

Advent 3

“We respectfully acknowledge that we are located in the traditional and treaty territory of the Michi Saagiig (Mississauga) and Chippewa Nations, collectively known as the Williams Treaties First Nations which include Curve Lake, Hiawatha, Alderville, Scugog Island, Rama, Beausoleil and Georgina Island First Nations,”

“We respectfully acknowledge that the Williams Treaties First Nations have been stewards and caretaker of these lands and waters, and that today remain vigilant over their health and integrity for generations to come.”

The Opening responses:

Peace on each one who comes in need,
PEACE ON EACH ONE WHO COMES IN JOY.
Peace on each one who offers prayers,
PEACE ON EACH ONE WHO OFFERS SONG.
Peace of the Maker, Peace of the Son,
PEACE OF THE SPIRIT, THE TRIUNE ONE.

The Collect:

God of power and mercy, you call us once again
to celebrate the coming of your Son.
Remove those things which hinder love of you,
that when he comes, he may find us waiting in awe and wonder
for him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God now and forever. Amen

The Readings:

Zephaniah 3:14-20

3:14 Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!

3:15 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.

3:16 On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak.

3:17 The 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

3:18 as on a day of festival. I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it.

3:19 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.

3:20 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.

Isaiah 12:2-6

12:2 Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the LORD GOD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.

12:3 With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.

12:4 And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted.

12:5 Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth.

12:6 Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

Philippians 4:4-7

4:4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.

4:5 Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.

4:6 Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

4:7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Luke 3:7-18

3:7 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?"

3:8 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.

3:9 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."

3:10 And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?"

3:11 In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise."

3:12 Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?"

3:13 He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you."

3:14 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."

3:15 As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah,

3:16 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.

3:17 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."

3:18 So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

The Sermon:

The Third Sunday of Advent is traditionally set aside as a time of respite. The pink candle, referred to as the joy candle, is lit among the blue or purple ones. You might question that focus when you hear John the Baptist refer to everyone as a Brood of Vipers in the Gospel. But we will see as we reflect on the readings that Good News is always offered in the context of real life. All the people who are the subjects of today's scripture are experiencing challenging life circumstances. The joy that is being shared is not the electronic version we hear in malls or Christmas movies. Most people who are facing grief or difficult life experiences find commercial joy extremely painful. The joy reflected in our readings is far different and is intended to comfort the deepest sorrow. The Good News is also meant to remind the people of God that living into the Covenant means working for justice and peace.

Zephaniah is speaking words of reassurance to a people of whom he has only just been harshly critical. Their society is heading into uncertain and dangerous times that are not likely to be avoided. The people know their own culpability and likely expect God's judgement. Instead, they are called to sing and find reasons to rejoice. And if they cannot see such a way, the Prophet gives them many ways to rejoice. In our own times of uncertainty, we would be wise to take note.

I sent the original of this sermon before I heard about the tornadoes in Kentucky; the devastation and the loss of life. How can there be joy or rejoicing for the people there? There is joy there; in the support of people walking alongside; in the sharing of resources by their country and by being upheld in prayer and offers of help from around the world. How can there be joy or rejoicing for Indigenous survivors of Residential Schools and their families?

There is joy there; with the steadfast commitment to justice and reconciliation; in listening to the stories and the history as difficult as it is and joining in validating a new way forward-together. How can there be joy if you are struggling with illness or grief? There is joy there, the real joy; with the love of those who support you and the knowledge that prayer and companionship in your struggles truly makes a difference in the hardest of journeys.

Rejoice; because no matter what happens, nothing will break the relationship with God-O Daughter of Zion.

Rejoice; because no matter what happens, God offers forgiveness and takes away judgement.

Rejoice; because no matter what happens, God is in our midst.

Rejoice; because no matter what happens, God will renew us in love.

Rejoice; because no matter what happens, God will never abandon us even against oppression and brokenness.

Rejoice; because no matter what happens God will bring us home.

The Cantic from Isaiah furthers the call to sing every day to draw closer to God. Worship reminds us that we have a living relationship with God. This relationship is not only a reflection of the past and our hope for the future. God is in the present, here and now. God chooses all humanity and is not dependent on any individual's acceptance. God is always in relationship with all the created order. Those of us that know this intimacy need to live with courage to build righteousness and justice in our world. Paul is encouraging the Philippians in a similar way. Rejoice and do not spend time worrying about the things that draw them away from being assured of God's presence. Will people worry? Yes, but in the midst of that, God offers the peace that passes all understanding. That reality is what can fuel our courage to act even in the midst of challenging times.

Certainly John calling out the crowd as a Brood of Vipers is an attention getter. Hardly the words of rejoice in the other scripture. After all they had come to be baptised by John; surely a time of rejoicing. It surprises me that the crowd didn't leave at such a harsh greeting. But clearly it struck a chord and the people drew nearer. John gives them and us a reality check. Just seeking out baptism does not clear the slate as if we have no responsibility. To seek repentance means taking a hard look at ourselves inside out. This stands as a challenge to individuals and institutions. We need to do such hard work if we are to bear fruit. We are not in this world for our own sake and we should not build institutions that function that way either. John warns them against using their status as Abraham's children as a means to avoid accountability. Are we prepared to renew that which might be dying? What must we do, says the crowd.

John responds in a very specific way. If you have something that someone else needs, then share. To the tax collectors, John says take only what is just and fair. To the soldiers, John says to not abuse their power and exploit people. John is very focused on a way of acting that is within their power to accomplish. It is within our power to do what we can to share; to be mindful of just actions and to use power righteously. Why are the poor still without shelter, food and even vaccines in a world that honours billionaires? We need to hear John's call to live out a vision from the inside out. This is Good News because we have the gift of the God born in the flesh to fuel our spirit even in the midst of anxiety and uncertainty. Even a Brood of Vipers can discover a vision forward and rejoice in possibilities for all God's people.

Thanks be to God, Amen.

Confession:

Creator of light and darkness,
we so often chase shadows
and fail to walk in the light.
Forgive us, O God.

A time of stillness

We travel through Advent
as forgiven people,
lifting our faces towards the light.
Let us walk together
in hope and in faith.
Amen

The Prayers:

We bring to God
someone whom we have met or remembered today
and for whom we want to pray:
For Jane Hodder, recovering at home and for Roy and their family
For Ann Dutton recovering from surgery
For those facing the challenges of chronic illness: Renate, Carla, Pat

Come, God-with-us
Come, God-with-us:
who braves our rejection and hurt,
who holds us in acceptance and love.

Come, God-for-us:
who whispers
in our ears
that we –
each of us –
are beloved children.

Come, God-under-us:
who cradles us in arms that never grow weary;
whose lap has room enough
for all.

Come, God-over-us:
who watches
in the long silence of the night,

that we might rest in peace.

Come, God-beside-us:
who steadies us
when we falter,
who lifts us up
when we fall.

Come, God-behind-us:
who picks up all the faded dreams
we drop along the way
and patchworks them into hope.

O Come, O Come, Immanuel:
and we will rejoice for ever!

The Blessing:

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God and of the Son Jesus Christ our Lord. And the Blessing of God, Father (Creator), Son(Redeemer) and Holy Spirit(Sanctifier), be with you and remain with you; and those you love, now and forever. Amen