

ADVENT 3

12/12/21

CAVES BEACH

CALL TO WORSHIP

John: baptizer, wild prophet, baptiser,

We approach you with fear and anxiety.

John, voice of conscience, baptizer,

We hear you and are humbled.

John, caller to repentance, baptizer,

We stand ready to make a fresh start.

John: forerunner of Jesus, baptiser,

We will seek justice and peace within the community of the baptised.

Opening Prayer

We will not find you, Loving God, in the busy stores,
or among the Christmas: lights.

**But where a young couple struggles to get basic housing,
you are there.**

We will not find you, Caring God, in the packed casino,
or on the Internet.

**But where a refugee seeks a safe place for her family, you
are there.**

We will not find you, Compassionate God,
at the bank machine or in a high class restaurant.

**But where a newly bereaved person searches
for a comforting presence, you are there.**

Ever-present God: presence of, we will follow you,

**Faithfully, calmly, as we proceed on our Advent journey:
Advent. Amen.**

HYMN 161 Tell out my soul

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s6ji4y9Q-K0&t=32s>

ADVENT CANDLES

- Last Sunday the candle of peace was lit. We light it
and the candle of hope again as we remember that Christ
will come again and bring to the world everlasting
peace.

(a person lights the candles of hope, and peace.)

- The third candle of Advent is the Candle of Joy. It
reminds of the joy that Mary felt when the angel
Gabriel told her that a special child would be born to
her - a child who would save and deliver his people.
- God wants us all to have joy. The angel who
announced to the shepherds that Jesus had been born
told them: "Do not be afraid. I am bringing you good
news of a great joy for all people - for to you is born
this day, in the City of David, a Saviour, who is the
Messiah, the Lord."
- We light this candle to remember that Christ brings
the promise of a new life - a life in which the blind
receive sight, the lame walk, and the prisoners are set
free. We light it to remember that He is the bringer

of true and everlasting joy.

Light the Third Candle

- Loving God, we thank you for the joy

you bring us. Help us prepare our hearts for this gift.

Bless our worship. Help us to hear and to do

your word. We ask it in the name of the one born
in Bethlehem. Amen.

TIS 289 Verses 1-3 Christmas is coming

PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING & CONFESSION

God of love, the prophet calls on us to:

'draw water from the wells of salvation,' and to do so in joy.

We know that the well of your salvation and rescue
is deep and inexhaustible.

We know that when our lives are parched and dry,
you offer us refreshment, restoration and actual re-creation.

You give us the living water that bubbles up in and around us all the time.

For your great, abundant, never-ending, life-giving, life-sustaining gifts,
we are forever thankful, and we rejoice.

'What should we do? God, this is the question repeatedly asked of John the Baptist.

His answers were the answers we must all give if we are to be followers of the way of Christ:

that we are all one community and must live with and act toward each other as family. We know this to be true, God.

We know that when we live the lie that we are different

and can be unconcerned for others or build barriers against them, we all suffer, and the Earth suffers. We know our bitter history of violence that has torn the one community apart over and over again.

We know too, the great call you make for us to know ourselves as one – one community, one creation. And we know so well how far we are from doing the simple things of sharing from our abundance, of treating each other as kin, of living as Jesus.

Forgive us, we pray.

Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

The apostle Paul said: 'Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice.

Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.'

Friends, let us hear these words.

The Lord is near!

We are loved!

We are forgiven!

Thanks be to God!

READINGS

- **Zephaniah 3:14-20**

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;

shout, O Israel!

Rejoice and exult with all your heart,

O daughter Jerusalem!

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.

16 On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:

Do not fear, O Zion;

do not let your hands grow weak.

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

18 as on a day of festival.

I will remove disaster from you,

so that you will not bear reproach for it.

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.

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.

- **Luke 3:7-18**

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? 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. 9 Even now the axe 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.”

10 And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” 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.” 12 Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” 13 He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” 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.”

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

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

HYMN 270 On Jordan’s banks

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=plr21lLgFpg>

SERMON

I think that it is interesting that at this time of year we are faced with two different and contrasting perceptions of the coming of the Messiah in today’s readings. If we are honest with ourselves we would also probably admit that we could easily agree with both approaches at the same time.

We are now well and truly into the full-on Christmas celebration mode. But are we really experiencing Advent or are we just caught up in the whole Christmas hype?

Everywhere we are hearing of people being able to party once again this Christmas after all the times of lockdowns and lockouts during the pandemic over the last few years. Most state borders are easing their restrictions on travel. People are talking about travelling. There are parties being planned. There are shopping expeditions being undertaken. Tonight just at the top on the Lake at Speers Point there is a massive 'Carols' event being planned.

In the midst of the thoughts of celebrations and 'letting go' We come across the words of Zephaniah where he says: "Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!"

So what is there to rejoice over? That prophet goes on to explain his vision of what would happen when God appears in order to save His people. Their fortunes would be turned around, their enemies would be vanquished this would remove their shame as subjugated people. Those faithful people left would be gathered back together in safety with much joy and many celebrations. Here is the classic longed for wishes of a people who had suffered a lot of oppression and much pain.

Prophets like Zephaniah urged their people to celebrate now, and not to sit around moping and hoping. They were told to trust in God's promises and get on with the new times. Isaiah said: "Surely it is God who saves us. We will trust in God and not be afraid. For the Lord is our stronghold and our sure defence, and he will be our saviour."

As the Christmas Event draws nearer there is a very positive light shone on all the hopes which surround the coming of the Messiah. We drift off thinking of a hay trough that was used to give the baby a cot and all the possibilities which that birth gives us even today. For so long a Messiah was promised but now that event has occurred in such humble circumstances. God has come among us. As Paul tells us: "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I will say, Rejoice."

I am sure that there will be big gatherings at churches across the world the year. The traditional Christmas songs will be heard in all directions. People who have not been anywhere near a church in years will suddenly be filled with the desire to celebrate an event which occurred over 2,000 years ago. The story of Jesus' birth keeps bringing people together to celebrate.

But can we really celebrate?

There are times when I can feel a bit like a Christmas Grinch. I wonder about people who come into churches just for the Christmas festivities then they disappear for another year or two. They just expect the church to be there again when they next think of attending another Christmas celebration.

But this doesn't just happen with churches.

I don't know if any of you saw an item on the news last Sunday about an event that day at the MCG? Thousands and thousands of the Melbourne Football Club fans gathered for a replay of the 2021 Grand Final, which they won after so many years being at the bottom of the ladder. They saw the repeat on the big screen and waved their banners and flag and cheered for every score made. Just like they wanted to do if they had not been in lock-down stuck in their homes at the time when the match was shifted to Perth earlier in the year.

Looking through the crowd one commentator asked how many of the fans would have turned out, even to an ordinary match, last year when they were not a winning team? There is a big difference between a winning team's crowds and the rusted on hard core followers who cheer for their team no matter what their standing is in the competition. Some have paid their entry fees for years with no sign of a championship and stuck by the club in good times and bad. When the team starts winning more regularly then the fair-weather supporters seem to suddenly appear in greater numbers.

Where were all of these people in the many tough years?

Were they still encouraging the players when they seemed to lose every match?

Was there was a resentment against those who have only jumped on the 'bandwagon more recently?'

If we look at the two passages we heard this morning then there may well be some resonance with these emotions. The Old Testament prophets like Zephaniah and Isaiah along with Paul are full of rejoicing. However booming in the background comes John the Baptist. His piercing voice has a very different approach.

John says:

Who are these 'johnny-come-latelies?'

Who warned you about the coming judgement?

Do you think that you can just arrive at the last moment and expect to be welcomed to the great celebration with open arms?

You are no more than freeloaders wanting to join the party!

You need to prove yourselves over a longer period rather than jumping on at the last moment expecting a share of the spoils!

John has such a different approach to the coming of the Messiah. John sets out strict guidelines for those wanting to be prepared for the coming of the Messiah. Don't abuse what power and influence that you have. Share with others in need. Practice reckless generosity and love your neighbour.

John is the radical voice which the Advent story brings to us every year. Just as we start to relax and think that everything is flowing easily here comes John calling us to renewed faithfulness. Celebrating the birth of a baby is one thing, recognising the ramifications is another. Singing Christmas praises calls for us to be committed for the whole year.

A minister in another church relates this story.

About ten years ago, a girl who was a friend of someone in the congregation came along to a Christmas Eve vigil service, and during the service the minister could see the girl looking as though she was shrinking back from it, almost physically withdrawing into herself to avoid engaging with the service. His first thought was that their style of worship offended her, but when he spoke to her afterwards, she said she thought it was really amazing, but that she had never been in a service before where it felt like the words really mattered and that if you said them you had to be prepared to change your life and live them. And she wasn't prepared to change her life. She wasn't willing to make those kinds of changes, so she had to withdraw, to distance herself from the claim on her life.

This is the sort of challenge that John the Baptist is calling us to be honest about. As much as we celebrate Christmas we should equally be challenged with those demands that John keeps setting for us. John is challenging those who come to him not just to go with the flow but to make a real difference in their lives and the world around them.

At this time I am starting to think that John the Baptist might be on my side when I feel a bit peeved about those who only come to church at Christmas, enjoy the festive songs and then disappear for yet another year or so, thinking that they have done all that is needed for salvation.

But at the same time, I don't think that this is the way that Jesus approaches the issue. So people like me need to think carefully about our attitude. In other places in the Gospels Jesus criticises this sort of behaviour in His teachings.

Later in Luke we come across the parable of the Prodigal Son. The resentment of the older brother is pointedly set before us as being against what God wants. Even someone who has previously been squandering all their advantages is welcomed back once they recognise the error of their ways.

Then there is the parable of the employer in Matthew's Gospel who keeps returning to the market place to put on more and more workers and still pays them all a full day's wage in the evening.

This then puts a strong emphasis on any assumptions we might have had about being honoured and rewarded well before those who jump on board at the last moment.

When we sit back after all the hype of Christmas then we might recognise that a new born child does not know who has laboured long and hard and travelled many long and arduous miles to get there compared to those who just 'jumped on board' at the last moment.

When all this is allowed to trickle through into our spiritual lives then we might be able to start to understand that the Christmas message is for everyone. We can rejoice with the occasional visitor, perhaps they might even stay on a bit longer.

We need to fully hear John the Baptist as he calls on us to share our second coat and to help those in need without judgement. There is no limit to Jesus' grace, even after John the Baptist is heard from the wilderness and the Jordan River.

The real message then becomes clearer. The challenge from both John the Baptist and Jesus is that we are to respond to the full message, not our personal interpretation. We need to be prepared to celebrate the full meaning of Christmas, not just our own particular emphasis.

HYMN 618 What does the Lord require

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BMPL6bRUFzE>

PRAYERS FOR THE OFFERING

God of everything, we bring everything in our lives to you.

All we have is yours, all we are is thanks to you.

We bring it all, asking that you will use this money,

our time, and our energy and as community

to make real and alive your kingdom, your world.

Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Dear Lord and Father, sometimes our vision of your power and ability to even hear our prayers becomes so small that we wonder if it is worth it and then you answer and our faith is restored. Forgive us for even doubting you. Oh yes! We want you to answer the way we want but then you surprise us by answering our prayers in a better way. Your love just surprises us again.

We ask your blessings on the members of our church who are having difficulty with their health, it keeps them from sharing in the joy of worship. We also pray for members of our family who are experiencing hardship and illness that becomes all too oppressive. Take these people under your wing please dear Lord, give them peace and comfort in their time of need.

We pray for the members who have to make hard decisions in all different kinds of areas in their life: May they always place their problems and needs before you, asking for your guidance.

This also applies to the leaders of our Church.

We pray for the incoming Moderator, the need for a new Presbytery Officer in the Hunter Presbytery. We also pray for the Uniting Church in Australia that all decisions made at assembly, Synod and Presbytery level will be in your will and not to be a compromise of faith.

Give wisdom to our Federal and State leaders, Father God that they may govern this country with integrity and care, thinking of the best for the people of our country and not the best for politics.

In all our prayers, we ask that you will keep us in your great and mighty love and we pray this prayer in the name of Jesus our Saviour, who taught us to pray in the Lord's Prayer.

Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be your name,

your kingdom come,

your will be done,

on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins,

as we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial

and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours

now and for ever. Amen.

HYMN 590 What a friend we have in Jesus

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YTpUQO0aryw>

BENEDICTION

God calls us to life.

God calls us to prayer in life.

God calls us to thanksgiving in life.

Let us go our way today seeking peace,

living in hope,

being gentle to each other and to ourselves.

Let us go our way rejoicing

because the Lord is near.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wrtzej4Al2g>