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Sunday 14 December 2025 – Advent 3

Our service today is led by
Kimberley Nielsen, one of our Lay Preachers.

Welcome to our service this morning.

In working together on our shared mission, we commit to seven core values:

Togetherness, Humility, Curiosity, Love, Inclusiveness, Justice, Sustainability.

Justice: we hope for a better world for all and work together to be part of making that happen.

Community time during the service is a good opportunity to ask for prayers for yourself or others.

If you, or someone you know, would appreciate a visit from one of our **Pastoral Network Team**, please speak to the service leader.

*You are invited to stand if you are able,
for the hymns and the offering prayer.*

*You are invited to share in reading aloud the responses in **Bold Type**.*

Welcome

Kia ora and welcome to church this morning. Today is the third Sunday of Advent and our theme is joy. I was reading about joy and Advent on the Bible Project this week, and this what they had to say:

We often think about joy as an experience of happiness based on favorable circumstances: a stroke of good luck, a personal achievement, or a long-held desire finally being satisfied. But when joy depends on circumstances, it fades fast when the good times end.

Advent joy is not about general happiness stemming from good times. It's a deep sense of safety and freedom people feel because of God's loving character, which remains constant through all circumstances, and because God can be trusted to ultimately bless and heal creation as he promised.

Similar to the joy a friend's presence brings on good days and bad, we experience joy as God walks with us through the fluctuations of life's positive and painful circumstances.

In the Bible, people express joy both when God delivers them from situations of oppression and while still in the middle of exile, persecution, and pain. As people remember God's loving, rescuing actions throughout history, they wait in joyful hope for him to act in the future, even when that waiting requires patient suffering.

This kind of joy is about being united with the God who walks with us and trusting that he will one day wipe away every tear. It looks to the future but also takes root in our present reality. The season of Advent invites us to experience joy not because everything is perfect but because God is with us and his joy is already breaking into the world.

Call to Worship

People of God, rejoice with gladness and song, for the Lord is near!

We come with joyful hearts, for God comes to save us.

Beloved, let us lift our voices, for the splendour of God's glory is all around.

We worship the God who is, who was, and who is to come!

Source: Abbingdon Call and Response

Lighting the Advent Candles

We have lit the first two candles, one for hope and one for peace. Today we light the third candle, the candle of joy. This should be the easy one, because joy is all around us—in the children, the lights, the music, the gathering together. But how often do we let our preparations—or our memories—push joy to the side?

Joy is like an underground spring that wells up within us, but joy is also a choice, an attitude. Like a muscle, it needs to be exercised. So today we open ourselves to joy, trusting that God has already planted it in us. All we need to do is give it care and offer it to share.

(Three candles are lit)

Hymn HFTC 66: [O Come, O Come Emmanuel](#) – (first 3 verses)

1. O come, O come, Emmanuel
And ransom captive Israel
Who mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God draws near:
 Rejoice, rejoice!
 Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel.

2. O come, true Branch of Jesse, free
Your children from this tyranny;
From depths of hell your people save
To rise victorious from the grave:
 Rejoice, rejoice!
 Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel.

3. O come, bright Daybreak, some and cheer
Our spirits by your advent here;
Dispel the long night's lingering gloom
And pierce the shadows of the tomb:
 Rejoice, rejoice!
 Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel.

**Loving God, we open ourselves to you,
trusting that this is how you made us:
you created us for joy-filled hearts and lives.
Show us the creative power of hope.
Teach us the peace that comes from justice.
Fill us with the kind of joy that cannot be contained, but must be shared.
Prepare our hearts to be transformed by you,
That we may walk in the light of Christ. Amen.**

Opening Prayer – Blessing for the third Sunday of Advent – Joy

Blessed are we who wait with bated breath,
who wait for something new to be born
- for new hope or new joy or new life.

Blessed are we whose patience grows thinner by the day.

We who are tired of the world as it is
-in all of its heartache and loss
and hopelessness.

We who want more.

More hope. More joy. More life.

Blessed are we who sit here,
waiting at the still point between desire
and expectation.

We who are making room for more of you,
oh God, this Christmas.

Surprise us with joy in the midst of the mundane,
abundance in the midst of so much scarcity,
presence in the midst of Christmas chaos.

We have quieted our souls to listen,
to wait for you, oh God,
for your Word-Made-Flesh is life to us.

Amen.

*Source: The Lives We Actually Have:
100 blessings for imperfect days, by Kate Bowler & Jessica Richie*

Video – The Bible Project, Joy <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qvOhQTuD2e0>

Hymn HFTC 197: [Joy to the World](#)

1. Joy to the world – the Lord has come!
Let earth receive her king,
Let every heart prepare him room
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven, and heaven and nature sing!

2. Joy to the earth – the saviour reigns!
Let songs be heard on high,
While fields and streams and hills and plains
Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat, repeat the sounding joy.

3. No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground:
He comes to make his blessings flow
 Wherever guilt is found,
 Wherever guilt is found,
 Wherever, ever, guilt is found.

4. He rules the world with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove
The glories of his righteousness,
 The wonders of his love,
 The wonders of his love,
 The wonders, wonders, of his love.

Prayer of Confession

Whole God,
We confess that we have paid so little attention to the sources of joy in our daily lives. We have such constant access to the terrors and traumas of this world that it has become difficult to see anything else. We have sneered and mocked the happiness of others, dismissing their fun as immature or juvenile. We have possessed sparse imagination for the relationship between sorrow and joy, often demanding joy present as mere cheerfulness. Liberate us, God. And have mercy on our imbalanced assessment of daily life, that in our survival we would cling to the practices of joy we've inherited and find some measure of peace.
Amen.

*Adapted from: Black Liturgies: Prayers, Poems and Meditations for staying human,
By Cole Arthur Riley*

Forgiveness

Let your soul receive this rest: The God of joy takes compassion on your inner doom and fills you with a peace that surpasses understanding. Let the divine guide you to laugh, joke, rest, dance, remember, dream, all steadied by a belief that you are worthy of goodness even when goodness does not immediately make herself known to you. Forgive yourself your despair and relax in the arms of the divine.
Amen.

*Source: Black Liturgies: Prayers, Poems and Meditations for staying human, By
Cole Arthur Riley*

Hymn – Psalm 146 (<https://psalms.seedbed.com/>)

(Tune: [Blaenwern](#))

1. Praise the Lord, my soul, O praise Him; to the Lord your praises give;
I will praise Him my whole life; sing praise to God long as I live.
Do not put your trust in princes; in mere man who cannot save—
When they die, their plans are nothing; they descend into the grave.

2. Bless-ed is the one whose help is Jacob's God—how bless'd is he!
Bless-ed is the one whose hope is in the Lord his God, for He
is the Maker of the heavens, Maker of the earth and sea;
He, the Lord, made all that fills them, and keeps faith eternally.
3. He upholds the cause of those who are oppressed—to them is kind;
He gives food unto the hungry; and gives sight unto the blind.
The Lord sets the pris'ners free and lifts up those who are bowed down;
The Lord loves the righteous ones, and does their lives with glory crown.
4. The Lord watches o'er the strangers; and sustains the fatherless;
Helps the widows, but He frustrates wicked ones who would oppress.
The Lord God will reign forever; your God, Zion, evermore;
He reigns for all generations; hallelujah! Praise the Lord!

Reading – Matthew 11:2-11, The Message

²⁻³ John, meanwhile, had been locked up in prison. When he got wind of what Jesus was doing, he sent his own disciples to ask, “Are you the One we’ve been expecting, or are we still waiting?”

⁴⁻⁶ Jesus told them, “Go back and tell John what’s going on:

The blind see,
The lame walk,
Lepers are cleansed,
The deaf hear,
The dead are raised,
The wretched of the earth learn that God is on their side.

“Is this what you were expecting? Then count yourselves most blessed!”

⁷⁻¹⁰ When John’s disciples left to report, Jesus started talking to the crowd about John. “What did you expect when you went out to see him in the wild? A weekend camper? Hardly. What then? A sheik in silk pyjamas? Not in the wilderness, not by a long shot. What then? A prophet? That’s right, a prophet! Probably the best prophet you’ll ever hear. He is the prophet that Malachi announced when he wrote, ‘I’m sending my prophet ahead of you, to make the road smooth for you.’

¹¹⁻¹⁴ “Let me tell you what’s going on here: No one in history surpasses John the Baptizer; but in the kingdom he prepared you for, the lowliest person is ahead of him.

Reflection

It feels funny to stand up in front of you today, the day we celebrate joy, only to talk about doubt. Because, when I look at our reading this morning, doubt seems to me to be a key theme. Perhaps doubt and joy are two sides of the same coin – how joyful is it to realise that the thing you doubted has been true all along?!

Our reading this morning begins with John the Baptist in Jail, sending his followers to Jesus, asking if he is the Messiah. But before we get into that, we need to go

back a few steps – Who is John the Baptist? Why is he in jail? Why does he care who Jesus is?

Last week Richard talked a little about John and his mission, standing on the banks of the River Jordan crying, “Repent for the kingdom of God is waiting!” but I want to take us back even further than that, because for us to understand and relate to today’s reading, we need to get to know John a little better.

Luke’s Gospel tells us that John is the son of Zachariah and Elizabeth, both of whom are descendants from the line of Aaron. Luke’s gospel opens with Zachariah serving as a priest in the temple when he is visited by an angel. He is filled with fear (a common response when coming face to face with an angel, according to the Bible), but the angel says to him,

“Don’t fear, Zachariah. Your prayer has been heard. Elizabeth, your wife, will bear a son by you. You are to name him John. You’re going to leap like a gazelle for joy, and not only you—many will delight in his birth. He’ll achieve great stature with God.

¹⁵⁻¹⁷ “He’ll drink neither wine nor beer. He’ll be filled with the Holy Spirit from the moment he leaves his mother’s womb. He will turn many sons and daughters of Israel back to their God. He will herald God’s arrival in the style and strength of Elijah, soften the hearts of parents to children, and kindle devout understanding among hardened sceptics—he’ll get the people ready for God.” (Luke 1:13-17)

The thing is though, that Zachariah and Elizabeth were unable to have children, and now they are past an age where that was still possible. Zachariah questions the angel on this and is struck mute until John is born, as evidence that what he has been told is true.

While Elizabeth is pregnant her cousin Mary, pregnant herself with Jesus, comes to visit. Luke tells us,

“When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby in her womb leaped. She was filled with the Holy Spirit, and sang out exuberantly,

*You’re so blessed among women,
and the babe in your womb, also blessed!*

*And why am I so blessed that
the mother of my Lord visits me?*

*The moment the sound of your
greeting entered my ears,*

*The babe in my womb
skipped like a lamb for sheer joy.*

*Blessed woman, who believed what God said,
believed every word would come true!” (Luke 1:39-45)*

We then skip forward about 30 years to Jesus heading to the Jordan River to be baptised by John. This story is told by Matthew, Mark, and Luke’s gospels and each of them tell it a little differently. In Matthew’s Gospel, John initially refuses to baptise

Jesus saying, “I’m the one who needs to be baptised, not you!” But Jesus insists, so John baptises him, with Matthew recording,

“The moment Jesus came up out of the baptismal waters, the skies opened up and he saw God’s Spirit—it looked like a dove—descending and landing on him. And along with the Spirit, a voice: “This is my Son, chosen and marked by my love, delight of my life.” (Matthew 3:16-17).

John is there. He sees the spirit appear as a dove, he hears the voice of God audibly claiming Jesus as his own.

So, as you can see, before he was born, before he was even conceived, John’s life was pointing to Jesus as Messiah, the one who was coming to save God’s people. Richard talked last week about John’s preaching pointing others to Jesus, and it’s this preaching that eventually leads to John being jailed and, ultimately, killed.

I tell you all this to point out that, despite the angelic announcement of his conception; the muteness of his Father; his recognition of Mary, pregnant with Jesus, while still in utero; despite seeing the Holy Spirit appear as a dove, and hearing the audible voice of God claiming Jesus as his son; In Matthew chapter 11, John is sitting in prison asking, “Are you the One we’ve been expecting, or are we still waiting?” (Matthew 11:3)

Maybe you’ve found yourself asking questions like this at certain points in your life – Why hasn’t God responded to my situation the way I thought God would? Can I trust God? Is Jesus who he said he is? Is this belief that I have dedicated my life to true? If it is true, is it worth it?

I want to share some encouragement here from Pastor David Lose:

“At those moments, we know that whatever our misgivings, whatever our disappointments, God is not disappointed in us and comes to us anyway, eager to join us in our weakness, to hold onto us in our insecurity, and to comfort us in our fear. For God in Jesus came not for the strong and the proud but the weak and vulnerable. God in Jesus, in other words, came for us.”

[\(David Lose, Working Preacher\)](#)

When God shows up it doesn’t always look the way we expect it to or hoped it would – even John, someone literally identified by Jesus as a messenger and prophet, had some doubts. So, if you find yourself asking questions, don’t beat yourself up too much – you have the faith of John the Baptist! Jesus, however, gives us a rubric to consider when searching for the presence of God – to take note of what we hear and see.

*“The blind see,
The lame walk,
Lepers are cleansed,
The deaf hear,
The dead are raised,
The wretched of the earth learn that God is on their side.” (Matthew 11:4-6)*

As we as a church continue to consider our future, this rubric is something we need to keep front and foremost, asking ourselves the same questions:

- Are the blind receiving sight? Are we learning new things about God? Gaining new insights? Seeing things from a different perspective?
- Is there healing taking place in our homes and church community? Not just physical – mental, emotional, social too – are the lonely finding friendship and a place to belong? Do people leave our services with a sense of peace, strengthened for the week ahead?
- Is there resurrection? Have you rediscovered a long-forgotten passion? Are you dreaming new dreams? Does something that once seemed impossible now feel hopeful?
- Do the wretched of the earth know that God is on their side, because **we** are on their side? Are we welcoming of all people? Do we stand for justice, speaking up in defence of others?

Note too that John is not seeing these works of Jesus himself, rather he's hearing about them from jail – are people aware of God working within our church through word of mouth?

I want to acknowledge here that these things all sound tricky to get right, especially to get all of them right at once! But my hope is that as God continues to move in our small church community we will grow and change in ways that can only have come from God.

There's a quote on my fridge that reads: "Nobody succeeds beyond their wildest expectations unless they begin with some wild expectations." My hope is that, if we continue to turn our faces toward God, trusting God to direct our steps, we will continue to serve each other, and our community, beyond our wildest expectations. It may not look the way we thought it might, remember Jesus often shows up in ways we do not expect, but we will look back to where we came from and exclaim "wow! How did we get here?!"

As we wait for God this advent, may we catch joyful glimpses in the world around us bringing enlightenment, healing, resurrection, and good news.
Amen.

Hymn HFTC 52: [Come O Long Expected Jesus](#)

(Tune = Hyfrodol)

1. Come, O long-expected Jesus,
Born to set your people free!
From our fears and sins release us,
Christ in whom our rest shall be.

2. Israel's strength and consolation,
Born salvation to impart;
Dear desire of every nation,
Joy of every longing heart:

3. Born your people to deliver,
Born a child and yet a king;
Born to reign in us for ever,
Now your gracious kingdom bring:

4. By your own eternal Spirit
Rule in all our hearts alone;
By your all-sufficient merit
Raise us to your glorious throne.

Offering Dedication

Loving God, we thank you for all the gifts you have given us in life. We ask that you take these gifts we have given, and our lives, and use them to bring about your reign of love, joy, and peace in this world. Amen.

Community Time: Notices, Celebrations, Prayer Requests

Prayer for Others / Intercession

O God, you give us every gift, and most of all you give us the gift of your Son Jesus. While we wait for the joy of his birth, we pray for the needs of the world he loves. We pray for this church and all Christians everywhere.

Help us show the world what Jesus' love is like, and prepare us to welcome him into our hearts and lives.

We pray for the world, and all people, animals, and plants.

Make fairness and truth more important than anything else.

Heal the broken environment and teach us how to care for it.

Provide food, clothing, and housing for everyone in need.

We pray for our neighbours, friends, and families.

You know the healing, comfort, forgiveness, and hope they need.

We trust in your love and lift up these prayers by name...

O God, in the middle of the hurry and busy activities, slow us down and help us hold space and time for the season of Advent, waiting for Jesus to come down to earth.

We pray in his name, and we say together the prayer he taught us..

Source: <https://www.liturgylink.net/2021/11/29/pop-advent-gifts/>

The Lord's Prayer

*(Feel free to pray this prayer in the language or words
that are most familiar to you.)*

**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.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.**

Hymn: Advent Begins in the Darkness of Night (Protest of Praise; Tune: Rescov)

1. Advent begins in the darkness of night,
waiting and watching for signs of a light,
walking in faith that a path will appear,
daring to follow in spite of our fear.
2. Advent begins with our dreams yet deferred.
Love sounds ridiculous;
prayers seem absurd.
But in the midst of life's centreless maze,
we lift together our protest of praise.
3. Advent begins in oppression's domain,
marked by the cries of confusion and pain.
Yet hope is kindled where justice is done,
mercy is nurtured and peace is begun.
4. Advent goes on till the promised dawn breaks,
tyrants are toppled, and God's dream awakes.
Hope is perfected and faith is made sight.
Love is our centre and Christ is our light.

Benediction/Commission and Blessing

Rejoice in God always, and again I say, rejoice
For God has created you with the capacity for joy.

**We will find what makes us joyful,
And make that our gift to the world.**

Trust in God's good will for all of creation
and open yourself to God's gentle, transforming love.

We will welcome new possibilities in our lives.

We will offer ourselves to God's goodness.

We will go forth in hope, and peace, and joy.

Sung Amen (threefold)

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