



GRACE LUTHERAN CHURCH

OF SOUTH BURNABY, BC

EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN CANADA

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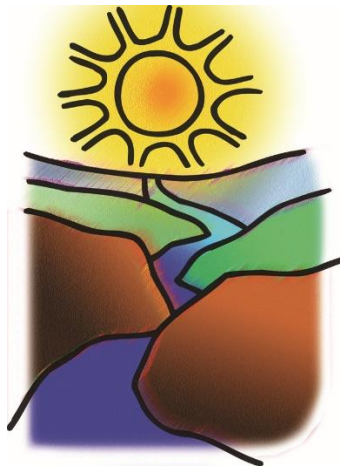
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**Third Sunday of Advent
December 17, 2023
Tree of Life**

“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 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 hən̓q̓əmiñəm̓ (Musqueam) and Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) peoples.

GATHERING

CALL TO WORSHIP

We gather on this 3rd Sunday of the Advent of our Lord, to worship the God who has done great things for us, filling our mouths with laughter and our tongues with shouts of joy. For we are glad indeed that our fortunes have been restored, our hearts have been mended, and our souls have been saved by the goodness and grace given to us all, through Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. **Amen. Thanks be to God.**

LIGHTING OF ADVENT WREATH

And in our joy we light the third candle of this wreath, giving thanks to our God for satisfying our hunger for justice, opening our eyes to the greatness of God's love, and leading us all into the everlasting arms of hope, peace, and community. May this third candle represent for us the joy that comes with these gifts of God, and may they all be reflected out onto the world through the grace shown to us through the saving redemption of Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

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

O God of joy, come.

Let us walk in the redemption of the Lord. Amen.

GATHERING SONG: Awake! Awake, and Greet the New Morn (#242)

GREETING

The surprising grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the unexpected love of God, and the unconventional communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

And also with you.

HYMN OF PRAISE (p. 6)

PRAYER OF THE DAY

We give you thanks, O God, for your prophets of every age, continually pointing us toward Christ. Give us eyes to see him present among us; among those oppressed, imprisoned, brokenhearted, or beaten down; among those who are outcasted, marginalized, excluded, or deemed unworthy; and may we recognize the freedom found in his love and peace, that our joy might be found in the hope of this, the Light of the world, Jesus Christ. **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 are the giver of life and light. Illumine our hearts and minds that by the power of your Spirit, our lives may reflect your glory, through Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

The other day I saw this movie that got me a little scared. Not because it was a horror movie or anything, but just the content regular movie got me to thinking. I don't want to tell you what movie it is, because I'm about to give away some spoilers. Anyway, the premise of the movie is that the world has inexplicably gone dark. Not literally dark like it gets in the early afternoon these days, but dark in that all

communication has been cut. TV, phones, internet, nothing works anymore. People were isolated, alone, and above all, confused because there was no way for information about what was going on to get out, and there was no guidance as to what should be done and no assurance that things are being taken care of.

Of course, speculation began to rise as to what was happening and maybe even who is behind it. The people received little tidbits and hints and tried to piece things together, but nothing was for certain. This caused suspicion between neighbours, tension between the different classes, and drew out a lot of assumptions between ethnicities. People didn't trust each other and so in everyone's eyes, everyone else became the antagonist.

But the part that really got me thinking was when one character tried to make sense of what was happening. He remembered learning about a method of attack that would destabilize a country from within in three steps. The first step was to isolate everyone, cut off all communication so as to confuse people. That definitely happened. Then the second was synchronized chaos. This is to overwhelm them with confusing and likely false information so there is no specific enemy and thus no way to defend. That happened as well. And the last step... well that was on the citizens to carry out. The first two steps were to break the people down so much that, if dysfunctional enough, would cause a civil war. Why? Because if people already didn't trust each other, this sort of attack would only exasperate their need to protect themselves from the other. People would act out of fear and their preset assumptions about who is good and who isn't them. When there is no clear enemy, the other becomes your prime suspect.

And this was scary to me because I see that kind of dysfunction now in our country. Even in this country that is presumably full of nice people and has "sorry" as their motto, it seems like there is a lot of division and lines drawn around what is right and what is wrong, which courses of action we as a country should take and which we should avoid, and who belongs here and who should be thrown out. And really, it's not just in this country, but we see it around the world, we see it in our communities, we might even see it in our churches. And that's scary to me. Because it feels like if push were to come to shove, it'll be easy to just throw the other under the bus and resort to conflict, violence, and division.

But this isn't a new revelation now, is it. I mean, this sort of dysfunction has been going on in varying degrees for... well... pretty much *ever*. From the beginning of time we have evidence of war, conflict, and doing harm to the other to gain power, to protect one's own pride, or even to just prove a point. Other people have always been expendable, because in most eyes, the only one worth protecting, valuing, or just listening to, is the self.

We see this friction, this drawing of lines, this "othering" in today's gospel lesson. We get another bit about John the baptizer, this time out of the gospel of John (no relation). And John is one of the greatest examples of "the other" that we get in history. I mean, John the baptizer was just doing John the baptizer things when some people were sent to grill him as to why he's doing said John the baptizer things, other than the fact that he's John the baptizer. They ask him who he is, and then who he thinks he is, that he can do the things he does, that according to them no ordinary person should do.

It's pretty clear that they don't trust him. Their line of questioning makes it obvious that they don't think he should be doing these things. It won't be a stretch to assume that they feel like he's overstepping his bounds and they need to put him back in his place. That is their right, their duty, their absolute moral obligation... according to them. *They* are the ones that must keep the order. *They* are the ones who need to show people what is right. *They* are the ones that have to keep the *other* in check.

And this is what I mean. If we're honest, don't we sometimes think that about ourselves? Don't we sometimes draw the lines between right and wrong not just for us, but for those around us? Don't we

sometimes look at the other, see how “other” they are, and just assume that we would know better and so we should have some kind of control over their actions?

It would seem then, that we all share in this dysfunction. We all have our superiority complexes, our self-centeredness, our supremacist pride. I know I can be like that. Members of my family are definitely like that. And maybe you’re a little like that too. I wouldn’t blame you if you were. We’re all a bit like that if we dig deep enough. And for some of us, we don’t have to dig that deep at all.

But instead of just throwing our hands up in defeat thinking that we can never change, I think that this 3rd Sunday of Advent, this Sunday of Advent that focusses on joy, highlights for us a different way. See we often think that joy is when we get what we want, when we are recognised for who we are, when we are the royalties of our own castles. Basically, we often think that joy is about ourselves.

When questioned by the authorities, John the Baptizer points away from himself. He points to the one among us who is more powerful than he is. He points to the path of righteousness, the road to salvation, the way of joy. It isn’t about protecting oneself, lifting oneself up, or hoarding all that one wants and desires. But as John and ultimately Jesus shows us, it is about humbling oneself, realising one’s own maker and redeemer, and living not for the self, but for the other.

In this unnamed movie that I was talking about earlier, neighbours turned against neighbour and families were falling apart throughout the crazy situation they found themselves in. But it wasn’t until they began to see the value in each other that they began to have hope. Their value wasn’t because they were useful or could contribute a lot to the team, but simply because they were people: unique and cared for. They started acting for the other, treating the other differently, and honouring the needs and the lives of the other. It was in this change in paradigm that we catch glimpses of hope, peace, and joy enter into their lives. Before that, let me tell you, everyone was just miserable.

And so I think this is the lesson for this 3rd Sunday of Advent, the Sunday of joy. In that while John the baptizer had everything to be miserable about, he had no fixed address, his wardrobe and diet sucked, and the people in power didn’t like him all that much, he found joy in his humility. Joy in knowing his position in God’s family and kingdom. Joy in honouring the other.

Joy isn’t found in our own power. It’s not found in belittling others. It certainly isn’t in having more things regardless of what all the ads tell us. But joy is in living for the other in communion with the saints as we are called by God.

And so you see, dear friends, joy can be found in our service, in our communal living, in our giving and providing for those in need. This is the progression through Advent, which shows us that there is hope that the world is not lost, there is peace in seeing the salvation in it all, and that brings us joy in that while each one of us are dearly loved by our Creator, we can live and act and treat the other accordingly in knowing that they too, are exactly and equally that as well: dearly loved.

This is our calling. This is our identity. This is our joy as people loved and saved by God who also is humbled and made vulnerable in the person of Jesus Christ our Lord: God with us, given to us as one of us. Thanks be to God. Amen.

HYMN OF THE DAY: Blessed Be the God of Israel (#250)

APOSTLES’ CREED (p. 12)

Together with those who have acknowledged the welcome in God’s love, 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

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 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 the joy in your name be extended to all that we encounter. Especially we pray for our neighbouring faith communities; those that use our building for worship, work, and play; our partners Anglican Church of Canada and Moravian Church in Canada; and our bishops, rostered ministers, congregations, and ministries of the ELCIC. We also say a special prayer for Shepherd of the Valley Lutheran Church in Comox and the pastors and leaders that serve there; and for our seminaries both in Saskatoon and Waterloo, for their faculty, staff, and students, in their mission to bring God's message of love to this country and world. 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 the continued support of those that we've sponsored to come into our country: Abraham Barhane; and Solyana Amanuel; as well as for those that have not yet arrived: Maekele Kiflu, Selam Haile, and their children; and Filmon Abraha. 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; Bryan and Chona; Bev and family; Sukhwant;

John; Cari; Laura; Kandie; Thomas; Will; Chris; Larry; Walter; Piet; Allen; Matt; Lucas; 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.**

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.

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 God, through our Saviour Jesus Christ, who puts us on a path toward joy and reconciliation, joining us with the choirs of angels, the hosts of heaven, and the whole church on earth in praising your name with this unending hymn:

HOLY, HOLY, HOLY (p. 14)

THANKSGIVING AT THE TABLE

O Lord, you are great and mighty and we remember all the things you have done for our salvation and welcome into your community. For you sent to us prophets to guide us, a community to support us, and a Messiah to show us how you are with us always regardless of what life might bring.

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

And after they ate, Jesus took the common cup, gave thanks, and passed it around the table for 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."

It is in this bread and cup of life that we see your providence and welcome, O God, even in the face of adversity you do not leave us but lift us up in faith and love, prompting us to together contemplate this mystery of faith:

Christ has died.

Christ is risen.

Christ will come again.

So it is to you, O God, that all honour and glory belong, for being with us, being present, abiding in this community, and bringing to us all the joy of knowing that you are all grace and mercy, 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 HYMNS: Lamb of God (p. 17)

There's a Voice in the Wilderness (#255)

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: Joy to the World (#267)

DISMISSAL

Go in peace, rejoice always, pray continually, give perpetual thanks.

Thanks be to God.

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