

THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT, 13TH DECEMBER 2020

Revd Alan F. Miller

Lighting of the third Advent candle

Jesus said, 'No one more important than John the Baptist has ever been born; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.'

Amen. Come soon, Lord Jesus!

The third candle is lit

Jesus is the light of the world.

A light no darkness can ever put out.

CALL TO WORSHIP

The Promised One of God brings good news to the oppressed
and binds up the brokenhearted.

We are witnesses to the light of Christ!

The Promised One of God proclaims liberty to captives
and release to prisoners.

We are witnesses to the light of Christ!

The Promised One of God comforts all who mourn
and gives a mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.

Rejoicing always, praying without ceasing,

holding fast to what is good,

we are witnesses to the light of Christ!

Prayer

We thank you, O God,

for all those in Scripture who have pointed to Christ:

for your prophets Elijah and Isaiah, for other prophets, and for John.

We thank you, too,

for those in our lives who have pointed us to Christ:

pastors and teachers, strangers and friends.

Give us eyes to see him today

among those who are oppressed, imprisoned,

brokenhearted, or beaten down,

and we will give our testimony, too:

how Christ releases and sets free;

how he turns ashes into garlands;

how he repairs and builds up what was ruined.

We, too, will point others to Jesus,
the Light of the world. **Amen.**

Psalm 126

A Harvest of Joy

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.
Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,
'The LORD has done great things for them.'
The LORD has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.

Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like the watercourses in the Negeb.
May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.
Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.

Prayer of Confession

Old habits and new wrongs wear ruts
through our lives and relationships.
But God is able to restore us.
Like water coursing through a desert,
the waters of baptism flow through us,
reminding us that we belong to God
and are raised to new life.

Merciful God, you love justice;
why, then, do we persist in wrongdoing
and every form of evil?

You have given us the gift of your Spirit;
why, then, do we quench the Spirit among us?
You have given us the words of the prophets
and the Word himself;
why, then, do we despise and ignore
what we have heard from you?
You have sent the light into the world;
why, then, have we loved darkness rather than light?
Forgive us. Restore us.
Till and tend us as your garden
until righteousness and praise spring up,
for the sake of Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

In Jesus Christ, the Lord has done great things for us!
Even if we have gone out in tears,
God brings us home shouting for joy.
Thanks be to God: we are forgiven!

Reading: Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11

Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11

The Good News of Deliverance

The 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 broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
to 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.
They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.

For 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.

Their 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.
I 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.

For 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.

Reflection

*Holy One,
giver of life and light,
as your word is read and proclaimed,
illumine our hearts and minds,
that by the power of the Holy Spirit,
our lives may reflect God's glory. Amen.*

Advent is a season for us to get ready to celebrate Christmas, just as Lent is a season to prepare us for Easter. In times past, these were seasons for reflection, self-examination, consideration of how we might better live our lives as followers of Jesus, called to witness to God's love for the world. Advent is also a season of hope and expectation, as we move from darkness towards the light that first shone in Bethlehem, and which shines now as the light

of the world, which no darkness can ever put out.

Advent is also a time to look not only to Christmas, when we rejoice at Christ's birth so long ago, but also ahead, to that day when we expect Christ to come again in glory as judge and king, to rule over all creation. Our hope is in that coming day, when God's justice will be established, wars will cease, and creation will be made new, all evil destroyed, and a life of peace and joy lies before us.

Today, scripture proclaims the good news of God's presence, and the promise of redemption in Jesus Christ, and so we are instructed to rejoice and be glad.

Isaiah proclaims a message of promise and of hope to the people of Israel – God's people – in a time of uncertainty and trouble, after their return from exile in Babylon to the place they think of as their homeland. When they were released from captivity and allowed to go free, the people rejoiced at the thought of returning to the promised land, to Jerusalem and to the temple of God which they would rebuild.

The returning exiles journeyed homeward in hope and expectations. They were free once more to reclaim their country, to resettle it, to live in peace and prosperity. God had proven to be faithful, and a God who kept the promises made to them.

Yet their homecoming was far from easy – Jerusalem had been razed to the ground and the magnificent Temple had been destroyed, the land was not empty, but occupied by the descendants of those who had not been enslaved in Babylon, and others who had come to live in the land.

The returning exiles faced years of struggle to re-establish themselves, to reclaim and rebuild what had been destroyed; to sow the seeds, literally, of a new future in fields that had been left fallow for decades, and to build new lives for themselves.

We might imagine how it felt, to have had such high hopes only to face the reality of the immense task that lay before them. How could they restore their land and their fortunes, the past glory that they thought had been lost for ever, and become once more a nation and a people under God?

It is in the face of these great trials, the seemingly insurmountable obstacles that stand in their way, just at the point where they might give up, that Isaiah speaks prophetic words of comfort that bring the assurance of a joyful future.

'The 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; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour' These words of proclamation of God's intention to give to his people an anointed ruler, who would be the Saviour of God's people and who will establish a reign of peace and of justice. Through the prophet, God promises the people that their mourning will turn their mourning into joy, to become a people who will be a sign for every nation of God's power and presence.

The ruins will be rebuilt, Jerusalem will be made new, and the Temple of God will once again become sign of God's presence in the midst of the people. All that is broken will be made whole, and all that is hurt will be healed; and God, who loves justice, will establish a new relationship with his people, an everlasting covenant.

Jesus himself proclaims the same prophetic words in the synagogue in Nazareth, before declaring that 'today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing'. The promises spoken by God to his people returning from exile proclaimed anew by the one who is the Christ, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is the one whose advent ushers in the kingdom of God

The people of Isaiah's day heard the words of promise for themselves in their own difficult circumstances, and took hope, so we who are the people of God in this time hear them and remember that God has fulfilled that promise in Jesus Christ, who is the hope of life renewed and restored, and freedom from the power of sin and death. Just as the returned exiles were encouraged to have hope and to persevere in the task set before them, so we must be encouraged by the knowledge that in all the difficulties we face in life, God is with us, and we should not despair, but continue with the work that Jesus began, to make God's love known, and bring God's kingdom close.

Then indeed we might be the ones who rejoice in the Lord always, whose sorrow is turned into dancing, and whose hope is in the new creation is not in vain.

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

God who restores,
you have done great things for us and we rejoice!
So often you have filled us with laughter,
even turning tears of sadness into shouts of joy.
You send prophets, who point the way to justice
and show the way to you.

We thank you for sending good news to us
and repairing so much that we have devastated.

In this season of light,
we lift up in prayer so many who wait in darkness:
people oppressed by poverty and discrimination,
by political upheaval or dangerous rulers;
people imprisoned wrongly
and also those imprisoned justly.

Right what is wrong among us and in us
and restore us to you,
to others, to ourselves.
Make the brokenhearted whole again;
comfort those who mourn;
repair our ruined cities.

In all the jostling and jingling of these days,
do not let us lose sight of you
or those whom you especially came to serve:
people who are in need of healing,
people who are overlooked or underserved,
the ones who are lost,
and the ones we have made to feel little and least.

Light of the world,
live among us always,
full of grace and truth. **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer

Benediction