

## Home Service for December 13, 2020

### Welcome and Announcements

You might notice a few changes. You may also find listening to some of your favorite hymns helpful in worship, just like we are doing in the church building.

*What if we live in a constant state of preparation for something great to happen?  
What if we truly believe God's reign of justice will come?*

### Call to Worship:

L: Love has come down to us this Advent Season.

**P: Divine love which heals and transforms our lives.**

L: With great joy, we receive that love and share it with others.

**P: We open our hearts to all God's children, the last, the least, and the lost, as well as those who feel privileged.**

L: The Lord has done and continues to do great things for us.

**P: Praise be to God who loves us so much and who challenges us to be people of joy in this darkened world. AMEN.**

### Opening Prayer:

Lord of Love and Light, shine through our darkness, bringing us hope. Open our hearts for the journey, our eyes for the light, our spirits for the peace which you bring. Fill our mouths with laughter and speech with shouts of joy that we shall reveal the love with which you surround us. We offer this prayer in the name of the One who is coming into the world bringing your hope, love, peace, and joy, Jesus Christ. AMEN.

### Prayer of Confession:

God of mercy, light and love, we confess that we have not been people who are quick to pray. When an emergency befalls us, we turn to pleas and prayers which usually begin with the heart-wrenching cry, "Why?". Help us to remember that you are always ready to hear and respond to all our prayers. Remind us that even though we have often failed to witness to your love and live as people of compassion and faith, you love us unconditionally. Forgive our stubbornness and willfulness. Cleanse our souls and spirits and make us truly ready to receive your light. In Jesus' Name, we pray. AMEN.

## Words of Assurance

*Rejoice! You who once lived in darkness – on you a new light is shining and the light of God’s glory shall brighten your path. You are healed, loved and forgiven. Be at peace! Live in God’s love, and bring hope and justice to all God’s people. AMEN.*

## Lighting the Advent Candles

Last Sunday we lit the candle of Hope, remembering the hope which comes in Christ, and we lit the candle of Peace, remembering God’s dream of a peaceful world. (Light Candles). Today we light the third candle of Advent, the candle of Joy.

In Advent, we are in a time of waiting. Like the Israelites who wandered through the Wilderness, waiting to come into the Promised Land, we wait for the coming of the Joy of Ages. We wait for the day where we can join our voices with the angels to sing “Joy to the World, the Lord is come!” We wait for the day when everlasting joy will be on each of us.

We light this candle in Joy. (Light Candle)

On this day, we remember the Spirit who breathes joy into our lives.

## Read Psalm 126

When the LORD brought back the captives of Zion,  
We were like those who dream.

<sup>2</sup> Then our mouth was filled with laughter  
And our tongue with joyful shouting;

Then they said among the nations,  
“The LORD has done great things for them.”

<sup>3</sup> The LORD has done great things for us;  
We are joyful.

<sup>4</sup> Restore our fortunes, LORD,  
As the <sup>[b]</sup>streams in the <sup>[c]</sup>South.

<sup>5</sup> Those who sow in tears shall harvest with joyful shouting.

<sup>6</sup> One who goes here and there weeping, carrying *his* bag of seed,  
Shall indeed come again with a shout of joy, bringing his sheaves *with him*.

## Prayers of the People:

Lord of time and hope, we are rushing headlong into the holidays to come. We look at our calendars and our day planners and wonder how we will get everything done in the time allotted to us before the "big Day" arrives. We begin to panic at the thought of projects still to be finished, contacts that need to be made, preparations for festivities that have only just begun. And the darkness of obsessive holiday planning overtakes us and clouds our minds and spirits. But you are a God of time and Light. You bring hope to us, as you always have through the voices of the great prophets, and now through the One who is to come, Jesus Christ. Remind us again what this season is truly about.....love, hope, peace and joy. Calm us down. Slow us down. Help us remember that it is in loving relationship that you gave your Son to us and it is in loving relationship that your Word is carried into the hearts of the people. No tinsel, ribbons, tape, cards and convey the eternal message adequately. You have given us the Light, to shine in our path and cut through our darkness. Shine in the hearts of your people today. Bless those dear ones whom we have named before you today with your healing, reconciling, comforting presence and love. Give strength to all who face difficult situations and let your compassionate light shine on them guiding their decisions and their steps. Bring us at last to your presence, where the light of hope and love continually pour out on us. These prayers and hopes we offer in confidence and gratitude for your love and presence. AMEN.

## Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day, our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is The kingdom, and the power and the glory forever and ever. AMEN

Read the Lesson: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners,

<sup>2</sup> to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—

to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of

mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor.

<sup>4</sup> They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations.

“For I, the LORD, love justice; I hate robbery and wrongdoing. In my faithfulness I will reward my people and make an everlasting covenant with them.

<sup>9</sup> Their descendants will be known among the nations and their offspring among the peoples. All who see them will acknowledge that they are a people the LORD has blessed.”

<sup>10</sup> I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

<sup>11</sup> For as the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Sovereign LORD will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations.

Read the Epistle Lesson: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Rejoice always, <sup>17</sup> pray continually, <sup>18</sup> give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.

<sup>19</sup> Do not quench the Spirit. <sup>20</sup> Do not treat prophecies with contempt <sup>21</sup> but test them all; hold on to what is good, <sup>22</sup> reject every kind of evil.

<sup>23</sup> May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>24</sup> The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

Read the Gospel Lesson: John 1:6-8, 19-28

Now this was John’s testimony when the Jewish leaders<sup>[a]</sup> in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. <sup>20</sup> He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, “I am not the Messiah.”

<sup>21</sup> They asked him, “Then who are you? Are you Elijah?”

He said, “I am not.”

“Are you the Prophet?”

He answered, “No.”

<sup>22</sup> Finally they said, “Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?”

<sup>23</sup> John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, “I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord.’”

<sup>24</sup> Now the Pharisees who had been sent <sup>25</sup> questioned him, “Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?”

<sup>26</sup> “I baptize with water,” John replied, “but among you stands one you do not know. <sup>27</sup> He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.”

<sup>28</sup> This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

## Message

Have you ever had “one of those days?” You know, those days when you “wake up on the wrong side of the bed,” marking the beginning of a chain of events that go downhill from there; nothing seems to work out, everything is a mess, chaotic, and fails. I know I have, especially a couple of weeks ago when my computer was hacked. It was kind of like that old adage, “If it wasn’t for back luck, I’d have no luck at all.”

However, as Christians we are not supposed to be suspicious and we are not supposed to believe in bad or good luck. Ours is a faith, a trust in God who has a purpose for all things in life; good, bad, or otherwise, whether we understand it or not. Today in our Epistle lesson, the apostle Paul admonishes all would-be followers of Jesus; providing a list several attitudes and behaviors necessary for the health and well-being of any individual and congregation. The one attitude and behavior that jumped out at me was the opening verse, it says so much in only two words: “Rejoice always.” As I reflected on those two instructive words of Paul’s in relation to what he says along with them; the first thing that struck me was that I personally do not always live up to those words, in fact, I fail miserably some days. How is one able to rejoice always? It seems, at face value, an impossible task or attitude to reach.

Yet today is the third Sunday of Advent and the focus today is that of Joy. Yet, we struggle with that, don’t we? How is it possible to be full of joy all the time. Bad and even evil things happen to people, including us. Was Paul some naive, head in the clouds dreamer when he told us to “rejoice always?” Was his instruction here so heavenly minded that it is of no earthly benefit to us? My answer would be no. Paul was not some overly naive, head in the clouds dreamer. Nor was he totally heavenly minded when he instructs the Thessalonians and us to “rejoice always.” He was a man who knew the ways of this world, and learned much in his life

through the school of suffering. Much of his instruction to Gentile congregations is full and rich with very practical wisdom and insights into the human condition and the complex, multidimensional nature of human relationships.

Paul reminds us that there is a circle in Christmas that we should always keep before us. Where is it? It's in our very first verse: "Be joyful always." In the Middle of JOY (J-O-Y) There Is A Never-Ending Circle. If we follow God's path or plan for our lives, we will enjoy the never-ending circle of joy throughout our lives. And even when that circle of joy is broken God will restore it for us.

Consider the Advent wreath. Normally we make it from evergreen branches, symbolizing life that does not end. Unlike the other trees, which lose their dead leaves in winter, the evergreen keeps its living green color. What meaning is found in the Advent Wreath itself? Some point to the symbolism of its circle as the promise of eternal, never-ending life. The circle of Christian joy rests in the promise of God, that after death, we will be renewed. We will live. And once we enter that second life, the circle will never turn back to death.

God gives us the plan or path for maintaining joy in our lives, even when outside circumstances want to stomp that joy out. This was important to the Thessalonians, because in their new faith, they were being persecuted. They were actually being mocked, threatened, and even thrown into prison for their faith. It is to them that Paul gives God's plan to joy. Here they are the steps:

- 1) "Be joyful always" – it is not beyond the realm of possibility to maintain a sense of joy, even in difficulty.
  
- 2) "Pray continually" –We are not Joy Generators. Christ, himself prayed for our joy, in what is called his High Priestly Prayer, found in John 17:13-15. Jesus knew the hatred that Christians would experience for their convictions and trust in God. He prayed that God would protect them from losing their joy. Prayer is part of the circle with which we surround ourselves, so that pain, worry, and sorrow does not overwhelm and drown our joy.

- 3) “Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” Not only should we give thanks to God for the blessings we receive, but for the things that that didn’t happen, too. When bad things do happen to us, we should look hard and sometimes really hard to find the blessings from God in the situation. Think of the people God has put in your life to support you during the difficult times. There is so much to thank God for, in our blessings and in the many ways He has preserved our lives from harm. Thank God, He doesn’t give us more than we can bear with His assistance.
  
- 4) “Do not put out the Spirit’s fire.” Each of us has faith. That is a fire within us, another gift from God. Knowing and trusting that Jesus is our Savior, reminds us that God has performed a miracle in our lives. We’ve been given a gift of the divine. God himself has adorned our hearts as the fireplace of his love.
  
- 5) “Do not treat prophecies with contempt.” Prophecy is the sharing of God’s Word. That is the one fuel that God gives us, which keeps the fire of faith burning. We receive God’s Word not only through Sunday worship, but also through the Sacraments, where God’s Word is connected with elements. That fuels our hope and consequently our joy.

Our joy rests in the remaining words of Paul: “May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.” Amen.

Benediction:

*May the light of this Advent season shine in your hearts, on your path, and beckon you to God’s Love and service to the world. Go in peace. May the God of peace go with you. AMEN.*