

Come, Let Us Adore Him: Presence

Rev. Cameron D St. Michael – December 15 2024

3rd Sunday of Advent

Readings: Zephaniah 3:14-20; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18 NRSVue

Reflection: Isaiah 12

Greeting: I will trust and won't be afraid. The Lord is my strength and my shield; he has become my salvation. You will draw water with joy from the springs of salvation. Thank the Lord; call on God's name; proclaim God's deeds among the peoples; declare that God's name is exalted. Sing to the Lord, who has done glorious things; proclaim this throughout all the earth. (Isaiah 12)

Advent Candle Lighting: We light this candle of joy as a sign of our commitment to be present to ourselves, our friends, our families, and our neighbors that in sharing our vulnerable lives we might share in the glorious joy of God's salvation together. Come, let us adore him, Christ our Lord.

Prayer: Merciful God, you sent the prophets as your messengers to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation. Give us grace to listen to their warnings and to let our lives be changed through your grace. Help us once more to celebrate the nativity, and that we may rejoice in the coming of Jesus Christ our redeemer. Help us as we reflect on the Preparations and the Passion of Advent so that we might embrace the Presence and Promise of the Christ who comes. May you bring us together to worship in Joy, remembering the comfort of Home as we prepare to look Ahead. Come, let us adore him, Christ our Lord. Amen.

Reflection: Isaiah 12:2-6

² Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and will not be afraid, for the Lord is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. ³ With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. ⁴ And you will say on that day: "Give thanks to the Lord; call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted. ⁵ Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. ⁶ Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel."
(Isaiah 12:2-6 NRSVue*)

We read the words of Luke, and we hear of God's salvation. That we should seek God so that we can find joy. We hear of being aware of God's presence in your life. That we should praise God for being with us. What is it you are praying about as we reflect on the birth of our Savior? Who can you lift up in your prayers this week? How are you present with others during this Advent? How is it that you will come to celebrate the birth of our Savior this year?

Prayer: Eternal God, we praise you for your presence with us. You sent your light into the world to dispel the darkness. We pray you will help us to be present ourselves in our celebration of Jesus Christ, our true light. We thank you for your many blessings in this Advent season. We seek you in our prayers this day. We lift up our many joys that we may celebrate with you. We lift up our sorrows that you may wipe away our tears. We lift up both the prayers we have spoken aloud together and the silent pleadings that we hold in our hearts. For we know that you are never far from us and that you hear every prayer we raise to you. May we know your presence in our celebrations and our sorrows, in both laughter and tears. May we remember that you are always with us. May you grant us hope, peace, joy, and love as we celebrate a child born and laid in a manger. May our hearts be overflowing with your steadfast love and faithfulness all the days of our lives. And it is in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Now let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Sermon:

Our scripture readings for today come from the New Revised Standard Version Bible Updated Edition. Our first reading is from Zephaniah chapter 3, verses 14 through 20.

¹⁴ Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! ¹⁵ The Lord has taken away the judgments against you; he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. ¹⁶ On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: "Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. ¹⁷ The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing ¹⁸ as on a day of festival." I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. ¹⁹ I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. ²⁰ At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the Lord. (Zephaniah 3:14-20 NRSVue)*

Our next reading is from Philippians chapter 4, verse 4 through 7.

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵ Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:4-7 NRSVue)*

Our final reading is from Luke chapter 3, verse 7 through 18.

⁷ John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?” ⁸ Therefore, bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹ Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” ¹⁰ And the crowds asked him, “What, then, should we do?” ¹¹ In reply he said to them, “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise.” ¹² Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” ¹³ He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” ¹⁴ Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.” ¹⁵ As the people were filled with expectation and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶ John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” ¹⁸ So with many other exhortations he proclaimed the good news to the people.
(Luke 3:7-18 NRSVue*)

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

This week, as part of our Advent celebration, we look at presence. And I don't mean the presents that you find under the tree. I mean our ability to be present in the moment and to be aware of what's happening around us. The type of presence that I'm talking about is our ability to be with each other and to be aware of how we interact and aware of our surroundings and aware of expectations. It's part of the way that we prepare ourselves during Advent for the coming of Christ. Our ability to be present in the moment helps us to appreciate the birth of our Savior. Our presence can be felt in many ways and understood in many ways. Partly, we understand it by the presence of the Holy Spirit with us to guide us and lead us and to help us be present. It also is the way that we are able to be present in the situations that we find ourselves in when we are following Christ.

We hear a few different ways that this works in our readings today. With the prophet Zephaniah, we hear of rejoicing. We hear of being present in those celebrations for what God has done while also recognizing how God changes things. We are called to celebrate and to sing songs because God is in our midst. You might say God is present with us and that is something that we celebrate. That we prepare for is the presence of our Emmanuel, God with us. We hear about the Lord being with us in our midst. That we should not fear because God's love is with us. That he watches over us and protects us. That God will deal with those who seek to oppress others. Part of what we recognize is who it is God is lifting up. The lame and the outcast will have their shame turned into praise. That God gathers us in and brings us home because we have home with the Lord. Recognizing who it is God looks out for helps us

to remember what it is Christ calls us to do, and the type of people Christ calls us to be. That we are not to side with those who would beat people down, but we are called to lift up the least and the last. And the birth of a child born and laid in a manger reminds us of that. Because when we remember who showed up at his birth, it isn't the great and powerful. It was shepherds who watched their flocks. We remember God's love reversing fortunes, knowing the first will be last and the last will be first.

We hear also of this kind of ability to be present in the moment in what Paul says in the letter to the Philippians. It's pretty clear what Paul wants us to do. "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I will say rejoice." How do we celebrate God being with us? We are gentle with the people that are around us. We let ourselves find comfort in the Lord and not be anxious. That we pray about everything, and we give thanks for everything. That we let the peace of Christ guide us so that we find peace in the presence of Christ. Because of Christ's peace we may be fully present with each other, and we may rejoice because we find a way to work together to celebrate God together. Because we recognize what God has done. We become aware so that we never forget about all the good that God has done for us so that we always give thanks.

Now, our presence in Luke might feel a little off at first. We think about this being a Sunday of joy, but John the Baptist starts by calling the people that have come to him a brood of vipers. John doesn't have very nice things to say at first, but John recognizes why they are there. He tells them to bear fruits worthy of repentance. That we shouldn't rely on things that are outside of us. That we should not rely on our heritage. That we should not rely on something that is not our own doing. We shouldn't say that we are good and that we have done the right thing if we have done nothing. That if we can't produce good fruit bearing witness to Christ, we might as well be tossed away like a tree that has no purpose. Now, we could take offense to that and simply say we don't need to listen to John because he's not being polite. But the truth isn't always polite. If we are being present with John, we can recognize the truth in what John is saying. That is what happened with the people coming to see him. The crowd is asking what they should be doing. John teaches that they should be generous and kind. John gives some incredibly solid advice to the people gathering there at the river. That if you have two coats, give one to your neighbor who is in need. If you have food and your neighbor doesn't you should share what you have with them. It's that simple. Tax collectors come to John, and tax collectors aren't liked all that much. What does John tell them? Just collect what you're supposed to collect. Don't get extra, don't try to pad your own pockets, just do what you're supposed to do. Soldiers want to know what they should do. John tells them that they shouldn't abuse people. Don't extort money. Don't make threats and accusations. Don't threaten people with the power that you have, do what is right and what is good. But for the people to ask that question, they had to be present there. They had to be aware of what John was teaching and accept John's presence with them. Because they don't simply ask how to do it, they acknowledge the truth in what John is saying and then ask how they should respond.

The people think John might be the Messiah. They think his teachings are so great that maybe he is the one. John clears up that confusion quickly. He isn't the Messiah. But his teachings will prepare others for the one who is coming. It is that kind of preparation that I think

about during Advent, because I often reflect on the ways that I want to serve Christ better. And it makes me think of the times when maybe I didn't follow those simple things John said we could do. That maybe I didn't share food when I had some and someone else had none. Maybe I didn't think about the fact that I was rather well off in comparison to others. Maybe it's that I didn't contemplate all the good that I could do with the position that I had. It's important that we think about those things because they help us to serve Christ better. Because one of the things that happens when we reflect on our presence is that to be aware means understanding what's going on around us. It means understanding the situations we find ourselves in and understanding the best we can the people that we are there with. Because the only way to know if somebody is in need is for them to be seen and heard and understood. The only way we can support each other in our needs is to be present and aware of what's going on around us, so that our shared presence is one that is beneficial to all. Because Christ calls us to serve one another. It is that act of servant leadership that makes the church so special. Because instead of looking for how others can help us, we are always looking for what it is we are capable of doing right now. I feel that's an important thing for us to be able to explore. Because we need to be able to be present in the moment to understand each other and understand the world around us. If all we ever do is think about what's five steps ahead, we will always trip on the step that is right in front of us. If we are always making a five-year plan, we will never get there because year one causes us to panic. And I'm not saying we can't make future plans. I am saying that if we cannot be present with Christ right here and right now, we won't know how to be present with him at any point in the future. Because we will always be looking down the road when he is right next to us. Because he is not God standing far off down the path. He is not God two counties over. This is not God somewhere beyond the horizon. We celebrate our Emmanuel, our God with us. With us in this moment. And if we are going to be with him, we have to be in this moment.

So, this is my thought for you today: be present in your prayers. Be thankful for the people around you. Be thankful for a God who looks after all his people. Be thankful for the opportunity to change your heart and your life to follow Christ better. And be thankful for this season of change, this season of preparation, so that we may better serve our risen Savior. That we may be present in this and all moments with him. That we may be aware of what it is we need to do. Let us celebrate the presence of Christ in our lives and our ability to be present in Christ. And let us celebrate our Emmanuel, God with us, born and laid in a manger, so that we could love and be loved. So that we could forgive and be forgiven. So that we could be present with each other right here, right now, experiencing a life in Christ together. So come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord. Amen.

Prayer of Confession and Pardon: God, you are with us even when we turn away from you. Guide us back into your loving arms. Judge us not by the perfection of our actions but show us mercy and love. We have strayed like lost sheep from your ways, failing both in what we have done and what we have failed to do. Bring us back into your fold that you may guide us and lead us in all things. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy upon us and forgive us. May we walk in your love and trust your ways. Amen.

Almighty God have mercy upon you. May the Lord forgive all your sins and lift you up in love through Jesus Christ our Lord, and by the Holy Spirit keep you in life eternal. Amen.

Offering: If you are so moved to make an offering, you may send it to the church treasurer, or you may send it to the PO Box listed below. We are still the church, and the church still needs your support to keep doing all the important work that we do.

Lord's Prayer

Dismissal with Blessing: May we go forth reflecting God's love in our lives as we go forth in the peace of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our Current Series – Come, Let Us Adore Him

This year our Advent series is “Come, Let Us Adore Him.” We reflect on all that we do to remember the gift of our Savior through old stories, favorite songs, and many traditions. This season we reflect on the Preparations and the Passion of Advent so that we might embrace the Presence and Promise of the Christ who comes. And through it all, we will gather to worship in Joy, remembering the comfort of Home as we prepare to look Ahead. So, come, let us adore him.

12/1: Preparations	12/8: Passion	12/15: Presence	12/22: Promise
12/24: Joy	12/29: Home	1/5: Ahead	

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752 Walnut
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Worship 10:30am

Toledo UMC

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Worship 8:15am

Etna UMC

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