

Call to Worship

God comes! So don't let go of all the reasons to rejoice.

**We will sing a song of Advent
to the One who fills our lives with joy.**

God comes! So don't stop lifting your prayers with thanksgiving.

**We will sing a song of Advent,
to the One who hears our words and silence.**

God comes! So don't stop giving your hearts to God.

**We will sing a song of Advent
to the One who graces us with a peace we cannot begin to understand.**

written by Thom Shuman

Hymn Rejoice the Lord is King! MP575

Rejoice, the Lord is King! your Lord and King adore;
mortals give thanks and sing, and triumph evermore;
Lift up your heart, lift up your voice;
rejoice, again I say, rejoice!

Jesus, the saviour, reigns, the God of truth and love;
when he had purged our stains, he took his seat above;
Lift up your heart...

His kingdom cannot fail, he rules both earth and heaven,
the keys of death and hell are to our Jesus given;
Lift up your heart...

He sits at God's right hand till all his foes submit,
and bow to his command, and fall beneath his feet:
Lift up your heart...

Rejoice in glorious hope! Jesus the Judge shall come,
and take his servants up to their eternal home.
We soon shall hear the archangel's voice;
God's trumpet call shall sound, rejoice!

Charles Wesley

Advent Candle Lighting

From the prophet Isaiah:

'Get yourself up on a high mountain, O Zion, bearer of good news, lift up your voice mightily, O Jerusalem, bearer of good news; lift it up, do not fear. Say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" – the Advent God of creation.

The symbol for today is the piggy-bank which represents working for a just economy for all.

The third candle is lit

As we light our third Candle, we give thanks to God for the gift of life in all its fullness. We see the gap between rich and poor increase and debt becoming a way of life for too many people. We are mindful of John the Baptist, who prepared the way of God by challenging people not to be selfish, so that all may flourish. In a season of excess, may we seek only what we need so that others may flourish too.

Sing all of Like a candle flame MP 420 © Graham Kendrick

Prayers

We pray for a just economy with equality at its heart, an economy where all may flourish. We pray for those in power to work tirelessly for such a vision. We commit ourselves to 'lift up our voices mightily' as we strive for economic justice for all. **Amen.**

God of peace, cause us to rejoice in you always,
make us gentle to everyone,
keep us from being anxious about anything -
help us to ask you for what we need, with thanksgiving;
and let your peace guard our hearts and minds in Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

written by Michael Perry in *Bible Praying*

Offertory

God, whose giving knows no ending, help us to be generous as John the Baptist teaches us.
All that we have comes from you and so
we offer the skills that you have graciously given to us;
we offer ourselves in service and praise
and we offer our gifts of money to help bring about your kingdom.
Receive our gifts by your grace and multiply and use them through the power of the Holy Spirit
to accomplish Christ's work of love in the world. **Amen.**

Bible readings: **Philippians 4:4-7**
 Luke 3:7-18

Sermon – Two coats – generosity trumps apology

To those of you who were at Rayleigh last Sunday, or who read the written service, I promised to continue with the story from Luke's gospel of John the Baptist preaching to the crowds. Like other prophets before him, John's mission was to turn the people away from disobedience and to make them ready to receive the Messiah. We are now, in this season of Advent, making ready to receive our Lord Jesus into our hearts as we tell again the story of his birth in Bethlehem; as we tell the totally amazing story of how our God came to dwell among us – the Incarnation – on a par in its fabulousness with the resurrection. And of course without the incarnation, there could have been no crucifixion and resurrection. This is no chicken and egg story – the birth definitely came first!

John's words sound harsh - you brood of vipers, why do you flee from the wrath of God? Every tree that does not bear fruit will be cut down. Someone is coming after John who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire, not with water. And that fire will sort the wheat from the chaff and the chaff will burn with unquenchable fire. As I said last week, John is the original fire and brimstone preacher. The question, perhaps is which works best – the carrot or the stick? The bribe or the threat? I'm sure most child psychologists and teachers will tell you that the carrot works best, but John uses both, with emphasis on the stick!

While John, does not exactly give us a carrot, he does give a straight answer to a straight question. When asked by the crowd what they should do, he says, 'whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.' Now that

sounds simple enough, doesn't it? But do we do it? If you buy gifts for five grandchildren say, do you then give five charity donations? Or buy five gifts of equal value for a children's charity? If you cook Christmas dinner for ten people, do you invite ten lonely strangers to dinner too? Or give enough money to a homeless charity to provide ten Christmas dinners? This is not one of those ridiculous questions you get on maths exams; this is a moral question for us all.

Luke does not explain why crowds have come out to be baptized by John in the wilderness, but the wilderness is often a place where humans encounter God's grace, as in the deliverance from slavery, as in the giving of manna. Perhaps the crowds who gather around John recognize the ways they have fallen short, how they have broken covenant with God and with each other, including the command to love God and neighbour. If we are honest with ourselves, we know that in our hearts, our actions, inactions, and attitudes, we too often fail to demonstrate love for others. Perhaps the people listening to John, feared the cost of their failures and they were looking for a way out. Maybe they desire to live more faithfully but they do not know how. Perhaps they are overwhelmed or frightened and have nowhere else to turn. We too can be overwhelmed – there is so much bad news, so many people who need help from refugees in the English Channel, to children abused by their parents, that we don't know where to start, so we simply give up. Perhaps we can only afford to support one charity, and there are so many to choose from, we don't know which one to pick.

Whatever their reasons, the crowds left the relative comfort of home and set out for the wilderness to be baptized by this prophet and hear him speak, even if they got more than they bargained for! John's first words in Luke sound very strong to modern ears, but they make clear John's place within the tradition of Jewish prophets. His mission is to warn the crowds of the consequences of their current disobedience and call them back to the ways of God. John tells them that their Jewish heritage and traditions will not save them. He cautions against abusing the privilege of their long prior relationship with God. If any think that ancestry, ethnicity, place of origin, language or any other status-marker or identity, including, today, being within the church or outside of it, allows them to lord it over others or lets them off the hook, John disabuses them of that idea. Indeed, if the tree does not produce good fruit, if the community does not live in such a way that its life illustrates its relationship with God, it might as well, metaphorically, be kindling for a bonfire.

It is good to be reminded that John's message is meant for a people who wait with eager longing for a Saviour, then and now. If those who came to see John are called snakes, so are we. If they cannot claim special privilege based on their heritage, neither can we. If they

risk cutting themselves off from God, so do we. And so the people ask – what should we do?

The question of what to do appears more often in Luke than in the other three Gospels combined. Think of the parable of the Good Samaritan, or the rich young man who is told to sell all he has and give to the poor. In the passage we heard today, the people ask this question in response to John's instruction to "bear fruits worthy of repentance".

Repentance, which literally means to change one's mind; is a significant theme in Luke, signalling a new or renewed relationship with God. In response to the peoples' question, John speaks directly to temptations inherent to each group - particularly that of grasping after more at the expense of others - a temptation that is still very familiar today. He tells the crowds to share resources. As for the tax-collectors, don't be greedy or corrupt. Soldiers, don't abuse power. There are plenty of examples in our world today – politicians and people in power taking bribes, fiddling their expenses and bending the rules. Military regimes like in Myanmar, abusing power and falsely accusing opponents. Rich countries asking developing countries to give up fossil fuels while not wanting to themselves, or making sure their populations are double and even triple vaccinated, while most of the world has barely had the first jab. That's before we might get onto our individual greed or selfishness, and our excuses – we always buy charity Christmas cards, but I did buy a charity gift, it's only once a year, we had such a terrible time last year, we need to really enjoy Christmas this year...

John's instructions suggest that it is not enough simply to be sorry, which is one of the ways we often think about repentance – that if we say sorry, or feel guilty, that will make everything OK again; repentance is lived out in the everyday practices of life – it is about making things right, not just apologising for not doing enough.

John the Baptist's mission in the wilderness is to call God's people to repentance and to show what that looks like. However, neither his preaching nor the baptism he offers can actually empower lives to be changed. If John's message were the end of the story, the people would leave the wilderness with little more than an interesting story to tell and a to-do list of good deeds. The good news for them, and us, is that God sends Another who is more powerful than John, with gifts greater than the crowd can imagine. This coming Messiah will bring a baptism of spirit and of fire: the very breath and power of God to change everything. And that is very good news, indeed.

Hymn On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry MP 538
*** note last verse has different words to the hymn book**

On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry
announces that the Lord is nigh:
come then and listen for he brings
glad tidings of the King of kings.

Then cleansed be every heart from sin,
make straight the way for God within,
prepare we in our hearts a home
where such a mighty guest may come.

For you are our salvation, Lord,
our refuge and our great reward
without your grace we waste away
like flowers that wither and decay.

To heal the sick, stretch out your hand,
make wholeness flow at your command;
shine out, and let your light restore
earth's own true loveliness once more.

* To you, O Christ, all praises be,
whose advent sets your people free;
whom with the Father we adore
and Holy Spirit evermore!

Charles Coffin (1676 - 1749) translated by John Chandler (1806 - 1876)

LORD'S SUPPER

Come follow the light that shines for you and leads you towards a stable with a manger and a child.
Lord, we have followed the light

Come listen for the voice that calls you to find new life in the broken corners of the world.
Lord, we have heard the voice

Come, rich and poor, neighbour or stranger, gather round and share a celebration with the Prince of Peace.
Lord, we have gathered to meet with you.

Come, like wealthy kings with priceless gifts or poor shepherds with only themselves to bring, for the Spirit has led you to this place where you are offered the promise of new life.
Lord, fill us with new life.

The peace of the Lord be always with you.
And also with you.

Hymn words to say together: (Church Hymnary 208, Elaine Davies)

The love of God be with
you,
a boundless love with no
measure,
a love you daily must
treasure
now and forever.

The grace of God be with
you,
a loving grace with no
measure,
his grace and favour we
treasure
now and forever.

The peace of God be with
you,
a quiet calm with no
measure,
God's loving peace you
must treasure
now and forever.

From being a child in a manger dependent on his mother's milk for food, Jesus grew to be the Living Word made Flesh offering everyone the bread of life. He travelled from the manger to the cross where his body was broken, his love poured out, but God held him like a mother and nursed him back to life. Lord, may we see the guiding light,
May we find you in a stable
May we follow you to the cross.
May we find new life through you.
As we gather round the table to celebrate the beginning of a journey from the manger to the cross and back to life again.

Holy Spirit, come among us and bless this bread and wine as we remember how Christ's body was broken and God's love was poured out for us.

On the night when our Lord Jesus was betrayed, he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

So draw near with faith. Be strengthened by the life of our Lord Jesus Christ, who was born in a stable to be the living bread and died on a cross having poured out his love so we may drink from God's cup of forgiveness. Eat and drink. Take Jesus into your hearts.

As you take the bread, hold it in prayer and remember how the body of Jesus was born, lived and was broken for you, and then we will eat together, united in the one body.

As you take the wine, hold it in prayer and remember how Jesus poured out his love for you and meets your needs when he lives in your heart.

Post Communion Prayer

Thank you for bread and wine through which we have remembered your life and love. Lord build a stable in our bodies, place a manger in our hearts and fill it with your love as if it were a new-born child. Amen

Prayers of intercession

In the hushed anticipation of your coming, O Lord, remind us that you are always with us. Let us be like Mary, emphatic in our 'yes' to your will.

Into our troubles and weaknesses, into the barren places of our souls, Come Lord,

Come among us and make us whole.

Into the war torn and the refugee, into those who live in conflict, Come Lord,

Come among us and make us whole.

Into the homeless and the unemployed, into those who feel abandoned, Come Lord,

Come among us and make us whole.

Into the sick and the disabled, into those undergoing treatment and those who are grieving,

Come, Lord **Come among us and make us whole.**

Into the poor and the starving, into those who are oppressed or abused, Come Lord

Come among us and make us whole.

Into the lives of loved ones, into those from whom we are estranged, Come Lord,

Come among us and make us whole.

Into our joys and celebrations, into our work and our achievements, Come, Lord

Come among us and make us whole.

In the remaining weeks before Christmas help us to be patient with our loved ones, and find time to reflect on the real meaning of Christmas amidst the business of preparation and gift buying. In our time of joy and plenty, help us to pray for those who have no homes to celebrate in, no festive food to eat, no family or friends to share the holidays with. And guide us to be generous to those who have little or nothing this Christmas. In the name of your Son, who came to live among us, to bring light to the darkness, we pray. Amen

Lord's Prayer

Hymn Hark the glad sound! MP210 OMIT v 3

Bridgwater Drive Church, 12 Dec. 2021. Advent III Written service circulated to all.

Hark the glad sound! The Saviour comes,
The Saviour promised long;
Let every heart prepare a throne,
And every voice a song.

He comes the prisoners to release,
In Satan's bondage held;
The chains of sin before Him break,
The iron fetters yield.

He comes the broken heart to bind,
The wounded soul to cure,
And with the treasures of His grace
To enrich the humble poor.

Our glad hosannas, Prince of Peace,
Your welcome shall proclaim;
And heaven's eternal arches ring
With Your beloved name.

Advent Blessing

Follow where the Spirit of Hope leads us
Listen as the Child of Peace cries for us
Rejoice as the Love of God embraces us
And let us go with Hope, Peace and Love in our hearts,
And the blessing of Creator, Child and Spirit for ever within us. Amen

The Bridgwater Drive Church sung Blessing. (MP 460)

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