

# St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Thunder Bay

207 South Brodie St. <http://standrewspres-tbay.ca>

**December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020 Second Sunday in Advent**

## Words of Welcome

Disappointment. Not a feeling any of us welcome. We may be disappointed in someone we love, work with, or have another connection to, but it is even more uncomfortable when we are disappointed in ourselves.

This 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Advent we consider disappointment.

## Call to Worship

Let us hear what God will speak,  
for the Holy One speaks peace to the people,  
to the faithful, and to all who turn to God in their hearts.

**Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet.**

**Righteousness and peace will embrace.**

Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,  
and righteousness will look down from the sky.

**The Holy One will give what is good,  
and we will bring our praise and song.**

[www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/5518/worship-elements-december-6-2020](http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/5518/worship-elements-december-6-2020)

## Advent Candle Lighting: Peace

**On the first Sunday of Advent, we lit the candle of hope and were reminded to put our hope in God's promises of a peaceful kingdom. *[Light first candle.]* This morning we light the candle of peace. We wait for God's promises of peace on earth and good will to all. We pray that God's peace would break through our restless hearts and lead us to Bethlehem, where we can celebrate our Savior's birth. We light this candle of peace. *[Light second candle.]***

From Reformed Worship: Resources for Planning and Leading Worship September 2020 Number 137.  
*Be not Afraid: A Worship Series for Advent* By Meg Jenista Kuykendall and Kathryn Roelofs

## Hymn

*Comfort, comfort you my people*

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1. Comfort, comfort you my people;  
tell of peace, thus says our God;  
comfort those who sit in darkness  
bowed beneath oppression's load.  
Speak you to Jerusalem  
of the peace that waits for them;  
tell them that their sins I cover,  
and their warfare now is over.

2. For the herald's voice is calling  
in the desert far and near,  
bidding us to make repentance  
since the kingdom now is here.  
Oh that warning cry obey!  
Now prepare for God a way;  
let the valleys rise in meeting  
and the hills bow down in greeting.

3. Make you straight what long was crooked;  
make the rougher places plain;  
let your hearts be true and humble,  
as befits God's holy reign,  
for the glory of the Lord  
now o'er earth is shed abroad,  
and all flesh shall see the token  
that God's word is never broken.

Words and Music: public domain

## Opening Prayer

God of all times and places, you are holy and loving.  
You create pathways where there is no path.  
You prepare us to receive wonders beyond imagining.  
In every time and every place, you have raised up leaders  
who point to your glory and honour your greatness.  
You have called us by name, baptized us with water and with the Holy Spirit.  
You bless us for abundant living, and set us in the world to serve you.  
We are your people, and so we worship you  
as our Creator, our Redeemer, and the Breath of our lives,  
one God, now and always.

God of mercy, we confess that we resist changing our hearts and minds, even when  
your Word compels us to reconsider cherished opinions. We are more comfortable  
remaining as we are than taking up your challenge. Forgive us for being set in our  
ways, and seeing others only in light of inherited ideas and past experience. Forgive  
us our reluctance to forgive each other as we have been forgiven. By the power of  
your Holy Spirit, transform us by your great love and mercy. Give us new eyes for  
seeing, new ears for hearing.

God of grace, still our busy minds so that we will hear your Word speaking through the  
scripture. By your Spirit, create a space within us to receive your wisdom your mercy,  
and your invitation to live for you. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

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## Assurance of Pardon

Jesus said, "Come to me, all you who labour and are heavy laden and I will give you  
rest." Friends, trust that peace and forgiveness are God's gift to you this day.  
Be renewed by the power of the Holy Spirit that moves with you into each new day.  
May the peace of Christ be with you all.

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## Scripture Reading     Luke 1:5-25

<sup>5</sup> In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. <sup>6</sup>Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. <sup>7</sup>But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

<sup>8</sup> Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, <sup>9</sup>he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. <sup>10</sup>Now at the time of the incense-offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. <sup>11</sup>Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. <sup>12</sup>When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. <sup>13</sup>But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. <sup>14</sup>You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, <sup>15</sup>for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. <sup>16</sup>He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. <sup>17</sup>With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.' <sup>18</sup>Zechariah said to the angel, 'How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.' <sup>19</sup>The angel replied, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. <sup>20</sup>But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.'

<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. <sup>22</sup>When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. <sup>23</sup>When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

<sup>24</sup> After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, <sup>25</sup>'This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.'

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The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

## Message Fear of Disappointment

How many of us hoped for a different kind of Christmas? For many, Christmas means gathering with friends and/or family, gift buying and wrapping, baking like crazy, and planning that big meal. It is not that way for all, but even for those who have a quieter Christmas, this year feels different because everyone is subdued, there is no hustle and bustle, even if it is someone else's that we usually observe. There is a lot of disappointment in the air. There has been for months.

Disappointment over opportunities missed due to cancellation of events or worse, loss of livelihood. There were one hundredth birthday parties cancelled, some of those I knew celebrated that milestone birthday and then died shortly after. It was as if they had fought to live until that moment just for the party and to say with others, "I did it!" and when nothing could happen, what was the point?

There was the disappointment of so many graduating from high school, college, or university programs. The culmination of accomplishment for education is graduation and the celebration that goes with it. Again, all subdued this year, even as teachers went above and beyond to make it something special.

This is the year when weddings and funerals, those moments when people who haven't see each other for years may come together, those times became moments witnessed on a screen. It is a year when technology and innovation has been our most unifying factor. Just yesterday, I officiated at a wedding where the dad lives in China. His hope had always been to walk each of his daughters down the aisle on their wedding day. Imagine his disappointment to know that this daughter would not be on his arm on her wedding day, and though disappointment would still have been in his heart, his daughter placed a video call just as she prepared to enter the sanctuary and she held her dad in the palm of her hand so that they could see each other as she walked down the aisle.

A Psychology today articles states, "As an emotion, researchers describe disappointment as a form of sadness—a feeling of loss, an uncomfortable space (or a painful gap) between our expectations and reality."<sup>1</sup>

There is not one of us who has not felt the sting of disappointment. It may have been a romance that didn't last, a job not offered after you thought the interview went well, the bitter sadness of a long-time friendship that ended in a misunderstanding or worse, an argument. For me it was the profound sadness when the last phone call with my mom was cut short and I never phoned her back thinking, "I will be there in a few days, hold

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-clarity/201706/dealing-disappointment>. Accessed December 4, 2020.

on Mom”, and then the next phone call was that she had died sooner than any of us expected.

For others it has been the disappointment of a miscarriage after the promise of new life or, like Elizabeth in our scripture, that a woman was not able to conceive a child. I think of people I know and love, friends and family, who desired to have a child and did everything in their power to make that happen, only to be disappointed time and time again when hope for news did not come to pass.

Sadly, in Biblical times, if a woman did not conceive a child she was disgraced. The words put into the elderly Elizabeth’s mouth after she is finally able to bear a child as promised by God were, “This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people” (Luke 1:25) There was no understanding at the time of a woman’s body, nor that a man could be the problem. The man held the seed, and the woman’s body was the fertile ground in which the seed would grow. If the seed didn’t grow it was not because the seed was weak, but rather the ground not fertile.

Thankfully, through research and medicine, we know and understand more clearly the contributing factors when a couple desires to conceive a child but cannot, even if there is still a great disappointment and sadness with that realization. With that in mind, we can look at the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth and find meaning.

It is important to note that both Zechariah and Elizabeth were seen as “righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord.” (Luke 1:6). Tradition taught that if a woman was barren that it was because she had done something to displease God, but right away we know that is not the case here. There is also something to say about the fact that Elizabeth does conceive, if very late in life. This does not mean that she finally got things right. In this story, for its purpose, this is a story of bringing life and possibility where the human heart and body, the people of God, saw none. This story encompasses God’s possibility. It is about human doubt and disappointment and God’s promises.

We all have expectations about how our lives will play out. Granted, rarely does it work the way we may have planned, but we still have those expectations. For Elizabeth and Zechariah, there had been hopes and expectations at the beginning of their marriage that just didn’t work out. As a nation, Israel had hope and expectations for how God would work in and through them. At this time, it felt as though God had been silent for decades. The people were praying outside the temple. The temple was understood as God’s house. It was in the temple that Zechariah was greeted by an angel who gives him the news of a child. The life and purpose of the child is stated, it is hope for a nation.

Still, life had disappointed too often and Zechariah doubted the word he had heard and because of this he was left unable to speak until the day of the child's birth. It is hard to trust God. It was hard for a dedicated, righteous, and blameless Zechariah. It is hard for us. We have been disappointed so often in our prayers, that we begin to fear disappointment. We try to live life in a way that avoids being disappointed. We stop risking, some stop praying or believing. We don't want to feel the sadness, the ache of disappointment. Often this leads to the suppression of our hopes and dreams. We don't want to feel that emptiness, or live in that uncomfortable space again, so resign ourselves to what we perceive as the inevitable. We lose our vision for a different future.

This happens in our lives, in our communities, and in our churches. We forget that God is still at work even when we have no idea what the future holds and it feels like God is silent. It may be one of the things in the scripture that stands out, the fact that the people had not given up, they were still at the temple praying after years. They continued to be faithful, just as Elizabeth and Zechariah had been faithful.

What is it that you have given up on in your life? In the life of your family? What have we given up on in the church? Does our experience of disappointment stop us from believing that God can work when we think there is no longer opportunity or life?

In this story the promise comes in the son John that is conceived by the couple. The next chapter will be the promise of son to Mary, the boy Jesus, whose life will transform the world. Just as then, God is still in at work in the world and in our lives even if we are not aware of it. Our lack of vision does not inhibit God's action. Our work is to pray and trust, but also watch for the unexpected, for something to come from a place we had not anticipated. This story is not just about a childless couple getting pregnant and having a child, it is representative of the world of possibility that is God's realm.

In our church we can dream, pray for God to work in and through us and we know God is with us but we long for more, and God knows that longing. Prayer and faithfulness are the keys to God's work, because God chooses to work through people. We trust that God is present and God is going before us preparing a way. It may not be the way we had envisioned, but that doesn't mean it isn't the best way. We like to control things a little too much and that is when disappointment step in, we fear it, we avoid it.

Trusting God can lessen our experience of disappointment as we wait for God rather than human action to lead us. In our waiting on God we find we are free to explore and experience adventure in our lives. Exploring possibilities, not all of which will work out, but still worth the risk, and living our lives as an adventure, even if we never leave our city. The adventure is about watching God at work in our lives and the lives of others, being in awe of God, and being ready and willing to participate in any way God call us. In the words of Isaac Watts, in his hymn Joy to the World...

No more let sins and sorrows grow,  
Nor thorns infest the ground;  
He comes to make His blessings flow,  
Far as the curse is found.  
Amen.

## Closing Prayer

God of Wisdom and Patience,  
In this season of Advent, we wait for your gifts of hope and peace to claim the world once more. We wait on you in prayer, knowing you hear us even before we speak. Prepare our hearts and minds to welcome the coming of your Son once again, and prepare our courage and conviction to follow the way of the Lord.

Thank you for leading us on the Way, especially in these difficult days when the pandemic still threatens, and people are so divided. We are grateful that we can rely on your strength and comfort when so much around us has become uncertain. Comfort those who are troubled in mind or spirit as the days grow shorter. Strengthen the bodies and spirits of those who are tired or suffering. Embrace those who are living with loss, and protect children and young people for whom the future seems confusing and unimaginable.

God who makes all things new,  
Turn our lives upside down and shake out the unnecessary distractions of this season. Focus us on what is truly important and who truly matters to us. Turn our lives upside right so that our priorities and purposes match those we have learned from Jesus. Shape and reshape us until we conform to his way of living and his likeness.

Turn us upside down, O God, so that we value what is hidden and small more than what is showy and grand. Open our eyes to the needs of the most vulnerable in our community and help us speak out with them and for them, even if we must challenge those who usually get their way. Turn us right side up, O God, so that we can see we have more than enough resources to share with those who have much less than they need day by day.

Hear us now as we name places, people, and situations that need your care:  
(*A silence is kept for 20-30 seconds.*)

God, you are Alpha and Omega, our beginning and our end.  
Strengthen us with your Spirit to build your kingdom, here and now, now and always.  
Hear us as we pray together, using the words that Jesus taught:

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## Lord's Prayer

**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. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen.**

## Invitation to make an offering

This Sunday in Advent celebrates God's gift of peace. When we look around the world, we see so many places where peace is missing. There is conflict. There is anxiety. Life seems threatening. But because we know the gift of God's peace, we live in hope that our gifts will help restore peace to souls and situations by the power of the Spirit.

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## Hymn

*Come, thou long-expected Jesus*

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| 1. Come, thou long-expected Jesus,<br>born to set thy people free;<br>from our fears and sins release us;<br>let us find our rest in thee.<br>Israel's strength and consolation,<br>hope of all the earth thou art,<br>dear desire of every nation,<br>joy of every longing heart. | 2. Born thy people to deliver;<br>born a child and yet a king,<br>born to reign in us forever;<br>now thy gracious kingdom bring.<br>By thine own eternal Spirit<br>rule in all our hearts alone;<br>by thine all sufficient merit<br>raise us to thy glorious throne. |
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Words and Music: public domain

## Benediction

The same voice that speaks over the waters and calls us to follow and obey,  
the same voice that promises "I am your God, you are my people,"  
the same voice that spoke "This is my beloved Son,"  
now blesses the people with peace:

"So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God.  
I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand"

The blessing of Almighty God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—  
is with you now and forevermore. Amen.

—Based on Psalm 29:2, 9; Exodus 20:18; Matthew 3:17; Isaiah 41:10

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