

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Thunder Bay

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

December 13, 2020 3rd Sunday in Advent

Minister: Rev. Joyce Yanishewski

Words of Welcome

Change is a constant, it can be welcome or unwelcome. Nearly always it means we have to alter our plans, or revise a schedule either for the week, year, or life time. Stay with me while we worship and consider how we approach change and what scripture might have to say in the story of the announcement to Mary that she would conceive a child.

Call to Worship

We have heard the story of Jesus Christ with joy and anticipation.

We open our hearts to prepare room for his coming.

We open our ears to hear the choirs of angels proclaim his holy birth.

We open our lives to God's greater plans for us.

Through the grace of God's Holy Spirit,

we have come to worship Christ, the newborn King.

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](#)

Advent Candle Lighting: Joy

As we anticipate the birth of Jesus Christ, we light candles of hope and peace as reminders of the promise that Emmanuel is our God with us and that God graciously gives us these gifts even if they sometimes come in ways that are mysterious to us. *[Light two candles.]* On this third Sunday of Advent, we light the candle of joy. We fix our eyes on Jesus Christ, the author and perfecter of our faith. For the joy set before him, he came down to earth and took on our humanity, endured the cross with all its shame and sat down at the right hand of God in heaven. The day is coming when there will be everlasting joy to the world, for our Lord will come! Let all the earth receive her king! We light this candle of joy in anticipation of that day. *[Light pink candle.]*

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Though we are not able to sing together, music is a way that we tune our hearts and minds toward God in worship.

1. Long ago, prophets knew
 Christ would come, born a Jew,
 come to make all things new,
 bear his people's burden,
 freely love and pardon.

2. God in time, God in man,
 this is God's timeless plan:
 he will come, as a man,
 born himself of woman,
 God divinely human.

Refrain

Refrain:

Ring, bells, ring, ring, ring!
 Sing, choirs, sing, sing, sing!
 When he comes, when he comes,
 who will make him welcome?

3. Mary, hail! Though afraid,
 she believed, she obeyed.
 In her womb, God is laid
 till the time expected,
 nurtured and protected.

Refrain

4. Journey ends! Where afar
 Bethlehem shines, like a star,
 stable door stands ajar:
 unborn Son of Mary,
 Savior, do not tarry!

Refrain

"Long ago, prophets knew," words Fred Pratt Green, Music: public domain
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Prayer is another way to connect with God through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Opening Prayer

Loving God, Compassionate Son, Healing Spirit,
 Holy One in Three and Three in One,
 You approach us with such kindness and tenderness.
 You look kindly on us, no matter what our state or condition,
 Your care for this world is greater than we could ever ask or imagine:

You bring order from chaos.
 You turn weeping into laughter.
 You turn sorrow into joy, and death into new life.
 You redeem all that appears lost, making all things new.

And so we come to you in joy,
 resting from our work and responsibilities,
 trusting you to bring peace amid our anxiety
 and hope into these uncertain times.
 Receive our worship this day
 as we anticipate the difference your gifts will make to us through Christ.

Generous and gracious God,
We confess the smallness of our love and the narrowness of our concern.
These days we easily become preoccupied with statistics and case numbers.
Opportunities to say thanks, to offer encouragement, to remember each other in friendship slip by. Anxiety turns us inward and anger can make us lash out.
Forgive us for neglecting the joy at the heart of the Advent season. Turn our hearts back to you, and inspire us with your love made flesh in Jesus Christ.

God of wisdom, by the inspiration of your Spirit, open our hearts so that we may hear and understand your Word, speaking in the scriptures. Open our minds to your renewing grace, at work in Jesus Christ, your Living Word. Then open our eyes to see what you are doing in the world. Amen.

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Assurance of Pardon

In Jesus Christ, we are a new creation.
There is nothing we have done, nothing we could ever do,
that can separate us from the love of God shown to us in Christ.
Know that you are forgiven, and with this joyful truth,
have the courage to forgive one another.

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Scripture Reading Luke 1:26-45

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' ³⁴Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' ³⁵The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God.' ³⁸Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

³⁹ In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled

with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

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The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Message Fear of Revision

Imagining what the future will look like is something that all of us do. We start out having dreams about the course of our lives. We consider our careers, who we may marry or that we will choose not to get married. There may be hope for children, leisure, finances, and for many, a long-term plan about what retirement will look like. Some have that mapped out in more detail than others, but it is safe to say that we all dream of what the future will look like, especially when we are young and filled with hope. And then life happens and things change.

It can be hard to get our minds wrapped around some of the changes. When our youngest son started grade one, I began to think about how each of my days would change. As a piano teacher, it meant that daytime classes could be offered. It would be an opportunity for a little time with friends and for myself without any children at home. It was also a time for looking ahead to how old I would be and what opportunities might be presented when our youngest would graduate from high school. And then two weeks into grade one the call came from the teacher saying that we needed to meet.

A team came together for that meeting, and I knew that something was up. Two weeks after grade one began the decision was made to send our son back to kindergarten for another year. It was the best decision for him, but it meant a revision of my life plan. As each of our children were born, conversations would come up about what the future would hold, at least loosely, but this wrinkle of a child at home for an extra year was something that had not been anticipated. It felt like a set back. In the grand scheme of things, it was a small thing, but it took a couple of weeks to get past it.

This was a simple matter, and not really a problem, and pales in comparison to when one thinks of friends and family who have been diagnosed with cancer or other life altering concerns and choices have to be revisited and revised. Plans are changed or nixed all together. Those are things that can take the wind out of our sails. Still, there are also experiences that change our direction and are completely wonderful, or turn out to be something wonderful even if at first it did not seem to be the case.

Think of Mary, the mother of Jesus. She had a plan. It was the plan of most every woman living at the time. As a woman, parents chose who you would marry, you prepared for that day, you got married, had children, and managed the household. All the steps were in place for Mary, and then an angel by the name of Gabriel shows up, tells her she is going to conceive a child, and that not of her husband! The straight forward plan is off track in a big way. Joseph knew he wasn't the father, this wasn't his plan either, and yet, here is Mary saying, this is God's plan and Joseph himself gets a visit from an angel to let him in on things. (Matt 1:20) There is fear and joy in these moments. What a responsibility. How do you explain this and what does it mean for the future?

Hebrew Bible scholar Renita Weems suggests that one "might explore how God uses "Gabriels" as holy interruptions that shift the course of life. Unexpectedly, suddenly, unanticipated—Gabriels appear and alter what seem to be fixed and predictable paths."¹ Those shifts can throw one off balance, make one rethink a lot of things, but if God is in it, it can also mean impacting the lives of others in ways that we cannot fully comprehend.

Being human seems to mean that for the most part we fear change or maybe it is the unknown of change, which is interesting because the one thing that is guaranteed in life is that things will change. Some people don't like their children growing up and leaving home, but our children don't remain little. Some stay in very difficult and unhappy jobs or an abusive relationship because the unknown seems worse than the what is known. Anyone with an addiction knows that the biggest fear is what will life feel like if they give up that which seems to bring some amount of security and control.

And maybe that is the other piece of this, that we fear revision – change - because often it doesn't happen on our terms. How many times has change been out of your control? This year has been the ultimate example of how change can happen and so much is out of our control. I think of those who are facing closure of businesses, those in lock down for long periods of time without seeing loved ones, or those who simply fear being in public because the virus has made interacting with others somewhat of a risk. Life is revised, changed, not going as planned. So how do we learn to embrace change, knowing that it is a part of our living?

Last week when we heard the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, and when the angel Gabriel showed up everything changed. An elderly couple who had not been able to conceive a child were now going to have a child by the name of John who would close an era of how people experienced God. Now that same angel is announcing to Mary that she too would have a child, and she barely more than a child herself. Her baby would

¹ Weems, Renita. Commentary on Luke 1:26-38

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-of-advent-2/commentary-on-luke-126-38-5> Accessed December 12, 2020

begin a new way of being with God, of experiencing God. As was noted, it seems when angels show up in scripture the person or people who are visited end up veering off what was the anticipated path or future.

You may or may not believe in angels from heaven, but maybe we can all agree that it seem that God brings people into our lives that have the words we needed to hear, words that helped us through times of transition? Sometimes they are there for a time, they are like guides, and other times it seems they are there for a moment where just a word from them gives clarity, wisdom, or insight.

One of the keys to letting go of our fear of change, of a revised life plan, is knowing that God goes with us. Both Zechariah and Elizabeth, and Mary and Joseph knew that God was with them. They had been assured by God's own angel. So, what assures us, in our time, that God is with us?

It is from scripture that we find our assurance. One such assurance or promise is taken from John 14. It reads,

¹⁵ 'If you love me, you will keep* my commandments. ¹⁶And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate,* to be with you for ever. ¹⁷This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in* you.

¹⁸ 'I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ¹⁹In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. ²⁰On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.

God is always with us. God also send others to speak words of wisdom. So we need not fear the revisions that take place in our lives, each stage of life has its own set of changes and challenges. Trust that God has got this. You are not alone. You can face whatever comes your way. You can make changes that will bring hope, love, peace, and joy into your life and that of others. You can also face the changes that are forced on you due to other factors such as health, age, relationships or whatever else comes to and at you.

Open your heart to God, embrace the changes, prepare for the unknowns, and expect God to work in and through you for the benefit of all. You are not alone for God is with us. Amen.

Closing Prayer

Come, Christ Jesus, be our guest
and enter our lives today with your blessing.
We are lonely for you and the peace you bring.

Draw near to us in friendship and faithfulness
so that in this season which combines celebration in the face of uncertainty,
we may know your presence.

Come, Christ Jesus, be our guide
and show us the way to wisdom and gratitude.
We are thankful for the kindness we know in friends and good neighbours,
in warm houses and warm smiles,
which hold off the darkness and fear for the future.
Encourage us to reach out to those who need your embrace and ours.

Come, Christ Jesus, be our hope
and touch us with your healing and grace.
We remember before you all those we know and those known to you alone
who are living with loss or illness this season,
those who face depression or discouragement,
and all who will find it hard to be merry this year.

Shine the light of your comfort into their lives...
as we speak of the hope that dawns in your love.

Come, Christ Jesus, be our king
and claim your rightful place in our hearts.
Our world is struggling for the justice and mercy you bring.
Draw near to our leaders and all citizens working for peace and justice,
and those striving to contain and heal the effects of the pandemic.
Encourage honourable action and co-operation on all sides.
Give hope to people under oppression
and to those who live with fear or hunger day by day.
Hasten the day when the world's peoples will live as neighbours
reconciled in your truth and freedom.
For the coming of this day, we pray in the words Jesus taught us:

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, the Advent theme is Joy. Our scripture readings remind us to rejoice in Lord. Think of this offering as our opportunity to spread joy in God's world, even though that world seems darker these days. Rejoice in the Lord and give thankfully for Christ's sake.

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As we come closer to Christmas it is a joy to hear carols that have been shared for generations. May you be blessed and your heart warmed as we prepare to leave this time of sanctuary and hear the beloved carol...

Hymn

Angels from the realms of glory

146

1. Angels from the realms of glory,
wing your flight o'er all the earth;
ye who sang creation's story,
now proclaim Messiah's birth.

Refrain

Come and worship, come and worship;
worship Christ, the newborn King.

2. Shepherds in the field abiding,
watching o'er your flocks by
night:
God with us is now residing;
yonder shines the infant Light.

Refrain

3. Sages, leave your contemplations;
brighter visions beam afar;
seek the great desire of nations;
ye have seen his natal star.

Refrain

4. Saints, before the altar bending,
watching long in hope and fear,
suddenly the Lord, descending,
in his temple shall appear.

Refrain

5. Though an infant now we view him,
he shall fill his Father's throne,
gather all the nations to him;
every knee shall then bow down.

Refrain

Words and Music: public domain

Benediction

May the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing,
so that we may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Romans 15:13