

## WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

### CALL TO WORSHIP:

*A voice cries out, "Prepare in the wilderness the way for the LORD;*

*make straight in the desert a highway for our God!*

*Every valley will be raised up,*

*and every mountain and hill made low ...*

*And the glory of the LORD will be revealed,*

*and all people will see it together."*

(Isaiah 40.3-5, ad.)

Let us worship God.

**HYMN:** There's a voice in the wilderness crying

### PRAYER OF APPROACH AND CONFESSION:

Almighty God, who are, who were, and who are coming:

Through prophets in ancient times, you called your people to imagine and believe in a future in which the eyes of the blind would be opened and the ears of the deaf would be unstopped; a future in which the wolf would live peaceably with the lamb, and in which swords would be beaten into plowshares.

We come into your presence to worship you because that vision appeals to us, and because you have promised to turn that vision into reality.

We confess, however, that we often find it hard to see your vision of the future clearly. Our vision is obstructed by the realities of the present: strife and struggle, poverty and injustice, pain and anxiety, disease and death. We grow weary of waiting for your vision of the future to be fulfilled, and we lose our enthusiasm for your way. And so we try to get along as best we can by adopting the ways of the world around us.

Forgive us, we pray, for losing our vision, our hope, and our way. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, inspire us once again with the vision of the future that you are working toward, and enable us to live our lives in anticipation of that future.

We pray in the name of Jesus, our Savior, who came once, and will come again. Amen.

### ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS:

Hear this good news from the scriptures:

*God has saved us, and called us to a holy life,*

*not because of anything we have done,*

*but because of his own purpose and grace ...*

*which has been revealed through the appearing of our Savior,*

*Jesus Christ.*

(2 Timothy 1.9-10a)

So, if we have confessed our sin to God sincerely,  
 let us be assured that God will forgive us.

### **LIGHTING OF THE THIRD ADVENT CANDLE:**

In our in-person service today, we will be lighting the third candle on our **Advent wreath** at this point in the service — the Candle of **Joy**.

For this *recorded* service, however, we'll have to do a *virtual* lighting of the candle, but I'll use the candle-lighting liturgy provided by the national church that we will use *also* in our in-person service.

*Joy is the celebration given by God.*

*Joy is the celebration at the birth of the Christ Child.*

*Joy is the celebration when the angels sing "Glory to God in the highest!"*

*We celebrate the joy of Christ coming again.*

At this point, the candle will be lit.

Let us pray.

*Source of light:*

*Shine in our lives and in your world*

*with your life-giving joy.*

*In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*

### **SCRIPTURE READINGS:**

*Note: The readings are those for the 2nd Sunday of Advent, plus Luke 3.7-20, the Gospel reading for the 3rd Sunday of Advent.*

**- Old Testament Reading:** Malachi 2.17 - 3.6 - "I will send my messenger"

The book of Malachi was written to people who had become complacent and negligent in living as God's people.

In this reading, then, God, speaking through the prophet, warns that he is going to come and straighten things out — that is, to purify the religious leaders, and judge those who do wrong.

**- Psalm:** Luke 1.68-79 - "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel!"

According to Luke, these words were spoken by Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, when John was born.

This passage contains words of praise to God, as well as words expressing the hope of First-Century Israel for a deliverer, descended from King David.

In the second half of this passage, beginning with the words "And you, my child", Zechariah speaks about the destiny of his newborn son.

**- Gospel Reading:** Luke 3.1-20 - The ministry of John the Baptist

One of the key figures in the season of Advent is John the Baptist. He had the task of preparing the people of First-Century Israel for the ministry of Jesus. This reading is Luke's account of John's ministry.

**HYMN:** On Jordan's bank ...

## SERMON

Every year, the Common Lectionary has us spend the Second and Third Sundays of Advent reflecting on the person and message of that great New Testament prophet, John the Baptist. In our congregation, though, that usually works out to only one Sunday, since we normally have our Hanging-of-the-Greens service on the Second Sunday of Advent. So, since we don't always get to hear the readings for that Sunday, I've decided to use those readings for *today's* service, even though today is the *Third* Sunday of Advent.

The Gospel of Luke gives greater prominence to the person and ministry of John the Baptist than do the Gospels of Matthew and Mark. Indeed, Luke even begins his Gospel by telling the story of the events leading up to John's birth. He tells how John was born under miraculous circumstances to an elderly couple named Zechariah and Elizabeth, who had never been able to have children. Indeed, Luke intertwines the story of the birth of John with that of the birth of Jesus, which took place just six months later. This means, of course, that John and Jesus were just about the same age.

However, as all four Gospels tell the story, John began his ministry first, while Jesus was still living in obscurity in his hometown of Nazareth. Luke begins today's reading by saying that John began his ministry in the fifteenth year of the reign of the Roman Emperor Tiberius, which would've been approximately the year 28 of the First Century.

Luke characterizes John's ministry as *preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins* (Luke 3.3). "Repentance", of course, means turning away from sin; making a major change in one's life; turning one's life around. It means recognizing that one isn't living in God's ways, and making a conscious decision to start living in God's ways. If people repented, John taught, God would forgive their past sins, giving them "a clean slate", so to speak. And as a sign of that forgiveness, John offered a simple ritual washing called "baptism" — a sign of God's forgiveness; an outward sign of what was going on inside the person.

The goal of John's ministry, of course, was to prepare the people of First-Century Israel for the ministry of Jesus, which would shortly begin. All four Gospels make that point quite clearly. Luke's comment on John's ministry is that it fulfilled a prophecy in the Book of Isaiah, which he quotes as,

*A voice of one calling in the wilderness,  
 "Prepare the way of the Lord;  
 make straight paths for him!"* (Luke 3.4; compare Isaiah 40.3)

Actually, in Isaiah's original Hebrew, it was the "way of the Lord" that was in the wilderness, not the "voice"; but Luke was working from the Greek translation of the Old Testament, in which it's the "voice" that's in the wilderness. That of course, ties in very neatly with John the Baptist, who carried out his ministry in the wilderness.

In today's psalm, the so-called "song of Zechariah" from Luke, Chapter 1, John the Baptist's father also speaks of John's role as someone who "prepares the way". This is what he says:

*You, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High,  
 for you will go on before the Lord, to prepare the way for him,  
 to give his people the knowledge of salvation  
 through the forgiveness of their sins ... (Luke 1.76-77)*

Similarly, the prophet Malachi, in today's Old Testament reading, speaks of a messenger of God, who will prepare the way for God's coming to Israel. Quoting God, he says, *I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly, the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple ... (Malachi 3.1)*. Interestingly, the Hebrew name Malachi actually means "my messenger"; so the messenger who is to prepare the way for God may, in fact, be Malachi himself. Like John the Baptist, he is someone who "prepares the way" for someone greater than himself.

In both John's ministry and Malachi's, then, preparing the way for God, or for the ministry of Jesus, involved calling people to repent — that is, to change their ways. John says, *Produce fruit in keeping with repentance (Luke 3.8)*, by which he means, "Act in ways that show that you have genuinely repented; that you have truly changed your ways." Repentance isn't just about what we think or say; more than anything, it's about what we do.

Luke's Gospel is the only one in which John's audience asks him to be specific. Three distinct groups ask him, *What should we do?* (Luke 3.10, 12, 14). To the crowd in general, his answer is to share clothing and food with those who don't have what they need. To tax collectors, his answer is to collect no more than they are required to. Interestingly, he doesn't tell them to *stop* collecting taxes, but rather to do it fairly. And to soldiers, his answer is not to extort money, and not to make false accusations against people. He doesn't tell them to get out of the military, but rather not to abuse their authority. Presumably, these would've been Jewish soldiers; it's hard to imagine that Roman soldiers would care about what John said!

It's significant that these specific bits of advice all have to do with the way in which people treat each other. John doesn't say anything about worshiping God only, or about offering the right sacrifices, or about observing the Sabbath. Rather, he exhorts his listeners to be generous to people in need, and not to use their power or authority to take advantage of others.

In this respect, John's message has something in common with Malachi's. The behaviors that Malachi says that God will condemn have to do, for the most part, with the way people treat each other. Malachi quotes God as saying, *I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers, and perjurers; against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the*

*widows and the fatherless, and deprive the foreigners among you of justice, but do not fear me* (Malachi 3.5). Only one offence in that list could be considered specifically “religious”, and that is “sorcery”. The rest are ways in which people mistreat or hurt others.

Both prophets — Malachi and John — foresee a forceful intervention by God in the world, particularly in Israel itself, in order to do away with wrongdoing, and to establish peace, harmony, fairness, and the well-being of all. Therefore both of them call on their respective audiences to “get their act together”, as it were, in order to avoid God’s condemnation.

Of course, we who know the story of Jesus’ ministry realize that it turned out *not* to be the kind of forceful intervention by God that John the Baptist had envisioned. Jesus’ ministry of teaching and healing was quite unlike *the coming wrath* that John spoke of (Luke 3.7). The writers of the New Testament books, writing a generation or two after John’s time, taught that God has deferred his forceful intervention to the time when Jesus comes again — an event that remains in the future, even for us, all these centuries later.

And so, John’s call to repentance remains relevant for us today. We too live in a world in which a lot happens that is contrary to God’s will. We too live in a world in which some people have plenty while others have nothing; in which people abuse their authority, and take advantage of others. We too live in a world in which people are unfaithful to their marriage partners; in which people tell lies about others; in which laborers are defrauded of their wages; in which widows and fatherless children are oppressed; in which foreigners are exploited.

In view of the future that God has in store for the world, then, it’s essential that we not give in to our sinful and self-centered impulses, but that we rather learn to live in God’s ways, in preparation for God’s promised intervention. And let us not do so out of fear, but rather out of a recognition that God’s ways are good and right.

For people outside the church, the Christmas season is already in full swing. But for us *in* the church, Christmas is not yet here. It is Advent, the time of preparation, of waiting, of anticipation. And this necessarily involves repentance — recognizing where we fall short of God’s expectations, and making the necessary changes in order to live more and more faithfully in God’s ways.

## **PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE:**

God of righteousness and love:

The prophets Malachi and John the Baptist remind us that there is much that goes on in the world that is contrary to your will. As they looked forward to the day when you will intervene in the world to set right what is wrong, we do too. Yet, we feel a certain amount of apprehension, because we know that, even though we’re not completely bad, we’re not entirely good, either. Sometimes we do wrong unintentionally, while at other times we do wrong quite deliberately. In this Advent season, then, enable us once again to repent — to turn

away from doing wrong, and to do what is right with greater commitment, enthusiasm, and consistency.

On this Anniversary Sunday, we give you thanks for our congregation — for those who brought about its establishment, those who have contributed to its life and work over many generations, and those who have given leadership. We thank you for your blessings on us as a congregation. We are particularly grateful this year for the financial support we have received from the federal and provincial governments, which has sustained us so far during the pandemic. We pray for your ongoing guidance and blessing as we face an unpredictable year ahead of us, that we may be more and more effective in carrying out the ministry that you call us to do.

Hear our prayers for members of our congregation, and others close to us, who are experiencing challenges and difficulties of various kinds; in particular, those whom we now name before you: \_\_\_\_\_ . We pray that you would minister to each one's needs, and grant them guidance, strength, encouragement or healing.

Hear also our prayers for the wider world. Today we pray in particular for those whose lives have been disrupted by tornadoes in the United States. Grant that they may receive the support and assistance they need to cope with the losses they have experienced. We pray the same for people in British Columbia and the Atlantic Provinces who are dealing with the aftermath of flooding, landslides, and washouts.

As we pray for people in positions of authority today, we pray in particular for those dealing with the damage that is being done by drug abuse. As it becomes more and more obvious that past solutions to the problem are not working, give our leaders creativity and courage to come up with strategies that will be more effective in dealing with drug abuse, and more compassionate to those suffering addictions.

We continue to pray about the COVID pandemic, especially now as the new Omicron variant is spreading throughout the world. May the lessons that have been learned up to now be taken to heart, and not disregarded. Continue to grant wisdom to government and public health officials as they give leadership in this ongoing crisis. Continue to grant strength and stamina to doctors, nurses, and others in the health care system who are stressed and overworked. May more and more people take advantage of the protection offered by vaccines, and may rates of transmission of the virus once again be reduced.

We thank you that you hear our prayers, gracious God, and we offer them up to you in the name of Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

## OFFERING

## PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING AND DEDICATION:

Gracious and generous God:

We give you thanks for holding out to us a vision of the world as you want it to be — a vision that upholds and encourages us as we deal with the fallenness and brokenness of the world

in the present. Yet we thank you also for all the good that we experience in the world today — for everything that gives us joy and pleasure. We thank you also for the blessings we receive from you day by day, by which you sustain us.

In gratitude, then, we present to you these offerings, to support the work that your church does for you — in our congregation and community, across the country, and around the world. Guide the uses to which they will be put, we pray; and prosper the work that will be done with them.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

### **COMMISSIONING AND BLESSING:**

Sisters and brothers in Christ:

Go into the week ahead, now,

in peace,

and in the strength of the Holy Spirit,

to continue your struggle against sin,

and to serve God with renewed energy.

And may God bless you:

May he continue to guide, strengthen, and encourage you;

in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.