

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Thunder Bay

<http://standrewspres-tbay.ca> - Minister: Rev. Joyce Yanishewski

Third Sunday of Advent – December 12, 2021

Words of Welcome

When you think of comfort what comes to mind? What is comforting to you?

Why is it comforting to you? Is comfort a response to discomfort?

We are going to spend a little time with that. As we do, we begin with words that center us on the lighting of the third candle of Advent. The candle of Joy.

Call to Worship: Waiting in Joy

What are you waiting for?

Light shines on the righteous,
and JOY on the upright in heart.

REJOICE in the Lord, you who are righteous,
and praise his holy name.

Where is your JOY?

Sing for JOY to God our strength;
shout aloud to the God of Jacob!

You make known to me the paths of life;
you will fill me with JOY in your presence.

Joy? Even in pain or questions?

In the midst of a very severe trial,
their overflowing JOY and their extreme poverty
welled up in rich generosity.

Let me hear JOY and gladness;
let the bones you have crushed REJOICE.
Restore to me the JOY of your salvation,
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

What brings JOY to God?

I have no greater JOY than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love,
just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love.

I have told you this so that my JOY may be in you
and that your JOY may be complete.

JOY comes with our salvation!

All the ends of the earth have seen
the salvation of our God.

Shout for JOY to the Lord, all the earth,
burst into jubilant song.

With JOY you will draw water
from the wells of salvation.

Splendor and majesty are before him;
strength and JOY are in his dwelling place.

What are you waiting for?

—adapted from Psalm 97:11–12; Psalm 81:1; Psalm 16:11; 2 Corinthians 8:2; Psalm 51:8, 12; 3 John 4; John 15:10–11; Psalm 98:3–4; Isaiah 12:3; 1 Chronicles 16:27. Chris Walker. What are you waiting for – A Series for Advent and Christmas – Reformed Worship September 2021.

Advent Candle Lighting – The Candle of Joy

Advent is a time of waiting.
We wait in hope.

[The first candle is lit.]

We wait in peace.

[The second candle is lit.]

As we wait, we are filled with joy—not because our lives are perfect, not because we don't have any struggles, but because we find our strength in God, the God of our salvation. We are joyful because God sent God's Son, Jesus Christ, into this world so we may be saved.

Today, we light the candle of joy. As we wait, let us be people of joy.

[The third candle is lit.]

Chris Walker. What are you waiting for – A Series for Advent and Christmas – Reformed Worship September 2021.

Hymn

Those who wait on the Lord

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| 1. Those who wait on the Lord
shall renew their strength;
they shall rise upon wings as eagles;
they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint:
help us, Lord; help us, Lord, in your way. | 2. Those who serve the suffering world
shall renew their strength;
they shall rise upon wings as eagles;
they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint:
help us, Lord; help us, Lord, in your way. |
| 3. Those who live the risen life
shall renew their strength;
they shall rise upon wings as eagles;
they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint:
help us, Lord; help us, Lord, in your way. | 4. Those who love the Mystery
shall renew their strength;
they shall rise upon wings as eagles;
they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint:
help us, Lord; help us, Lord, in your way. |

5. Those who die on the march
shall renew their strength;
they shall rise upon wings as eagles;
they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint:
help us, Lord; help us, Lord, in your way.

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6. Those who wait on the Lord
shall renew their strength;
they shall rise upon wings as eagles;
they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint:
help us, Lord; help us, Lord, in your way.

Prayer of Adoration and Confession

God of Joy and Justice,
We will always rejoice in you.
You are our strength and our song.
You gather those who have strayed from you and welcome them back to your side.
You bring healing to those who are broken in body and spirit,
and draw close to those who walk alone.
Through your great love and mercy,
you transform us all into more than we ever thought we could be.
We will trust in you and not be afraid.
With joy, we sing of your glory and proclaim your saving power to those near and far.
Receive our prayers and praise this day, for you alone are worthy, God most holy.

**All knowing God,
We know perfect joy only comes through faith in you,
yet we seek it out in lesser ways.
In search of comfort, we indulge our desires.
In search of love, we hide from our faults.
In search of approval, we spend beyond our means.
Forgive us, O God, for seeking satisfaction in the wrong places.
Help us turn again to you, our true source of joy, and guide us to discover
what is honourable, just, and pleasing in your sight.**

God of truth and wisdom,
send us your Holy Spirit to teach us through the scriptures,
read and interpreted this day.
Open our eyes to understand your truth more fully,
and our hearts to live out your wisdom
in the example of Jesus, your Living Word. Amen.

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Assurance of Pardon

The good news of this Advent season
is forgiveness of sin and new life.
Let us commit our lives to Christ's way of hope and peace.

**Thanks be to the Advent God,
who comes among us,
setting us free to love and serve.**

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Scripture Reading Isaiah 40:1-11

- ⁴⁰ Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.
² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.
³ A voice cries out:
'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.
⁵ Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.'
⁶ A voice says, 'Cry out!' And I said, 'What shall I cry?'
All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field.
⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass.
⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever.
⁹ Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, 'Here is your God!'
¹⁰ See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.
¹¹ He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

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

Message Waiting for Strength

Early this week when the temperatures had plunged into the low twenties with a wind chill that dropped that down into the -30 to -35 range, I decided to make a pot of stew for dinner in the crock pot. As we got home each of us took in the smell of the simmering combination of meat, potatoes, carrots, onion, spices and more. As we sat down one said, "Oh! comfort food. So nice on such a cold day." Later on, we sat down on our recliners and put our feet up to get comfortable. And when it was time for bed and I snuggled up under the comforter, I gave thanks for the comfort of my bed that welcomed me to a night of rest.

We like to be comfortable. We joke in the church about people having their comfortable pews. Now of course, our wooden pews might not always feel that comfortable, especially if your back and butt are not good on hard seats, but the comfort comes from being in a familiar spot with the people you are used to having around you nearby.

I have seen the same thing happen at conferences. People find “their” spot and gravitate back to it and the people they are with, even if they have never met them before. Where and how we sit, whether in a restaurant, our vehicles, or our homes, has a lot to do with comfort. In September Ken bought me a new office chair as a gift, but he let me choose it. I spent a few minutes at Staples sitting in every one of the display chairs until I found the one that was most comfortable.

We talk about comfort zones. Sometime we like to stay in them, other times we choose to stretch ourselves and move out of our comfort zones. So comfort is a big part of culture and conversation.

We also talk about comforting those who grieve and that is likely the closest we are going to get to what is meant by comfort in the opening words of the scripture from Isaiah 40. “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.” When the prophet is talking about comfort it is not about how comfortable you are, it is about bringing comfort to souls that are tormented, weary, hurt.

You see, Isaiah 40 comes after 39 chapters of warning about judgement for sin and wandering away from God’s intent and purposes for human relationships. God’s intention was that people would flourish in loving, compassionate, grace-filled relationships with God and one another; that we would be image bearers of God. Instead, there was sinful behaviour where people did not care for those in need, didn’t concern themselves with God’s will, did what they wanted. At the time it seemed lives, worship, authority, all of it was more concerned with power than whether or not everyone had food to eat and a place to be safe. That is a watered-down Coles-notes version of the first 39 chapters of Isaiah, but it leads us to where we are in this passage. And it doesn’t seem to far from what is going on in our world even yet.

At this point in the writing, Jerusalem has fallen and is captive to an aggressive and brutal regime, they have been suffering for a long time under extreme conditions. Their identity and culture, worship and homeland, in the hands of another power. Their sinfulness had led them to a place of destruction. After years of oppression the people were waiting for God. Waiting for God’s comfort. Waiting for God’s strength to get them out of this mess. Into this circumstance Isaiah speaks the words, “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her time, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.” Their wait is over.

Then a voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord make straight in the desert a highway for our God...Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.” In other words, God

is on the way, it is time to prepare. And how does one prepare for God? Well in a way that sounds down right groveling to those of us who would prefer to make our own way in the world.

The prophet tells people, “You are like grass, or a flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades.” In other words, you have no power, you won’t last forever, the world does not revolve around you. Not really a message any of us is keen to hear. Most of us like to think we have some influence, power, or authority, but in comparison to God we are like grass or flowers.

Preparing the way for the Lord means acknowledging that we are sinful and asking for forgiveness. N.T. Wright, a respected biblical scholar, teacher, and preacher, defines sin as “the human failure of vocation, with all that this entails. When we sin, we abuse our calling, our privileges, and our possibilities. Our thoughts, words, and actions have consequences. They were meant to. That is what being image-bearers [of God] is all about. Sin risks replacing good consequences with damaging ones. Turning away from the source of life, we invite death to fill the vacuum.”¹

The Good News in Isaiah, in the Christmas story, in our lives, is that God does not leave us in our sin. Though we are like grass that withers or flowers that fade, God’s word stands forever and that Word is love. When we choose to acknowledge our weakness, our sinfulness, our desire to be our own power, and turn to God, in tenderness God comes with might to reclaim you, to love you, to give you life, to give you strength, the strength that you have been waiting for to endure and hold on, the strength you have been waiting for in order that change can happen.

The last line of this passage from Isaiah says, God will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.” This to mean that God will comfort you, God will love you, and God will give you the strength you have been waiting for to face your trials and tribulations.

In the last while, I have sat beside or prayed for and with people who were dying, people who have been suffering, people who are afraid of treatments, procedures, and surgeries, people who are hurting, people who are feeling lost, and my hope is always that God will bring them comfort and peace in the midst of their troubles. That people would know God with them through the power of the Holy Spirit in the minds, bodies, and spirit. I have learned this by following the lead of one such as Isaiah. Each of us has the opportunity to do that for others, to be the light in the darkness, the voice in the desert, the face, hands, and feet of God’s comfort and strength. We are not the Saviour, we are not God, but through our image bearing we can represent God’s comfort. And as people made in the image of God, loved by God, we can know and trust that God is on

¹ Wright, N.T. *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus’s Crucifixion*. Harper Collins Publishers. New York. 2016. P84.

the way, is already here, and will always be with us, to comfort, guide, and be our strength.

In Christ, with Christ, and through Christ. Amen.

Prayers of the People

O God, our Strength and Salvation,
we come before you with joy and thanksgiving
as the beauty of this season unfolds with starry nights and sparkling snow,
with faces that smile and generosity that grows
even after a long, hard year of pandemic struggles.
With the kindness of your Spirit,
awaken opportunities for understanding to emerge among those who have differed,
and refresh our community and congregation with joyful anticipation
that your gift to us in Christ can change everything.
Generous God, Send joy to the world again.

Tender God,
We delight in the joy you bring into our lives and neighbourhoods
through our life together in Christ, and through the love of family and friends.
These gifts have sustained us through stressful times and we thank you.
We pray for those who are finding it hard to be joyful this year,
remembering those facing illness in spirit, mind, or body,
and those waiting for diagnosis or treatment, as anxiety grows.

We pray for those who are lonely or in mourning,
and all who have been touched by tragedy and violence.

We pray for those searching for work, struggling with rising costs,
worried deeply about their security.

And we pray for those working to bring justice to the discouraged and defeated,
and those doing their best to care for the earth you love, despite the challenges.

Use us to bring joy to others through our friendship, generosity and understanding.
Generous God, Send joy to the world again.

We offer our prayers in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, our hope, our peace,
and our joy, who taught us to pray these words together:

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Lord's Prayer

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us, and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever and ever. Amen

Invitation to make an offering

We make our offering today with joyful hearts, anticipating our celebration of God's gift to us in Christ Jesus. Know that our gifts may touch lives in deep need this season with the joy we have received in Jesus' name.

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As we are people from different churches and places following this service. I encourage each of you to present your offering to God this day to your church community.

If you consider St. Andrew's your church, regardless of where you live, would like to learn more about St. Andrew's, get involved in our ministry and work, or make a donation toward the life and ministry of St. Andrew's Presbyterian, in Thunder Bay visit our website at <http://standrewspres-tbay.ca> for more information or to connect with me.

Hymn

Joyful, joyful, we adore thee

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1. Joyful, joyful we adore you,
God of glory, Lord of love.
Hearts unfold like flowers before you,
opening to the sun above.
Melt the clouds of sin and sadness;
drive the dark of doubt away;
giver of immortal gladness,
fill us with the light of day.
2. All your works with joy surround you;
earth and heaven reflect your rays;
stars and angels sing around you,
centre of unbroken praise.
Field and forest, vale and mountain,
flowery meadow, flashing sea,
chanting bird and flowing fountain,
join to praise you joyfully.
3. You are giving and forgiving,
ever blessing, ever blessed,
wellspring of the joy of living,
ocean depth of happy rest,
God Creator, Christ our Saviour,
all are yours who live in love.
Teach us how to love our neighbour;
Lift us to your joy above.
4. Morning stars, awake the chorus;
mortals, join with every part,
for what joy is set before us
as Christ's love joins heart to heart!
Ever singing, march we onward,
victors in the midst of strife;
joyful music leads us sunward,
in the triumph song of life

Words: public domain

Benediction

With joy may you go from this time of worship!

The living God is among us and within us.

The laughter of the saving Christ,
the cheerfulness of the lively Spirit,

and the joy, comfort and strength of the everlasting God, be with you now and always.

Adapted from a prayer written by Bruce Prewer, and posted on Bruce Prewer's Home Page. <http://www.bruceprewer.com/>