

Call to Worship (Psalm 126)

Let us begin this day by rejoicing!

The Lord has done such wonderful things for us. Let us be glad!

Though we could be resentful, we come to give thanks.

Though we could be complaining, we come to offer appreciation.

Though we could be upset about what we lack, we come in gratitude for what we have.

We enter now into this time of worship carrying seed to sow, singing songs of joy,
praying together.

Let us begin this day with rejoicing and return to our homes with gladness!

Hymn Like a candle in the night (Tune – We three kings of Orient are)

Like a candle in the night –

flick’ring, dancing, far from bright –

shadows leaping, hostile greeting –

Bethlehem’s fragile light.

*O light of life and light of love
let us all your brightness prove.
Each refining, set us shining –
all our darkness now remove.*

Dawn of hope in Galilee,
can your presence set us free?
Teaching, healing,

truth revealing,
help us your light to see!

Noonday dark on Calv’ry’s hill;
evil forces met to kill –
life relinquished,
hope extinguished –
but you are with us still.

Resurrection morning bright;
death is beaten in the fight.
Jesus’ glory now our story –
all of us share his light

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Introduction/Children’s Time prepare the way

Light the 3rd Advent Candle for Joy

Sing – Like a candle flame Red folder 59

Offering

Generous God, through your Son, Jesus Christ,
you have shown us what it means to love.

And you call us to follow Your example—

to love our neighbours as we love ourselves.

Continue to write your law of love on our hearts.

Give us an unwavering passion for justice,

and a tenacious faith that will not rest

until the hungry are fed, the oppressed find relief,

and the outsider finds a welcome. **Amen.**

Children leave for Sunday Club

Opening Prayer

Here, in this place, we discover the great things God has done.

In story and song, in silence and sacrament,

we are reminded that God’s relationship with us which lasts forever.

Here, with these people, we find our true home.

where we can run home laughing, after being lost for so long.

Here, during this holy season of Advent, we hear those promises made so long ago.

Of the One who repairs all our mistakes, of the One who reshapes our brokenness.

Holy God, the world in which we live is as terrifying as it is wonderful.

We need Jesus as much today as in times of old.

Many sow in tears, and go out weeping.

Replenish our lands, fill our hearts with gladness,
restore our faith in you and each other, wipe away the tears of despair.
As we worship today, we tilt an ear to listen close.
Let the voice of your angel fill our minds with new understandings.
We are waiting for you. Speak to us today. Amen.

Hymn On Jordan's bank R&S 134

On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry
Announces that the Lord is nigh;
Come, then, and hearken, for He brings
Glad tidings from the King of kings.

Then cleansed be every breast from sin
make straight the way for God within,
and in each heart prepare a home
where such a mighty guest may come

For Thou art our salvation, Lord
Our refuge, and our great reward;

Without Thy grace, we waste away
like flowers that wither and decay.

To heal the sick stretch out thy hand
and bid the fallen sinner stand;
shine forth, and let thy light restore
earth's own true loveliness once more.

All praise, eternal Son, to thee
whose advent sets thy people free,
whom, with the Father, we adore,
and Spirit blest, for evermore.

Charles Coffin

**Readings: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11
 John 1:6-8, 19-28**

The prayer in the URC Prayer Handbook for today is based on this passage from John's gospel and is titled 'identity'. This reading is about the identity of John the Baptist. Who is this John who comes to prepare the way for Jesus. We hear a lot about identity – this week we've heard much about different groups and factions in the Conservative Party and where they stand or identify on the Rwanda scheme. We hear about the IDF, Hamas – designated, identified, as a terrorist organisation, which we must be reminded of in every news bulletin. There are identities and factions when it comes to the environment and COP28 – are you a tree-hugger, or an oil producing nation; are you in the global north or the global south, are you a climate-change denier or scared witless about what will happen. And we increasingly hear about identities that are persecuted or discussed or even debated in parliaments – the LGBT community, trans people, those who campaign for dignity in dying. And there are those we might think are confused about their identity like non-binary people, or those who struggle to work out their identity because they have been adopted, or some other reason. And everywhere there are so many identities and labels and subgroups, quite often set against each other for political gain.

In the other gospels, John is portrayed as John the Baptist who precedes Jesus, in John's gospel, although John does baptize, "the Baptist" is not a title you hear for the man himself. John has a very focused role — he witnesses to Jesus.

Picture John on the witness stand (John's gospel has a judicial dimension from beginning to end) being interrogated. The leader of the religious establishment asks three times, "Who are you?" John answers truthfully, but differently, each time. Trying to be clear about his identity, John answers in three ways: He clarifies who he is not (for example not the Messiah, not Elijah...). He references a Hebrew Bible text that discloses something of his vocation ("the voice of one crying out in the wilderness") And he owns the limitations of his actions ("I baptize with water" and there is another immanently more worthy) In order to witness to Jesus, John has to know who he is not, who he is, and what he does.

John's identity is crucial to how he is able to bear witness and what his witness means. In the end, this passage isn't so much about John as it is about his testimony. Here are some things we learn about Jesus from John's witness in these verses and those that follow in chapter 1 that a first-time hearer would not have known:

- Jesus is the true light (In John's gospel, light refers to Jesus' ability to create and maintain life)
- Jesus is exalted (John is not worthy to untie his sandal)
- Jesus is the Lamb of God (perhaps the Passover lamb, a symbol of God's deliverance of the Israelites in the Exodus)
- Jesus takes away the world's sin (sin is singular — the world's communal brokenness)
- God's Spirit is upon Jesus and remains with Jesus
- Jesus will baptize people with the Holy Spirit
- Jesus is the Son of God (meaning John recognizes that Jesus has a special relationship with God and a unique ability to reveal God)

This is a massive witness. The religious elite, the priests and Levites seem not to know these things about Jesus, or even who Jesus is. So, it is predictable that faced with embarrassment, they would either want to cover up their ignorance or would want to discredit this new witness, John. John's witness lends credibility to the emerging Jesus' movement.

The priests and the Levites came from Jerusalem to ask John who he is. First, he tells them by saying who he is not. John is not the Messiah. He is not Elijah. He is not a prophet. And earlier we heard that he is not the light. He comes to testify to the light, but he himself is not the light. In the midst of the well-known, poetic start to this chapter, which we will hear read this afternoon at the carol service, there is a pause in the cosmic description of Jesus for a short description of John's role as witness to it all. John is said to have been sent as a witness to testify to the light, with the goal of everyone coming to believe in the light. John is

preparing the way. While the light mentioned here is a clear reference to Jesus, more specifically this light is the life of all people. We might think of it as life force, the animating power of our lives, and the darkness cannot extinguish this light. John is a witness to this light, to life, to Jesus the Christ who came to give us life, and life more abundantly.

Most of today's reading is about who John is not – not the light, not the Messiah, not Elijah, not a prophet. Who then, is this John? Finally at the end of all their specific questions about who John might be, the priests ask an open-ended question which allows him to tell them something positive, rather than a negative. He is the one unworthy to untie the sandal of the one who is coming. Again, John is preparing the way for Jesus. He quotes the prophet Isaiah – 'I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord.' Just as Jesus quoted Isaiah 61, which we heard earlier, in his first sermon in the synagogue, saying that he was the fulfilment of that prophecy, John quotes Isaiah to say who he is.

We all know, I'm sure, John's phrase of being so lowly, so humble and unworthy that he cannot even kneel down to untie Jesus' sandal – the work of a servant in those times, or a host welcoming a guest after a long journey. This is the same symbolism Jesus himself uses when he washes the feet of the disciples. It is hyperbole the crowd of people would have readily understood, and beyond merely emphasizing the worth of Jesus, this exaggerated speech helps build up excitement about the reveal of Jesus, helps build community around the legend of this yet-unknown figure, and might serve as the kind of persuasion necessary to get someone to pay attention to the gospel Jesus is going to preach, for surely the worthiest of all time is worth learning more about.

In addition to bigging up Jesus, preparing the way, warming up the crowd like a good warm-up act does at a concert, John is letting them know that Jesus is already there among them. 'Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me, the one who is so much better than me. The priests and Levites have a recognition problem; they are oblivious to the presence of the light that was in their midst. Do we also have a problem with recognition? Do we recognise the light amongst us? We have already been told this Advent to keep awake, to watch, and be alert. In all our busyness as we count down to Christmas and faithfully follow all our traditions of carol singing, and baking and buying and eating, have we lost sight of the light amongst us? The work of Christ going on all around, maybe unseen, or unproclaimed because there is no John the Baptist doing the witnessing and the preparation? By describing himself as someone unworthy of untying the straps of Jesus' sandals, John is declaring himself to be the unworthiest of all to amplify the worthiness of Jesus. John is a witness to the light that is Jesus the Christ come into the

world, God made flesh. We must celebrate this light. Advent should be a time that elicits excitement for a light that can't go out. Like the burning bush that was on fire but did not burn, Jesus is the light that the darkness of death cannot extinguish. And this is good news! In a world that is increasingly dark, amplifying the tenacity of the light brings a welcome piece of hope.

So I return the prayer handbook, and read the prayer written for today (p66)

Hymn Hark, the glad sound! R&S 137

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 gates of brass before him burst,
the iron fetters yield.

He comes, from ignorance and doubt
to clear the inward sight;

and on the darkness of the blind
to pour celestial light.

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,
thy welcome shall proclaim;
and heaven's eternal arches ring
with thy beloved name.

Philip Doddridge

Lord's Supper

We remember, as we do at every communion service, the gift of the life and death of God's Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Come to this table, you who are beloved in Christ. Come, not because you must, but because you may.

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

It is indeed right to give you our thanks and praise, O God,
for you have turned our grief into songs of joy,
and clothed us in salvation and victory.

You planted the earth and all life,
and called a people to be your light in the world.

When they were taken weeping into exile,
you promised through your prophets
to bring them home, singing and laughing.

Salvation has come in your Messiah, Jesus,
— the one whose coming light your servant, John, bore witness to.

Filled with your Spirit, Jesus came proclaiming good news for the poor,
healing for the broken hearted, and the day of freedom to all who are bound.

He was killed by the proud and powerful,

but with your wonderful power you raised him to life.

In his presence we are filled with expectant hope and joy,
and eager to embrace your eternal covenant.

Therefore we join with all your people
on earth and in heaven, in joyful praise, saying:

Holy, holy, holy Lord

God of power and might,

heaven and earth are full of your glory.

Hosanna in the highest.

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

Hosanna in the highest.

Lord God, send your Holy Spirit upon this bread and wine,
and upon your people, that Christ may be with us,
and we may be ready to live for you
and do what you ask of us, today and every day to come. **Amen**

On the night when he was betrayed, Jesus 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.

Sharing of bread and wine

Prayer after communion

Lord Jesus Christ, as we have proclaimed your death
by eating this bread and drinking this cup, help us to wait for you,
to wish for you, and to watch for you,
so that when you come again you will find us ready.
For you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

Prayers of Intercession

Holy God, as John the Baptist came proclaiming your message of justice, may we, the church, be prophets for our own time. Help us to work to make governments more aware of their responsibilities to those under their authority, whether they are rich or poor, black or white, male or female, and whatever their political or religious persuasion. We ask that by our words, prayers and actions, we may be forerunners for your kingdom of love, justice and peace.

Holy God, as John the Baptist came to prepare the way for your coming, may we, the church, seek to prepare the way for you to come into the lives of others. Help us so to follow Christ that in all our relationships with other people something of his love may be seen, something of his nature understood. We ask that by our words, prayers and actions, we may be forerunners for Christ to enter the lives of others.

Holy God, as John the Baptist came to call the people to repentance, may we, the church, offer to others by our witness and example, an alternative way of life, a way of life based on love and truth, rather than selfishness and complacency. Help us to keep a clear view of your goodness, so that our values may reflect our faith and not the values of the society around us. We ask that by our words, prayers and actions, we may be forerunners for the salvation of humankind.

Holy God, as John the Baptist came to challenge the religious people of his day, may we, the church, always be ready to challenge our own attitudes and traditions in the name of love. Help our

church to become a place of healing where the anxious and depressed, the sick and the bereaved and those who believe they are of little worth, may find acceptance and love.

Merciful God, as we continue to hear about the atrocities happening in Gaza, we pray for the people of Israel and Gaza, for the people living through war in Ukraine, and for all those living in areas of conflict around the world. **Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer**

We pray for all those living in poverty and for all those who go hungry and for the people who help them. As we look towards Christmas and we are bombarded with adverts for fancy food and luxury gifts, help us to remember those who cannot afford to give their children presents; for those who will have no food, for those living on the streets and those for whom the holidays are emotionally or mentally challenging. **Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.**

We pray with all those living with any kind of disability or impairment. Make us mindful that often the difficulties of being disabled are caused by prejudice and misunderstanding of the able-bodied. Help us to be more caring and understanding. **Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer**

We pray for all those with mental health issues and those who care for them. And we pray for those living with learning difficulties or autism, that they may find understanding and support. **Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer**

We pray for unity and equality and an end to discrimination and prejudice of all kind. We pray for those who have experienced discrimination because of their disability, mental health, or stigma because they live with dementia; for those who experience prejudice because of their sexuality or the colour of their skin, or because they are poor, or uneducated. Help us to truly remember that in Christ we are all one, created in God's image. **Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.**

We pray for all those around the world affected by climate change. And pray that the agreements made at COP28 may truly make a difference **Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.**

We pray for all those who are ill and those who care for them; for those in hospital, those awaiting test results or treatment, for the dying and those who mourn. **Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.**

Holy God, we gather all our prayers together in the prayer your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ taught us, saying:

Lord's Prayer

Hymn And art thou come R&S 136 omit v2

And art Thou come with us to dwell,
Our Prince, our Guide, our Love, our Lord?
And is Thy name Immanuel,
God present with His world restored?

Thou bringest all again; with Thee
Is light, is space, is breadth and room
For each thing fair, beloved, and free
To have its hour of life and bloom.

Each heart's deep instinct, unconfessed;
Each lowly wish, each daring claim;

All, all that life hath long repressed,
Unfolds, undreading blight or blame.

Thy reign eternal will not cease;
Thy years are sure and glad, and slow,
Within thy mighty world of peace
The humblest flower hath leave to blow.

The world is glad for Thee; the heart
Is glad for Thee, and all is well,
And fixed and sure, because Thou art,
Whose name is called Immanuel!

Dora Greenwell

Blessing

Can you be a voice crying in the wilderness?

Can you proclaim that God is active in the world?

The time is near, of the crowning of the year.

We sing with angels, setting the roadways and the buildings humming

As people who are being changed, we go into a world that is being changed.

Ready to share the Good News that the long-expected Jesus is coming,
that we are being freed from whatever binds us.

Glory be to the God who walks with us, sings with us, and struggles with us,
each and every day. Amen

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