



GRACE LUTHERAN CHURCH

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Third Sunday of Advent December 12, 2021 Tree of Life

Christ's presence in our midst in the wonder of the holy supper is cause for singing. The nearness of the God in prayer, in every circumstance, is cause for rejoicing. The coming of one "more powerful" than John, even with a winnowing fork in hand, is good news—and cause for exultation—for us who are being saved. Great joy is the tone for the third Sunday of Advent.

A warm welcome to those who are here worshipping in-person and 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.

Grace Lutheran worships, prays, and serves on the traditional and unceded lands and territories of the hənq̓əminəm̓ (Musqueam) and Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) peoples.

GATHERING

CALL TO WORSHIP AND LIGHTING OF ADVENT WREATH

(Paraphrase of Isaiah 12:2-6)

We gather together in the name of the God our salvation, in whom we trust and are not afraid. For the Lord God is our strength and our might, thus we joyously draw water from the wells of salvation and give thanks to the Lord as we praise and proclaim God's exalted name.

So we shout aloud and sing for joy, for God is with us, blessing us and saving us with love and grace. And so in our gathering we give thanks for the decorations and adornments on this tree and for the hands that put it together. May its beauty remind us of the beauty of God's promises in and around our lives.

And we light the first candle on this Advent wreath reminding us of the hope that we have in those promises. Then we light the second candle, symbolizing the peace that we share in knowing that God's promises are true. And lastly on this 3rd Sunday of Advent, we light the third candle, shining bright into our souls with the joy of our salvation.

For all these and all that you do, O God, we give thanks as we worship, as we pray, and as we continue to see you in the world, through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

GATHERING HYMN: Beneath the Tree of Life (p. 3) verses 1, 3, 5

GREETING

The hopeful grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the peaceful love of God, and the joyous communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

And also with you.

PRAYER OF THE DAY

Merciful God, you reach out to us in love by coming into our midst by becoming one of us. Humble our hearts and minds, that we might see how life with you isn't oppressive but liberating, not hindering but freeing, not laborious but joyful, as you welcome us into your hope and peace by the love of Jesus Christ our Lord, your very self with us. **Amen.**

WORD

FIRST READING: Zephaniah 3:14-20

A reading from Zephaniah.

The prophet Zephaniah's message is mostly one of judgment for sin. This reading, however, which comes from the conclusion of the book, prophesies joy for Judah and Jerusalem. Judgment has led to repentance, and God's salvation is at hand.

¹⁴ Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout, O Israel!

Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!

¹⁵The 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.

¹⁶On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:

Do not fear, O Zion;
do not let your hands grow weak.

¹⁷The LORD, your God, is in your midst,
a warrior who gives victory;
he will rejoice over you with gladness,
he will renew you in his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing

¹⁸as on a day of festival.

I will remove disaster from you,
so that you will not bear reproach for it.

¹⁹I 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.

²⁰At 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.

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

SECOND READING: Philippians 4:4-7

A reading from Philippians.

Despite being in prison, Paul is remarkably upbeat as he writes this letter. Here, he urges his friends in Philippi to trust God with all their worries and concerns with the hope that they will experience God's joy and peace.

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION (p. 10)

GOSPEL: Luke 3:7-18

The holy gospel according to Luke.

Glory to you, O Lord.

John the Baptist heralds the mighty one who is coming. John teaches that preparation for God's reign is not a matter of identity but of bearing fruits of merciful justice, radical generosity, and vocational integrity.

⁷John 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? ⁸Bear 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. ⁹Even 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."

¹⁰And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" ¹¹In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." ¹²Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" ¹³He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." ¹⁴Soldiers 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."

¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John 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. ¹⁷His 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."

¹⁸So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

The gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

SERMON

Holy God, you are our guide and ultimate assurance. By your Spirit, open us to your promises and teachings and shower us with the refining fire of your love, through Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

So it's almost Christmas. You probably were able to tell from the increased decorations here at the church, and perhaps even now in your homes. You probably seen the festive lights around the city and neighbourhood. And there is no way that you were able to avoid the music already playing on the radio, in the malls and stores, and pretty much any elevator that you had the opportunity to be in. It's pretty clear that it's almost Christmas.

And nothing really says "it's almost Christmas" than the increasing greed and selfishness of certain little kids. Not all of them, mind you, but just *certain* ones. Making long wish lists, trying to manipulate the situation to ensure maximum giftage, trying to look overly considerate and polite and pointing them to appear to deserve more and better. But this mentality of trying to get as much as we can for as little effort as possible, which really is what Christmas has become in much of our Western world, is normal, isn't it? I know I was like that when I was growing up, and perhaps that is where these *certain* kids got it from. But if I'm being honest, I'm still like that a bit now. It's just good business practice. Buy low, sell high. A penny saved is a penny earned. Always look for the best bang for your buck.

The point is, I think we all have a bit of that in us. Maybe it isn't greed per se, but it's a desire for us to just get the best. The best deal, the best products or services, and maybe even the best treatment. If you don't believe me, just go to like any busy restaurant and before too long you'll probably see what I mean.

I don't know if there is anything inherently wrong with that, wanting what is best for us. It's pretty natural as its part of our survival instinct. But I think the problem comes when it's just our survival or our getting ahead that we're worried about and not anyone else's. When we start stepping on the backs of others to get our dues, then maybe that is where the line is crossed into the selfish zone. When we take advantage of the powerless, exploit the weak, or exercise our privilege over others, then maybe we're inching dangerously close into the "brood of vipers" territory.

Because I think it's these attitudes of selfishness, self-centeredness, and outright greed that John the Baptizer is talking about today in his seemingly uncalled for rant toward the people who just wanted to get their heads wet. He goes off on them for fleeing the wrath to come, which by the way he warned them about, and chastises them for doing basically what everyone else in that time was doing, or not doing for that matter.

I mean sharing your excess stuff makes sense. If it's extra and we're not using it, then why not? Let someone else use it if we aren't. But it gets a little harder if we *are* using it or *do* want to keep it, doesn't it? Two coats doesn't sound like a lot especially in this crazy Pacific Northwest weather, it'd be good to have a backup and who know when those old styles will come back. And how do we define "extra" anyway? John goes and explains to the tax collectors not to charge extra and keep the surplus for themselves. He tells the soldiers to not create their own form of taxation and extort extra from the people. Why not just tell everyone to lay down and be a door mat while he's at it?

Sure, these days we might be like, well yeah, don't cheat other people. That makes sense. But in those days, that's how they made a living. It'd be like these days asking employees not to ask for a raise but work for the barely liveable minimum wage instead. It'd be like asking employers not to make profits but operate at cost instead. It'd be like telling everyone not to expect to ever get ahead because whenever they do, even by just a bit, it is their duty to give it to those who aren't as ahead.

So you can see why John was eventually beheaded. No one wants to hear this kind of unfair treatment. No one wants to be told that they can't have nice things. No one wants to not look out for themselves. Why not? Because then that is how the world goes to anarchy, isn't it? That is how we lose our precious freedoms. That is how the things we've worked hard to gain are taken away. That is how all the privileges we have from nothing other than where and to whom we're born are brought into light.

Wait, what?

See, not only did John the Baptizer call the people out on their selfish self-centeredness, but he also called out the privilege they have received from their national identity. He says, "Don't begin to say to yourselves, 'we have Abraham as our ancestor'" because that doesn't mean anything here, it doesn't matter who your parents or grandparents or great grandparents are.

He might as well have said “Don’t brag about what flag you stand under, because all the nations of the world are temporary anyway” or “Don’t hide behind your wealth and job titles, as you can’t take any of that with you when you die” or even “Don’t think that just because your skin is a certain colour that you are any better... or worse... than those of a different skin colour”.

I mean, that *is* what John is talking about here. He’s calling everyone out for the inequality of the systems that have been put into place. He’s pointing out the inherent narcissism and greed we all share. He’s encouraging us to step down out of our privilege and live in equality, peace, and joy. And honestly, for most people that sounds awful.

It sounds awful because we for so long have been used to looking out for just ourselves. We cringe at the thought of not being able to earn points, gain merits, and show off the achievements that we really do work hard to get. We don’t want to live just in consideration of others because if we do that, we feel that there won’t be anyone left to watch out for and take care of us.

Well, honestly, that is the beauty of this new way of life that John and later on Jesus and we come to realise God all along has been trying to describe. This new way of life that has been introduced to us like a few thousand years ago but is somehow still so hard for us to adopt. This new way of life that liberates us from the rat race, makes the greed and self-centeredness obsolete, lifts us up into true community with God and each other, and shows us the equality we share in God’s love and the joy of our collective salvation.

This new way of life is living for others. And while we’re worried about who will then watch out for us, we’ll find in this new way that just as we live for others, others are living for us. See this way of living promotes a mutuality that we just don’t get in a dog-eat-dog world. This way of living constantly reminds us of how we as a human race are better when we are together, and not alone. This way of living is what we are called to in our baptism, in our faith, and in the salvation that God so graciously gives.

So we can see how this preaching of John the Baptizer can be called “good news”. We can see how this is gospel for the people. We can see how this message of grace can work even in a world like ours. We just need to put down the weapons. Put down the rights we think we deserve. Put down the selfishness and greed. And maybe, by God’s grace, maybe we can bear fruits worthy of repentance. Maybe we live the love that God first gives us. Maybe we can know the true joy that God wants us to experience in being part of this body of Christ, equally identified and called children of God, saved by God’s grace and the peace that surpasses all understanding.

This new way of life for sure isn’t easy. But it is meant to be fulfilling in that we can see how we are all connected, how we all are loved, how we all matter in the great grand scheme of things that spans across time and space. See all of John the Baptizer’s words here aren’t exactly rebukes as much as they are encouragements and invitations to see something greater than ourselves. Something that is full of community and right relationship. Something that is made up of and brings out pure joy.

In this season of Advent, may we be humbled by God’s love and grace and built back up by God’s promises and good news, lifting us up to live in community and right relationship, in the joy of our salvation. Thanks be to God. Amen.

HYMN OF THE DAY: Joyous Light of Heavenly Glory (#561)

APOSTLES' CREED (p.12)

Together with all of God's people, let us 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

Brought into the joy of God's gracious salvation, let us pray for the church, the world, and all those in need. Each petition will end with "by your saving grace, O God," and you all may respond with **hear our prayer**. By your saving grace, O God, **hear our prayer**.

O God, you are our salvation and in you we trust. You bring us joy with all that you do and teach us, and you lead us to see the equality in your kingdom. Help us in our relationships and communities, that our actions be reflections of your grace and kindness. By your saving grace, O God, **hear our prayer**.

O God, you are our strength and might, with you there is nothing that cannot be done. Strengthen our ministry in the world, and bless our service to you and others. We pray especially for our neighbouring faith communities; our partner Anglican Church of Canada; our bishop Greg, assistant to the bishop and bishop elect Kathy, and national bishop Susan; and our companion congregations of the BC Synod. In particular, we pray for Chetwynd Shared Ministry in Chetwynd and the pastors and leaders that serve there; and for Christ Lutheran Church in Chilliwack and their pastor Dean Andersen. By your saving grace, O God, **hear our prayer**.

O God, you freely give us the joy of your salvation and we see it clearly in your creation of the lands and seas, the grounds and the waters, the skies and the wells. Help us as we care for all that you have made and increase our respect for the lands and its creatures. By your saving grace, O God, **hear our prayer**.

O God, we give thanks for all that you have done and proclaim your deeds to all the nations. Humble all governing bodies and individual politicians to hear your promises of grace and love,

that all be motivated to work to bring out your peace in the world. We pray especially for those that we've sponsored to come into our country: Solyana Amanuel; and Maekele Kiflu, Selam Haile, and their children; that they might be able to journey out of danger soon. By your saving grace, O God, **hear our prayer.**

O God, we sing praises to you, for you have gloriously welcomed us into your presence and revealed to us the wholeness of your love. Be with those among us who are sick, who mourn, or who feel lonely, that your love might shine in all our lives. Especially we pray for Diana; Paula; Ron, Tess, and Mineko; Bev and family; Laura; Kandie; Thomas; Cindy; Linda; Charlotte; William; Owen; Amika; those who have contracted or been affected by COVID 19; and all those we name aloud or quietly in our hearts at this time...
By your saving grace, O God, **hear our prayer.**

O God, you are indeed great and your presence is here in our midst. At the same time you welcome us into your kingdom to live in faith with you and all the saints. May their memories always be fresh in our hearts, that their lives of faith and joy serve as an inspiration for our relationships and communities. By your saving grace, O God, **hear our prayer.**

Into your hands, O God, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in the joy of your salvation to guide us, through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

PEACE

The peace of Christ be with you always.
And also with you.

MEAL

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.

THANKSGIVING AT THE TABLE

It is indeed right, our duty and our joy, to at all times and places give thanks and praise to you, merciful God, through our Saviour Jesus Christ, who reveals to us our sin but graciously reminds us of the work of your forgiving love, welcoming us back into your love and community.

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

And after they had eaten, Jesus took the common cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them to drink from 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 in these gifts and by these actions that we see the salvation in God's grace, even as we together proclaim the mystery of faith:

Christ has died.

Christ is risen.

Christ will come again.

It is by your love that we are saved, O God, giving us the hope in the peace that your reign with in our hearts, granting us the joy of your community and kingdom, shared with and by and because of Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.

LORD'S PRAYER (p. 17)

Gathered into joy by God's saving grace, 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 of our salvation.

Thanks be to God.

COMMUNION

COMMUNION HYMNS: Lamb of God (p. 17)

What Feast of Love (#487)

Holy, Holy, Holy (#473)

PRAYER AFTER COMMUNION

Holy God, again you have fed us with your heavenly food and shown us your love. Continue to lead us in your joy, that we might be your faithful servants and witness in the world, through our relationships and communities, by the grace of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

SENDING

BLESSING

May the God of justice be your path, the Lord of mercy be your guide, and the Spirit of joy be your light, this day and always.

Amen.

SENDING HYMN: Joy to the World (#267) verses 1, 3, 4

DISMISSAL

Go in peace, show mercy to all.

Thanks be to God.

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