



Third Sunday of Advent

12 December 2021

Scriptures

Old Testament Zephaniah 3:14-20

New Testament – Letters Philippians 4:4-7

New Testament – Gospel Luke 3:7-18

Theme

Jesus Makes All the Difference – The Life

Call to worship

We live in expectancy of Jesus' coming into our lives and prepare our hearts for his coming. This morning, as we worship let us also see that even as we wait on Jesus, God calls us to live out the Christ-life. We ask our wonderful Holy Spirit to come among us and do God's work of transformation in our hearts. Let us shine the Christ-light on our journey towards Christmas Day. Let us be Christ in the world.

Songs

Opening

It was on a starry night (SASB 112/535)

Jesus what a beautiful name (87/718)

In introducing this second song, talk about the characteristics of the life we have in Christ that are featured in the song. These characteristics are also powerful resources and realities for our lives and are available to us now through Jesus' coming. You don't have to wait till Christmas Day! Encourage your people to let these realities be their lived experience, to let them settle deep in their hearts.

- Midway** Do you know the song that the angels sang? (105/627)
Note again in this song the experience that is ours through Jesus' coming – peace and goodwill.
- Response** Jesus, be the centre (373/567)
- Sending Out** Our God reigns (254/793) or
Standing on the promises (522/840)

Children

Living it out

Visual: Words to the song 'Rejoice in the Lord always' (teach it as a round, getting everyone involved).

Who is looking forward to Christmas Day? Why? You know you don't have to wait until Christmas Day to know the amazing life that Jesus has for you and to begin living it out every day. You can start right now. One of the amazing qualities of life with Jesus is that you can 'rejoice' no matter what's going on – good or bad.

Philippians 4:4 says: 'Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!' The fact is that even when we don't feel like it, rejoicing because of Jesus and his love for us lifts our spirits and brings us closer to him. Remember, Jesus makes all the difference. There's even a song about rejoicing and we're going to sing it.

Message

Action: Ask people if they can remember a time when even as they waited for something to happen, it actually happened while they were waiting and before the date they were expecting it.

If there's one thing today's Bible readings emphasise it is that even while we anticipate Jesus coming among us, and even as we prepare our hearts for his coming, we are called to be living out the Christ-life. And this is how the prophetic works. It's not like there is an announcement and we wait, tapping our fingers, for it to happen. There is a beautiful symmetry between 'the prophetic' and 'the actual', a crossing over between them.

Often we don't realise it, but when we follow Jesus Christ with all our hearts we live permanently in that space of the promise of God and the blessing of God. It's 'the prophetic' and 'the actual' crossing over in our lives. We live in the promises of God even as we wait for the fulfilment of the promises.

A clear example of this was how Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, even before they give birth, are so excited and celebrate the promises of God to them as if they had already taken place. Jesus was already making all the difference in their lives, and we'll be taking a closer look at their experience next week.

This morning, however, our Bible readings are calling us to live in this space, not blindly or by chance, but intentionally. So, what does living in the space of crossover actually look like? Our gospel reading has a lot to say to us about this reality.

1. We produce fruit

First of all, living in the crossover time of promises given and promises fulfilled, means that we start bearing fruit. John suggests it's not about standing around waiting. It's already time for action. And as the reading unfolds we see the kind of fruit John is talking about. It is action-oriented. The promise is 'good news' about salvation through Jesus Christ that deserves an immediate response.

John was offering a baptism of repentance at the Jordan River, pre-empting the coming of Jesus among them. The fruit we produce is 'in keeping with repentance', warns John, strongly, from Luke 3:8.

The fruit begins by the sharing of our possessions. 'What should we do then,' the crowd asked. 'Anyone who has two shirts,' John told them, 'should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same' (Luke 3:11). This outward change reflects an inward change in people's hearts. It is the overflow of their repentance and anticipated salvation. They are so grateful they cannot help but give of their resources to others. Something is stirring. The Kingdom of God is at hand!

In verse 12, we see tax collectors coming to be baptised and asking John what the coming of Jesus would mean for them. John replies, 'Don't collect any more than you are required to.' In other words, stop ripping people off and act justly. That will be your fruit.

Then in verse 14, we see Roman Army soldiers asking John the same question, 'What should we do?' John replies, 'Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely – be content with your pay.' That will be their fruit.

2. We take responsibility

These are challenging words for us because living the Christ-life now, even during Advent 2021, means that we take responsibility for how we live and how we take on a life of generosity and service. Did you notice in this reading how John allows no escape clauses, no outs. He says to them, 'Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.'

In other words, when it comes to the Kingdom of God and the coming of Jesus, things get personal. If we are to experience true salvation and come to Christ with full integrity in our repentance, the results will show in the fruit we produce, in the difference Jesus makes in our lives. It is not salvation by group, as it was for the Israelites.

And it is not a salvation we acquire by privilege or birthright or entitlement. In fact, those are baseless human constructs when it comes to the Kingdom of God. Salvation is only by the love

and grace of God in Christ and our faith in this wonderful provision for our lives. It is strictly on a case-by-case basis.

3. We make Jesus the centre

So, we are set free, liberated, in Christ and our hearts burst with the goodness, love and grace of God. We cannot help but bear much fruit. We take responsibility and submit ourselves to the transforming power of God and begin to live the Christ-life.

In effect, we make Jesus the centre of our new life, even though it is impossible to anticipate all that this life will have for us. It is a step of faith – like, I’m throwing all my eggs into this basket because I can see the difference it is already making. It will always be that way – waiting on Christ, walking in Christ and embracing our future even before it happens.

As we sang earlier, ‘Rejoice in the Lord always, and, again, I say rejoice.’ This is the tone of our new life with Jesus at the centre. Nothing is too hard, no valley too low, no mountain too high. Speaking to the crowd who had come to receive his baptism of repentance, John described the Advent of Jesus in this way, ‘I baptise you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie’ (Luke 3:16)

Like John, in our new life we are both in awe of Jesus and humble before him. But we are also the recipients of his power and share in his life and mission of salvation. In the next breath, John said, ‘He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.’

Response

How good it is to be reminded this Advent season of all the riches we have in Jesus Christ, especially in light of the pandemic that has impacted our emotions and physical freedom so much across 2020 and 2021. As we approach another Christmas, is it possible that all of us can experience a refreshing of our life and our faith? These Scriptures speak across two millennia, encouraging us to review our lives and make it a personal responsibility to ensure that Jesus is indeed at the centre; that we are submitting to the Holy Spirit’s transforming work in us; that the fruit is there for the picking.