

Call to Worship (Luke 3:4-6)

As streets fill with shoppers
Bright lights and tempting offers
Christmas songs and children's laughter
You lead us along a different path
To a desert river and a Prophetic voice
A call to repentance
A call to service
A call to immerse ourselves
In living water that will never run dry
A call to prepare a way in our own lives
For the Saviour of the world to enter in
To know the touch of tender mercy
And rest in your forgiving love

written by John Birch

Prepare the way of the Lord, and make his paths straight!

HYMN O come, O come, Emmanuel R&S 126 verses 1, 4, 5 & 6

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here,
until the Son of God appear.
*Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.*

O come, Thou Key of David, come
and open wide our heav'nly home;
make safe the way that leads on high,
and close the path to misery.
Rejoice! Rejoice!

O come, thou Rod of Jesse, free
thine own from Satan's tyranny;
from depths of hell thy people save,
and give them victory o'er the grave.
Rejoice! Rejoice!...

O come, Thou Dayspring, come and cheer,
our spirits by thine advent here;
disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
and death's dark shadows put to flight.
Rejoice! Rejoice!...

Today is the second Sunday in Advent so we come to the symbol of the dove which represents actively working for peace.

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 peace.

The second candle is lit

As we light our second candle, we give thanks to God for the gift of peace. We remember the Prophets, throughout the ages, who have spoken in favour of peace instead of wars and fighting. Jesus reminds us that 'blessed are the peacemakers', yet in our own lives, in our churches, communities and between nations we see lots of conflicts. Help us not be content with uneasy peace but find the strength to wait in hope for the reign of Jesus the Prince of Peace to build real and lasting peace everywhere.

Sing two verses and the refrain of Like a candle flame Red folder 59 © Graham Kendrick

Let us pray

We pray for all peacemakers, for the mediators and negotiators, for those who challenge anger and refuse to meet violence with violence. We commit ourselves to the way of peace and to 'lift up our voices mightily' to call on all to live in God's peace. **Amen.**

Gifts – please bring up your gifts

Dear God, on this gift Sunday, when we think of others rather than ourselves, accept these gifts for HARP and HomeStart that they may help the homeless, and families who are having a hard time. Help us to remember that everything we have comes from you and it is good to be generous to others who are not as fortunate as we are. As we come later to our church Christmas Lunch, help us to remember all those who will not have a hot meal today, who will not have a warm bed to sleep in, and have no hope of a happy Christmas. In Jesus' name **Amen.**

Children leave for Sunday Club – we listen to *Hope is a candle, once lit by the prophets*

Recording from the URC Cumbria Partnership, used with permission (video with words if that works, if not audio – words at the end of this document) Hopefully, once heard, we can sing this at worship on the 19th.

URC Prayer Handbook p72 The Coming

Readings: Luke 1:67-79

Luke 3:2-6

Today we hear about John the Baptist, the one who came to prepare the way for Jesus. Firstly, we heard the words Zechariah said after the birth of John. Earlier in chapter one of Luke we have the announcement of John's birth, which is very similar to the announcement of the birth of Jesus. The angel Gabriel visited Zechariah and said 'Do not be afraid, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear a son, and you will name him John.' Zechariah was not only 'terrified' and overwhelmed with fear, he was also pretty incredulous as his wife was barren and they were both 'getting on in years.' For being unbelieving, he was made mute and unable to speak until after John was born.

We get similar words when the angel Gabriel visits Mary – 'Do not be afraid... you will bear a son and you will name him Jesus.' God clearly didn't trust anyone to name their children properly, though of course the names are important and have specific meanings! Mary is told not to be afraid, but actually she wasn't terrified like Zechariah, but only 'perplexed' and though confused, far from being unbelieving, she says, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' I could preach a sermon on the different responses to God's call from an old, powerful man (Zechariah was a priest of the Temple) compared to a poor young girl, soon to be socially outcast for being pregnant before she was married, but I'm not going to – you can reflect on that yourselves!

After John is born, Zechariah's speech is restored and he is filled with the Holy Spirit and gives the prophecy we heard, which tells how God looks favourably on his people and will send a saviour to redeem them, and John will be a prophet who prepares the way for this saviour, and because of the mercy of God dawn will break and there will be light for those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.

We could do with some light in the darkness ourselves, couldn't we? Not only is it now getting dark before 4pm, but just as we thought things were almost back to normal and we could have a Christmas more free of restrictions, we are hit with a new covid variant that has everyone worried again, back to wearing masks, and wondering whether that will be enough to "save Christmas"!

So what does preparing a way for the Lord involve? Getting all your Christmas shopping done? Buying a turkey and getting the sprouts on early? Maybe making Christmas puddings, cakes, mince pies, or homemade festive cookies? For the prophet Isaiah it meant filling every valley, flattening every hill, making the crooked straight and the rough smooth – I assume he was talking metaphorically, since John the Baptist was a prophet not an engineer. But John had a pretty big job to do, even if he didn't have to fill the valleys and flatten the hills, and he ended up imprisoned and then beheaded. Next week the lectionary passage tells how he chastises and berates the people coming for baptism for not repenting enough of their bad ways, for not being generous enough – John is the original fire and brimstone preacher - but that's for next week (you'll have to read my sermon if you want relief for that cliff-hanger as here will be the Nativity service)! For now, let's turn back to the words of John's father Zechariah. His prophecy is in song form, like Mary's Magnificat, and it previews several of the claims of Luke's gospel:

- God remains faithful to God's promises
- God's way is salvation
- God's path is peace.

Zechariah's song begins with words of praise from the psalms - "Blessed be the Lord," and points backward, to God's long-established covenant with God's people. God's promises have come "from of old" through the prophets. Whatever else might be happening that day at the Temple, or later, through the life of his son John, it is in line with God's holy covenant. This is no distant God, content to set the world in motion and then to leave it alone. This is the God who comes "to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death", the God who has raised up a saviour for us. The promise given long ago through the birth and naming of John is the same as the promise given today: God is active among God's people, here and now. Luke shows us this is true by referring back to the promises and actions of God in the past – God's covenant with the people when they came out of the wilderness into the promised land.

God's way is salvation - Zechariah blesses the God who has raised up a mighty saviour for us. Before long, the day will come when his own son John, will prepare the way for God's son, participating in God's mission of salvation by calling people to repentance for the

forgiveness of sins. It is a mighty task to be a prophet of the Most High and the rulers of the age did not go easy on him. Zechariah is filled with the hope that accompanies new life. It is the hope of salvation for all people: Jews and Gentiles, insiders and outsiders, rich and poor, tax collectors and sinners, women and men, old and young, Samaritans and soldiers, and many others. Zechariah waits, as we all wait, for the unfolding of God's purposes through John, looking ahead to the one who is more powerful than he is, the one who is still to come.

God's path is peace - Zechariah sings a declaration of God's purpose as a message of hope to a world in danger of losing hope: "By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." By the time Luke was writing his Gospel, the Romans had destroyed the Jerusalem Temple, and news about Jesus had begun to spread beyond Palestine to other parts of the Roman Empire. In that context, the message of God's peace comes to a world more practiced at the art of warfare than it is at the craft of reconciliation. God's peace stands in striking contrast to the Roman Caesars, during whose reign both John and Jesus were born and executed.

Luke uses the word "peace" more often than the other three Gospels combined. Indeed, God's peace is a message that frames the beginning and end of his Gospel. Here, near the beginning, Zechariah sings that God will "guide our feet into the way of peace." His prophecy is fulfilled near the conclusion of Luke's Gospel when the risen Christ stands among his followers and announces, "Peace be with you". In between, God's peace is the gift granted to those who kneel in faith before Jesus and to those who receive the message that God's kingdom is near. In the end, Zechariah's song is not simply a way to announce the birth of John the Baptist, but rather to proclaim God's faithfulness, God's salvation, and God's peace.

We now come to Luke 3, where the word of God comes to John in the wilderness.

John comes from priestly ancestry on both sides of his family. His father, Zechariah, is a priest who served in the Jerusalem Temple, and Elizabeth, his mother, descends from the line of priests originating with Aaron. If John were following the family business, he would be engaged in work associated with the Temple, the holy place in Jerusalem where God is said to dwell, not stuck out in the wilderness. But the wilderness has a special place in the minds of God's people – it was important in the Exodus story, and we know that Jesus was tempted in the wilderness at the start of his ministry. The wilderness in biblical writings often represents vulnerability and uncertainty. In Luke it is a place of testing and of hunger and sometimes of danger or destruction, or of being lost and then found. It is precisely in

that wilderness place of vulnerability and danger that God appears. God guided the Israelites in the wilderness and provided manna for their daily food. So, the wilderness is where, and how, God's people learn to depend on God.

A voice calls out in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord. Not only do raised-up valleys and flattened mountains lead to smooth passages, but they also represent radical transformation. The language of reversal, common in Luke, evokes words from Mary's song, "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly".

Nothing looks the same; everything is changed by the coming of God's Messiah, by the coming of God himself in human form. This is a world set right by being turned on its head - not by the top-down power that is so often prized by humans, but by the upside-down power of God.

Today, having experienced the wilderness trauma of a global pandemic for nearly two years, many of us are longing for certainty about the road ahead. Sadly, it looks as though we won't get any certainty about the pandemic any time soon. Some complain about the chairs not being next to each other like they used to be, others about the cold or having to wear masks, or not being able to have a traditional carol service, while leaders in politics, society and the church have to try to find the balance of keeping people safe, while trying to carry on with daily life and learning to 'live with the virus'. Some hope for a new life, others ache to return to the way things were, and still others have little energy to look beyond the struggles of the current day. Very little is certain about the pandemic world, except for the promise represented by John's proclamation in the wilderness: God enters this time and this space in this period of history, so that "all flesh shall see the salvation of God". This is what we look forward to at Christmas. This is what we remember year in and year out – that God is here with us. Our God came to live among us and experience our joys and our sorrows.

Hymn The voice of God... R&S 131 (Tune *Woodlands*, at R&S 740)

The voice of God goes out to all the world;
his glory speaks across the universe.
The great King's herald cries from star to star:
with power, with justice, he will walk his way.

The Lord has said, 'Receive my messenger,
my promise to the world, my pledge made fresh,
a lamp to every nation, light from light':
with power, with justice, he will walk his way.

Anointed with the Spirit and with power,
he comes to crown with comfort all the weak,
to show the face of justice to the poor:
with power, with justice, he will walk his way.

His touch will bless the eyes that darkness held,
the lame shall run, the halting tongue shall sing,
and prisoners laugh in light and liberty:
with power, with justice, he will walk his way.

Luke Connaughton

Prayers of Intercession

In the lonely places - The wilderness
Where we stand forlorn, windswept and alone
Your voice calls out **Prepare a way for the Lord**

In the dark places - The shadows
Where we hide our fears, embrace our tears
Your voice calls out **Prepare a way for the Lord**

As we come to prepare a way for the Lord, let us pray for our world, for those lost in the wilderness, for those without hope:

In a week that included World Aids Day, we pray that we may help to bring about an end to stigma and prejudice. That the rich countries of the world may learn to share their scientific knowledge and vaccines, not only for Covid, but for other diseases which affect the poor and marginalized disproportionately. Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

In a week when people continue to make the perilous journey across the Channel, seeking safety from wars, violence and discrimination, help us to have compassion for refugees and asylum seekers and speak out on behalf of those whose voices are never heard. Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

In a week when there are fears and concerns about new Covid variants, we pray for those who are fearful, those who are lonely because they still have to shield, those who are unable to see family because of travel restrictions, and all leaders – politicians, managers of businesses, teachers, and religious leaders – grant them wisdom to strike a balance between keeping people physically safe and allowing normal life to continue. Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for health care providers – doctors, nurses and pharmacies who are now having to provide vaccines and boosters to even more people, without enough staff or resources. We pray for those who are on long waiting lists or whose treatment has been delayed because of the ongoing pandemic. Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

In the silence, we bring to mind those known to us who are ill, recovering from illness, seeking treatment, and those who mourn... Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

God in this season
suspended between hope and fulfilment,
let us never forget what you have done for us.
May we be overwhelmed by your mercy.
May we be honest about the darkness within us,
and perceptive of the light around us.
May we make straight the path for the Lord,
that together we may see God's glory revealed. **Amen**

Lord's Prayer

Hymn On Christmas night, all Christians sing R&S 153 OMIT v1
First two lines of each verse are repeated

Then why should we on earth be sad,
since our Redeemer made us glad,
when from our sin He set us free,
all for to gain our liberty.

Christ Church, 5 Sept. 2021 Written service circulated to both churches

When sin departs before his grace,
then life and health come in its place;
heaven and earth with joy may sing.
all for to see the new-born King.

All out of darkness we have light,
which made the angels sing this night:
"Glory to God, on earth be peace,
goodwill to all shall never cease."

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

Hymns used under the Christ Church CCLI licence 63352
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Words to Hope is a Candle – Richard Leah ©Selah Publishing

Hope is a candle once lit by the prophets
Never consumed though it burns through the years
Dim in the daylight of power and privilege
When they are gone hope will shine on

Peace is a candle to show us a pathway
Threatened by gusts from our rage and our greed
Friend feel no envy for those in the shadows
Violence and force their dead end course

Love is a candle whose light makes a circle
Where every face is the face of a friend
Widen the circle by sharing and giving
God's Holy dare love everywhere

Joy is a candle of mystery and laughter
Mystery of light that is born in the dark
Laughter at hearing the voice of an angel
Ever so near casting out fear

Christ is the light that the prophets awaited
Christ is the lion the lamb and the child
Christ is the love and the mystery and laughter
Candles make way Christ is the day