

Straight from the "Hart"

Worship Service from December 12, 2021

Advent 3 - Joy



Opening Prayer

Heavenly Father, as we enter these last weeks prior to Christmas, we are reminded of all the great wonders you performed, and much of it was for and through the most humble and obedient of your children. As we give our gifts to you this day, give us ears to hear the whispers of the angels speaking to us. Give us eyes to see the needy and the unloved all around us. And give us faith to offer our lives to your plan of saving love. In Christ, our redeemer, we pray. Amen.

Affirmation of Faith (P - Pastor, C - Congregation)

- P: We believe in the Father Almighty who strengthens us and gives more generously than we can imagine.
- C: We believe that he creates all things. He is our maker, our host, and our home. How lovely is the Father's dwelling place. We joyfully awaken in his presence and learn to give generously.**
- P: We believe in Jesus Christ who gave his all -- by deliberately emptying himself of all but love.
- C: We believe that he died and was raised. He nourishes us by his teaching, heals us by his grace, fills us with his Spirit, and leads us by his Word. How lovely is Christ's dwelling with us! We joyfully live in his presence and learn to sacrifice willingly.**
- P: We believe in the Holy Spirit who enters the faithful and creates a new community.
- C: We believe the Holy Spirit forms us into the one body of Christ, devoted to mutual mercy and justice. How lovely is the Spirit's dwelling among us. We joyfully represent his presence and learn to transform our world. Amen.**

Join the praise band in singing about why we have gathered -- our joyful desire to offer ourselves to our Savior Jesus Christ, who lifts us up as we, in hope, lift up praises in his name.

MUSIC OUR GOD SAVES

Key Lyrics: In the Name of the Father, the name of the Son,
in the name of the Spirit, Lord, we come.
We're gathered together to lift up your name,
to call on our Savior, to fall on your grace.

Hear the joyful sound of our offering
as your saints bow down, as your people sing.
We will rise with you, lifted on your wings,
and the world will see that: Our God saves, our God saves.
There is hope in your name.

Mourning turns to songs of praise.
Our God saves, our God saves!

That salvation was initiated on a holy night long ago, thrilling a weary world and infusing them with hope -- and the world rejoices with relief at the coming of Christ's birth.... Let's proclaim his power and glory...

Music O Holy Night

Key Lyrics: O holy night! The stars are brightly shining;
it is the night of the dear Savior's birth.
Long lay the world in sin and error pining,
till he appeared and the soul felt its work.
A thrill of hope – the weary world rejoices,
for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn!
Fall on your knees! O hear the angel voices!
O night divine, O night when Christ was born!
O night, O holy night, O night divine!

Truly he taught us to love one another;
his law is love and his gospel is peace.
Chains shall he break, for the slave is our brother,
and in his name all oppression shall cease.
Sweet hymns of joy in grateful chorus raise we;
let all within us praise his holy name.
Christ is the Lord! O praise his name forever!
His power and glory ever more proclaim!

CALL TO WORSHIP (L - Lay Reader, C - Congregation)

L: That holy night creates a passage back to God, winding through the ordinary, weaving through the busyness, over-coming roadblocks and detours.

C: Our quest is for the Lord, our destiny; the One we long for.

L: Leaving the past in the past, we clean out the inner stables of our hearts so that new life can be born, our spirits refreshed, and our lives renewed.

C: Forging our way forward to home.

L: Confidently following him into to our future, a pathway to God, a bridge to sanctuary, discovering his nearness along the way.

C: We rejoice. God is at home with us now in the present!

Advent Candles

Call to the Candles *We Lift the Light of Hope*

Key Lyrics: We lift the light of joy O God, Your praise is our delight!
Your blessing flow that all may know unbounded joy in Christ.
Your blessing flow that all may know unbounded joy in Christ.

Candle of Hope, Peace, Joy

(Presentation by lay person -- no script available)

In response to the joy, let's sing with the angels' joyous strains and the shepherds' jubilee as they sing Glory to God in the Highest.



Musical Response *Angels We Have Heard on High*

Key Lyrics: Angels we have heard on high, sweetly singing o'er the plains;
and the mountains in reply, echoing their joyous strains.

Shepherds, why this jubilee? Why your joyous strains prolong?
Say what made the tidings be which inspire your heav'nly song?
Gloria in excelsis Deo! Gloria in excelsis Deo!

Come to Bethlehem and see him whose birth the angels sing;
come, adore on bended knee Christ the Lord, the newborn King.
Gloria in excelsis Deo! Gloria in excelsis Deo!

See within a manger laid Jesus, Lord of heav'n and earth!
Mary, Joseph, lend your aid, with us sing our Savior's birth.
Gloria in excelsis Deo! Gloria in excelsis Deo! Gloria.

Theme

I haven't told a story for a while, so I'm going to tell you two! The credits did not make the bulletin, but they are both adapted and abridged from stories by Pedro Pablo Sacristan.

Once upon a time, there was a heroic knight whose triumphant deeds were joyously recounted throughout fairytale land. But he grew tired of defeating

imaginary creatures and decided to cross over into the real world and test his abilities there.

He saw anxious fear and worry in all the peoples' faces, rushing here and there as if something awful was going to happen. Yet no matter how hard he searched, he could not find any threatening creatures or villains to defeat for them.

He returned to Fairytale land to inquire of the "the wise old man", "I cannot find the enemy that is robbing everyone of their joy. How do I defeat it?" He said, "You cannot win this battle. The enemy does not exist, yet it is powerful and as numerous as the stars in the sky."

"How is that possible?" asked the astonished knight.

"In the real world, they invent their enemies, designed so that they can carry them inside their heart. For some it is called greed, for others, envy, others selfishness, pessimism, depression, desperation... The sow the seeds of negativity in their souls and take its fruits with them wherever they go. You can try to uproot that -- but it is pretty near impossible."

But the knight was determined to set them free and so he returned to the real world with all his weapons and offered to free people from their negative inner life. But no one paid him any attention, all he found was -- indifference.

Exhausted and confused, he threw his weapons down and went to rest on the side of the road-- but he tripped over his sword took an awkward tumble into a young rooster who reacted with some hilarious movements and crowing sounds.

A sad man walking by saw the tumble and burst out laughing -- the knight thought about being angry about that response, but he pictured in his mind what he must have looked like, and he was humble enough to laugh at himself, and decided instead that if it helped that man have a good day, it was worth it.

He came to discover that what people in the real world needed was not a knight brandishing a weapon to take up battle, but to counter their negativity with smiles and laughs and good deeds, and with that he recruited a large and growing group of people with smiles who won the day by reminding others of the joy that is life. The knight valiantly won just as he had in fairytale land...

Maybe one of them was the boy from our second story, who had few resources or toys, but he was always very happy. He said what made him happy was doing nice things for others, and it gave him a good feeling inside.

People thought he was loopy. But that didn't slow him down. One day he met a famous doctor who thought the boy's case was peculiar and interesting and so he

decided to investigate. Through a complex system of miniaturized cameras and tubes, the doctor managed to record what was going on inside the boy's body.

He discovered that every time the boy did something good, a hundred tiny angels gathered and tickled the boy's heart. That made the doctor curious, and he expanded his study and found that we all have those angels within us, but he found that as so few do so few things, the angels spent most of their time wandering around, bored. But now we have the solution to defeating the heart-created enemies within -- by bringing joy to others.

Well clearly, those are two simple make-believe children's stories. Yet they teach some good lessons about how to find real joy: that we can discover joy when we want to do the kinds of things God wants us to do, and in fact, that is why he wants us to do them in the first place -- because it is good for us, and for each other.

The prophet Zephaniah offers an incredible picture of God-gifted joy that doesn't come from fairy tale children's stories, but is based in God's actions with his people. At the time, the people were pursuing false joys, experiencing anxiety, and fear, and felt shame from sin, failings, -- and he tells them that every issue that separated them from God will be replaced by a day when God will put this all behind them, remembering none of it -- and the people would be made right with God *through his grace*. He will do this by sending a new king (who we now know as Jesus) to live among them. A king who would take away all their enemies and fears. Therefore...

Responsive Reading (L - Lay Reader, **C - Congregation**)

L: Everyone sing, celebrate and shout aloud!

C: We will be glad and rejoice with all our heart!

L: Your punishment is over. The Lord has forced your enemies to retreat. The Lord, the Mighty King, is with you.

C: Never again will we fear any harm. We won't have to worry about any more troubles.

L: The time is coming when it will be said to you: "Don't be discouraged or grow weak from fear! The Lord your God saves."

C: He wins victory after victory and is always with us.

L: He will rejoice over you with singing. He will refresh your life with his love. He will rescue the lame and gather the exiles. He will restore your blessings

before your very eyes. You will be honored instead of despised in every country on earth.

C: “At that time,” says the Lord, “I will gather you. I will bring you -- home.”
(Inspired by Zephaniah 3:14-17,19b-20 (NIV, CEV blended))

Now hear this song about how God brings his people home through Jesus...

Special Music *Christmas Hallelujah*

Prayers

So let's take a moment for Hallelujah -- praise the Lord for all he did for us in the first Christmas season, and offers to do for us every Christmas season -- ushering in a rule of life that is based on the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray **Lord's**

Prayer

Pastor's Lord, we long for “home” like the prayer your taught describes -- where you are honored and your will is always done, where daily provision is available, where forgive-ness and reconciliation is the order of the day, where temptation is not allowed and evil is on the run -- where we always can be best selves we can be and we live in contented satisfaction within and serenity without.

We are often singing in our hearts to you Lord, and rightly so. The prophet reminded us of something we rarely consider, that in the midst of troubles, struggles and a world gone wild, you come to us, quieting our hearts, comforting and strengthening us by singing over us with love and your gladness. Your delight in your children is what gives us the confidence and joy and privilege of bringing our requests before you. **Praises and Petitions** We continue to pray for * those dealing with the school shooting in Oxford, * for Ann Martin (here today) recovering from sickness, * for Lone Bennett with cancer, and reconsidering treatment options, * for Marty's Hansen's neighbor Susie Stevick in hospital with covid for a week and not improving at last report, * and the family and friends of two other friends of the Hansen's who passes away from covid, * the family and friends of Mike Kenel's aunt and son who also passed away from covid,* and Jan asks for Tim Tidmore, who has dementia, fell, and is in the hospital, * and tornadoes and destruction of property and life, * and Terri asks prayers for a friend Carol -- no details, but Lord, you know what they are; we ask that you undertake for her as well. And there are others that have been mentioned in weeks past that were not mentioned today, or some that have not been mentioned at all, but are in our hearts and on our minds, and consuming our thoughts and prayers, and we lift these “unspoken” up to you as well.

Lord, it is always appropriate, but some days it seems that now more than ever, we need to open our hearts and focus our attention to remember that you are in our midst, singing over us, taking away our fears as we snuggle into your strong, holy, helpful, providing arms. And it is in Jesus name that we pray. Amen.

Just as the angels told Mary and Joseph and the shepherds need not fear, nor do we need to fear coming before God because God is with us, and for us, and that is why we praise him and sing hallelujah.

Prayer Responsive Music *Fear Not*

Key Lyrics: Fear not, Mary, this child you carry is the Savior.

Fear not, Joseph, you've been chosen for this journey.

Hallelujah, God is with us. Hallelujah, God is with us.

Fear not, shepherds, the voices you've heard are the angels.

Hallelujah, God is with us. Hallelujah, God is with us.....

Fear not, children, come before him. Hallelujah, God is with us.

Introduction to and Bible Reading

Intro "Fear not" is a common phrase in the Christmas story. It is said to the priest Zechariah when the angel appeared to him by the altar and told him that he and his wife Elizabeth, though an old couple and unable to conceive, would give birth to a son to be named John.

When Elizabeth had been pregnant for 6 months, the angel came again with the words "Fear not". This time they were spoken to Mary, a virgin who had not conceived, but would give birth to the Son of the Most High God. Then, to give Mary confidence in this promise, the angel mentioned Elizabeth's miraculous condition as a sign that God's word does not fail, to which Mary replied, "May your word *to me* also be fulfilled."

Bible Reading

Afterward, Mary arose and hurried off to the hill country of Judea, to the village where Zechariah and Elizabeth lived. Arriving at their home, Mary entered the house and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby in her womb leaped. --- She was filled with the Holy Spirit, and sang out exuberantly, --- "Mary! You're so blessed among women, and the babe in your womb, --- also blessed! For your child is destined to bring God great delight. ---

"How did I deserve such a remarkable honor to have the mother of my Lord come and visit me? The moment you came in the door and greeted me, my baby skipped like a lamb, [he] danced inside me with sheer joy! (Luke 1:39-44 TPT, MSG blended)

The baby is on the way -- God and sinners will be reconciled, we can rise with joyful triumph because Christ is born to bring healing -- the King is coming down to us, to rise up and save us. Let's stand and sing...

Music ***Hark the Herald Angels Sing (King of Heaven)***

Hark! the herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn King;
peace on earth, and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled!"

Joyful, all ye nations rise, join the triumph of the skies;
with angelic host proclaim, "Christ is born in Bethlehem!"
Hark! the herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn King."

Hail, the heav'n born Prince of Peace, hail the Sun of Righteousness!

Light and life to all he brings, risen with healing in his wings.

Mild he lays his glory by, born that man no more may die;
born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth.

Hark! the herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn King."

King of heaven, come down; King of heaven, come now;
let your glory reign, shining like the day, King of heaven, come;
King of heaven, rise up, who can stand against us;
you are strong to save, in your mighty name, King of heaven, come.

Christ, by highest heav'n adored; Christ, the everlasting Lord!

Late in time behold him come, offspring of the virgin's womb:

Mild he lays his glory by, born that man no more should die;
born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth.

Hark! the herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn King."

[Repeat King of heaven... stanza)

Sermon **Discovering Joy**

One of the first signs of Christmas joy is when John, still in the womb, heard Mary's voice and recognized that Jesus had "come down, now". He leapt for joy giving a "karate kick" of celebration. Of course, Christmas joy isn't meant to be a seasonal joy, it is a shot in the arm to flagging spirits and bored complacency -- we've gone through almost a *full year* - [gasping sigh] - and we need that shot - a reminder that spiritual joy can *always* be ours.

Joy is easy to see when others experience it and unmistakable when we feel it. Yet if we were asked to describe a universal catch all symbol of joy in words or images, we might find that challenging. How do you say it? How do you picture it? Perhaps, a mother holding her newborn child? The shout of a fan when their team finally wins it all? The huge grin of a groom when he glimpses his soon to be bride walking down the aisle on their wedding day?

Some might say it would be no challenge at all. Just draw a dollar sign. Many people connect happiness with material things. Here is an example: Tell young children that in lieu of presents, Santa is only giving out hugs this year and see how they react... *not just kids!* 😊

Watch the faces of many game show contestant winners light up with what looks like joy. Their life is complete now, they've won the prize. Others dream of hitting the lottery or local casino games thinking they'll be happy for life, for some, that's even their retirement plan. There is a story (I hope it isn't true) of a guy who was talking to his friend about their Christmas gifts, and the friend asked, "I thought your wife wanted one of those sporty 4-wheel drive vehicles. Why'd you get her a diamond ring?" He replied, "Where am I going to find a **fake** Jeep?" 😊 He hasn't quite got the idea.

Christmas joy isn't about stuff, it isn't about many goals we pursue that we think will make us happy. But there is, or at least can be, a real joy behind and underneath many of these objects and objectives that we think will make us happy. It is this deeper joy that allows us to truly enjoy all the blessings we experience in this life. In the case of Christmas, for example, yes gifts can make us happy (usually short term), but what lasts is the true joy that is found in the heart felt giving and receiving of those gifts. One child expressed it this way -- Love is what is in the room with you when you stop opening the presents and listen.

This is the joy that enhances happiness, and this is the true joy that doesn't need to be lost in tough times because it goes deeper and beyond life's circumstances.

The prophets looked forward to this time of joy. Isaiah wrote, "Surely God is my salvation. I will trust and not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might, he has become my salvation. With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation..." (Isaiah 12:2-3).

Drawing water from a well, hmm. It was one of many mundane daily tasks they had to do. Yet because salvation has come to the people, even the routine, common, ordinary things of life, things that we might consider lame -- can be joyful. For one, the well is not dry. In some parts of the world, that's a big thing! For another, water is about life, about cleansing, about refreshing, about making new, about being reborn.

Mary and Elizabeth joined together 3 months -- sharing in relationship and enhancing each other's joy and blessings. And the one in the room not yet born would one day say "I baptize you with water" -- a fresh start -- an enduring life with

God is possible -- and he says of the other one not yet born in that same room -- that he would “baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire” -- a cleansing and a purification is coming. A new creation is coming. Proclaim it, Isaiah says, praise the name of the Lord, make known among the nations what glorious things the Lord has done, shout aloud and sing for joy, for great is the Holy One *among you*. (From Isaiah 12:4-6)

This is the kind of joy that Christmas would have us remember. A joy that enhances the good things of life and endures in spite of the challenges of life -- for the world does not give it and the world cannot take it away. This is the kind of heavenly, spiritual joy that Jesus speaks of and gives to those who believe in him.

Mary believed. God chose her, a humble, very young woman, from an insignificant town -- yet she is as exceptional as is each person that is made in God’s image. And her joy is enhanced by her beautiful obedience to God’s invitation to be his instrument, to carry his Son. She is filled with wonder and joy and she runs to Elizabeth who is experiencing a wonder and joy of her own -- old and childless -- in those days that was a big deal -- is now also expecting. Like Mary, she is an exceptional one whose joy is enhanced by her obedience.

The prophets looked forward to this time. Zephaniah talks to people whose culture and religious values were getting confused, diluted and even lost in the presence of the conquering Assyrian Empire, just as in the days of Elizabeth and Mary, it was the conquering Roman Empire. Last week it was the Babylonian - or Persian Empire -- there is always some Empire trying to crush us, isn’t there? Zephaniah reminds all of us that we need to own up to the trappings of false success and happiness for which they had been striving. They would have to restore the damage and decay -- much like those TV shows where they flip houses -- where they buy horrible houses and restore them to good value again. In Jesus’ arrival, God begins the world’s greatest “flip.”

Zephaniah calls a hurting people to experience joy in anticipation of His coming. We’ve heard his words in the responsive reading -- hear them again in this adapted modern paraphrase:

So sing! Raise the rafters! Be happy! celebrate! God has reversed his judgments against you and sent your enemies off chasing their tails. From now on, God is your king, in charge at the center. There's nothing to fear from evil ever again! Don't be afraid. Don't despair. Your God is present among you, a strong Warrior here to save you. Happy to have you back, he'll calm you with his love and delight you with

his songs. [that is, he will rejoice over you with singing]. (Ad. from Zephaniah 3:14-17 (MSG))

He sings a song of joy over you. Like a mother singing a lullaby to rock us to sleep, or a father's cheering words from the bleachers to his child on the field in the game, Christmas is God delivering the Word to us, singing his joy over us and to us. Zephaniah goes on with the lyrics of his song (so to speak):

"The accumulated sorrows of your exile will dissipate. I, your God, will get rid of them for you. You've carried those burdens long enough..., I'll heal the maimed; I'll bring home the homeless. In the very countries where they were hated, they will be venerated.... I'll bring you back home — a great family gathering! You'll be famous and honored all over the world. You'll see it with your own eyes— all those painful partings turned into reunions!" God's Promise.(Ad. Zephaniah 3:18-20(MSG))

The small, insignificant, humbled nation will believe, and become exceptional, and enhanced by their obedience to God's invitation to be his instrument, to be his people in the world -- to be filled with wonder and with joy.

In John Irving's novel, *The Cider House Rules* takes place in a fictitious boys orphanage in rural Maine. Each night as they bunk down in their dormitory rooms, Dr Larch reads the boys a chapter from a Charles Dickens novel, and then turns out the light. Then, in a somber and resonant voice, he announces to them, "Good night, you princes of Maine, you kings of New England." He treats the abandoned children like royalty. His steady, affirming presence in their midst gives them confidence and hope. Zephaniah comforts, despairing, abandoned people by saying, "The Lord, your God, is in your midst," a God who "rejoices over you in gladness." We all could use someone to rejoice over us, couldn't we? As the angels did over Elizabeth and Mary as they informed them that God's Son would soon be in their midst.

As the novel goes on, every so often a child is adopted away from the orphanage. That's good news for the child but a sad loss for the orphans left behind. Dr. Larch has another bedtime saying that goes something like this: "Let us be happy for Homer Wells. Homer has found a family. Good night, Homer."

And Zephaniah says there will be a day when deep joy, biblical joy, comes from knowing without fail or falter that we are adopted into God's family and we are saved.

The joy of Christmas is found behind an inn in a small stable where Jesus is born to us, and for us. Luke 2 says, "Today in the town of David a Savior has been born

to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger". Zephaniah's "joy days" have come! All can be forgiven, our lives can be remade -- real joy has come to enter our hearts - and nothing can take that from us any more than we can rip a new toy from a toddler's hands. Not gonna happen.

Temporary joys can be stolen, destroyed, or simply fade away. Events can conclude, money may run out, health may deteriorate slowly or suddenly, but the joy described by Isaiah, that Zechariah, and Elizabeth, and Mary, and John experienced, the joy that Zephaniah predicted, the joy that comes -- perhaps as imperceptible as a deep down inner confidence or contentment (that you have to pay attention to or you might miss it), or as obvious to others as a kick in the gut - because it is bursting forth out of you -- it is the joy that comes from a relationship with Jesus Christ, that comes from the abundant full life he came to give us and the complete joy we experience through an willing obedient connection with him - - that joy -- cannot be taken away, and it lasts forever... (John 10:10, 15:10-12).

Prayer Let's pray. Lord, we must admit that sometimes our challenges bury your joy so deep that we find it hard to discover or experience. We feel lost in insignificance, despairing under the crushing empires of circumstances, growing impatient for blessing. Draw near to us. Help us feel the kick of joy in our guts. Help us hear the heavenly music singing over us -- help us give birth to new levels of beautiful obedience that enhance our joy as we move closer to your coming to the manger, to us, to that "home" we long for. Amen. Let's stand for our final song...

Music *Joy to the World! The Lord is Come*

Blessing Now as you go this week, [listen for God's song over you and be lost in wondrous joy] Give yourself fully to the worthwhile work of the Lord. Be an example of how to longingly, expectantly, prepare your heart's home for God's presence, welcoming his coming with the rise of each day. Amen.