord, even in our tears you give us reasons to sing for joy, for in you there is healing and wholeness. We pray this to be especially apparent to those among us who are sick, who mourn, or who feel lonely, that your love might shine in and through all of our lives. We pray especially for Beulah; Ron, Tess, and Mineko; Paula; Bev and family; Laura; Kandie; Thomas; Cindy; Linda; Henry; Thomas and Marie; Jone; Lindsey and Dani; those who have contracted or been affected by COVID-19; and all those we name aloud or quietly in our hearts at this time... God of our joy, **hear our prayer**.

O Lord, we know that even in death, we shall return in joy. For you have promised us eternal life with you and all the saints, joining us together as the one body of Christ. As we continue this journey on earth, may we look to and lean on the strength of those who have gone before us, that we continue to grow and evolve to be a better human race. God of our joy, **hear our prayer**.

Into your hands, O God, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**.

MEAL

PEACE

The peace of Christ be with you always.

And also with you.

OFFERING HYMN: Come, Let Us Bring (p. 13)

OFFERING PRAYER

Holy God, we give you thanks for giving us good things, bringing our lips shouts of joy and praise. May this food in front of us be a blessing to our bodies and souls, reminding us of your unending presence in and around us, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

DIALOGUE (p. 14)

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

PREFACE

It is indeed right, our duty, and our joy, that we should at all times and places give thanks and praise to you, O Holy and Almighty God, through our Saviour Jesus Christ, who reveals to us all hope and joy in your name, joining us with the choirs of angels, the hosts of heaven, and the church on earth in praising you with this unending hymn:

HOLY, HOLY, HOLY (p. 14)

THANKSGIVING AT THE TABLE

O Lord, we remember all the great things you have done for us, when you have restored our good fortune, when you've filled our mouths with laughter, when you've put shouts of joy on our tongues. And you continue to do great things and we are indeed made glad. For through this life of ups and downs, of laughter and tears, of rejoicing and weeping, you continually restore us into joy, reminding us of your grace, mercy, and love shown to us through Jesus, your Son, who came to us as one of us to make more tangible all that you give us.

For on the night that he was betrayed, your Son Jesus sat with his friends for a meal, took some bread, gave thanks, broke and shared it and said, "take and eat, this is my body broken for you, do this for the remembrance of me."

And after they ate, he took the cup, gave thanks, and shared that saying, "this cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin. Do this for the remembrance of me."

It is then through this food in front of us that we are again reminded of our connection to you and each other, even as we proclaim this mystery of faith:

Christ has died.

Christ is risen.

Christ will come again.

You are here with us, present, abiding, and filling us with the joy of knowing that you are gracious and merciful, continually giving us good things and leading and guiding us into right relationship and community, through Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.

LORD'S PRAYER (p. 17)

Gathered into the joy of the Lord, let us pray as Jesus taught us.

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.**

Give us today our daily bread.

**Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those
who sin against us.**

**Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.**

**For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours,
now and forever. Amen.**

INVITATION TO COMMUNION

Taste and see the joy in God's love.

Thanks be to God.

COMMUNION

COMMUNION HYMN: Lamb of God (p. 17)

POST-COMMUNION HYMN: By Your Hand You Feed Your People (p. 18)

PRAYER AFTER COMMUNION

Holy God, you have taught us to give thanks in all circumstances, to rejoice always, and be reminded continually of your blessing and faithfulness. May we be nourished by your Word, by your love, and your goodness, that we be strengthened to bear witness to all that you have done, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

SENDING

BLESSING

May the God of peace bring out our faith,
may the light of Christ shine joy upon you,
and may the Holy Spirit fill you with hope and love,
both now and forever.

Amen.

SENDING HYMN: People, Look East (#248)

DISMISSAL

Go in peace, rejoice always and pray without ceasing.

Thanks be to God.

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