

Signs of the Season: Signs and Truths

Rev. Cameron D St.Michael –December 14 2025

3rd Sunday of Advent

Readings: Isaiah 35:1-10; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11 NRSVUE

Reflection: Luke 1

Call to Worship: With all my heart I glorify the Lord! In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior. He shows mercy to everyone, from one generation to the next, who honors him as God. He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty-handed. Praise the Lord! (Luke 1)

Advent Candle Lighting: Today, we join our voices with the prophet Isaiah, who calls us to live in the joy of the truth of God's salvation. We light this candle of joy as a sign of the Truth that sets us free to live in joy as we wait and work for the day when all creation will flourish together.

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 signs of the season. Help us to understand your timing and truth as we hear stories of faithfulness throughout Advent. Guide us as we celebrate your glory and power as we share in this Christmas journey. May you help us to greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ, our Emmanuel, so that we may know peace and light. Amen.

Reflection: Luke 1

⁴⁶ And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowly state of his servant. Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed, ⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name; ⁵⁰ indeed, his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. ⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. ⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; ⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴ He has come to the aid of his child Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, ⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever." (Luke 1:46-55 NRSVUE)*

We read the words of Luke, and we hear Mary speak God's praises. She recounts how she is blessed in the Lord. She also speaks of all the good that she knows from God. That the Lord will feed the hungry and lift up the lowly. We hear of how God loves justice and mercy. That we find joy in our God. How do you remember these things as you prepare your heart for our Emmanuel, God with us? How do you think about joy as we await the birth of our Savior? How do we prepare ourselves for hope? What are your prayers as we reflect on the birth of our Savior? Who can you lift up in your prayers this week? In what ways are you preparing for Christmas? What traditions do you hold dear? 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 in our preparations for the coming 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 Updated Edition Bible. Our first reading is from Isaiah chapter 35 verses 1 through 10.

¹ The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus ² it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and shouting. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God. ³ Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees. ⁴ Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you." ⁵ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be opened; ⁶ then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert; ⁷ the burning sand shall become a pool and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp; the grass shall become reeds and rushes. ⁸ A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. ⁹ No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. ¹⁰ And the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. (Isaiah 35:1-10 NRSVUE)*

Our second reading is from James chapter 5, verses 7 through 10.

⁷ Be patient, therefore, brothers and sisters, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. ⁸ You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. ⁹ Brothers and sisters, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! ¹⁰ As an example of suffering and patience, brothers and sisters, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. (James 5:7-10 NRSVUE)*

Our final reading is from Matthew chapter 11, verses 2 through 11.

*²When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples ³and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" ⁴Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those with a skin disease are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. ⁶And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." ⁷As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸What, then, did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. ⁹What, then, did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' ¹¹"Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist, yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."
(Matthew 11:2-11 NRSVUE*)*

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

This third Sunday of Advent we look at signs and truths as we look to the signs of the season. This is an interesting one because I think it means being able to accept the truth of Christ and being able to share it in a way that shows that we fully understand all of what that truth is. Because it is a truth that speaks to the way that we should treat one another. Because it is a truth that should inspire us to love, to be generous, to care, to be kind. Because it is a truth that comes from the light. A truth that makes us better. We hear this in different ways in our readings for today.

Our main one comes from the gospel of Matthew, but has Isaiah tied up in it. In Matthew, John the Baptist sends some disciples to go ask a question of Jesus. John is in prison at this point. The question he wants to ask is, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" And the reply that we get is one that highlights using the truth of the situation. Jesus gives a reply that doesn't just say yes or no to the question, but answers in a way that highlights the truth of who Jesus is. Jesus is basically saying that John will understand when he hears what is happening. That he will not say that he is the one to come, but he will demonstrate the truth of who he is by his actions. Jesus asks them to tell John that the blind receive sight, the lame walk, that deaf hear, that people are being healed, and that the poor have received good news. Now, we might think that this isn't an answer, but Jesus knows that it will be an answer for John. These are all ways of telling John exactly what he wants to know. Because they are all signs that should come from the Messiah. And so instead of just answering, Jesus points to the truth of the situation and says, if John wants to know, tell him what I'm doing and he will know.

We can understand part of that truth when we look to our reading from Isaiah. Because it's all about what shall happen. It also gets to the truth that Jesus is speaking of when he sends that message back to John. Because we know that John was someone who is saying in the desert, make a highway for our God. And in Isaiah, we hear that the wilderness and the dry land shall be glad. But when we hear about what is to come, "the eyes of the blind shall be

opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be opened; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.” Isaiah gives us everything that Jesus has them send back to John. Because he knows that John will understand the truth of it. Because he will know what this means. That John spoke the truth of God and will know the words of Isaiah when he hears them and know what they mean. That the Messiah is here.

It's at this point that Jesus speaks the truth of John. Because he wants people to know that John had an important message to bring. That John was preparing his way. Jesus asks who they thought they were going to see when they went to see John. That he wasn't someone dressed in soft robes. He wasn't a reed shaken by the wind. He was a prophet. And it's important that we understand what a prophet is. We sometimes get mixed up and think a prophet is somebody that predicts the future. That is not the case at all. A prophet is someone who speaks the truth of God. That is who John the Baptist was. Very much so. He spoke God's truth and spoke to the one who was coming, the Messiah, Jesus Christ. John shared that truth with others. Jesus here is pointing out that they should have known John was a prophet because John spoke God's truth. And I find this fascinating because it speaks to the type of truth that we are called to recognize. Because in recognizing that truth, it means that we acknowledge what it is we see and what it is we hear. That we let that knowledge inform us. Here we see that John recognizes Jesus. When he asks if he is the Messiah, the message he sends back is, look, I am doing all the Messiah would do. Who do you think I am? And I think that speaks much better than just saying, yes, it's me. Because he lets the truth speak for itself.

That's what we're encouraged to do in James. That we should be patient, observing what time it is. That farmers wait for the early and the late rains before harvesting. We also must then be patient. That we should not grumble and judge each other. But we should be an example to others. And the prophets are given as an example of those who spoke in the name of the Lord. The prophets are the ones who spoke God's truth, so we should learn from their example. Because the prophets are not always accepted because the truth is not always accepted. We see that with John the Baptist having to ask about Jesus from prison. That's still true today. People would rather hear an encouraging lie than a difficult truth. People like when a lie matches what they already expect. They do not like when a truth contradicts what they already believe. But part of Advent is that we are called to embrace the truth even when it's difficult. Because part of what we embrace is the way that the world changes when we seek the truth. Because of the birth of our Savior, the Messiah, our Emmanuel, God with us. To help us to see and embrace the truth. And that can be difficult. The truth can be a hard thing to take in.

I was thinking about this because I was thinking about a Christmas movie. I thought it would be a great example for when we speak of how difficult the truth can be. The way sometimes God has to open our eyes to how wrong we can be. And I was thinking of “It's a Wonderful Life.” Because in that movie, George Bailey begins to doubt himself. In doing so, he begins to doubt the truth. Because George Bailey thinks the world would have been better off without him. And so, to show him how wrong he is, God lets George see what the world really would be like without his presence. It's not at all what he expected. Because he had underestimated the kind of life he had lived and how he had helped people. That truth was a shock to him. Because he had convinced himself of the lie that his life didn't matter. And I bring this up because I think we can all fall prey to that kind of thinking at times. We can all struggle with truths that are hard. That's what we hear in our readings. The people weren't sure what to

make of John, thinking he was just some guy out in the wilderness. But even when a highway is made for the path to God, it can still be hard for people to see the truth and to understand the way. Because people get scared. People have doubts. People have fears.

What Christmas reminds me of and what we prepare our hearts for in Advent is that the truth will set us free. Because the truth will strengthen us when we can embrace the light. We can be strong and not fear. Because we know that God will be with us. We can be patient. We can be kind. And we can be generous. We can help one another with love and compassion. We can do all that we can to help and to serve one another. I think this is something important when we think about signs and truths. Because the truth is that we too often judge ourselves harshly and doubt the difference that we can make. But I can tell you I see that difference in all that we do. And Christmas makes it especially clear. Because I have seen the difference it can make with one person being generous. It makes a difference in the eyes of a child who might not have had a Christmas without that generosity. I can see it in the generosity of one person making a donation so that someone has a winter coat when without that person's generosity they may have had no way to stay warm. And the thing is that when I see it here, I don't see just one person's generosity. I see the generosity of the whole church. I see it in food that goes out to children in need. I see it in people who are fed receiving the love of Christ in their hearts. Because people dared to care. Because the truth is everything that we do to help another person is worth it. That is the truth of Christmas. That even when it feels like maybe we are not reaching as many people as we would like to, if one person's life is changed, it was worth it. If one person knows the love of Christ because of your care, it is worth it. If one child is fed, it is worth it. If one person goes to bed feeling like they matter, it is worth it.

And that is the truth. Because we often judge ourselves too harshly. But what we do matters. And we do so much. It inspires me to do more. For me, that's part of the miracle of Christmas. Part of the signs of the season is not that we have doubt about what we do, but that we are inspired to be more and to do more in Christ when we reflect on his birth. When we reflect on his life, his death, and his resurrection, we remember all that he is to us. And it inspires us once again to do more and be more because of His love in our lives. That the Holy Spirit will always guide us and lead us to where we need to be. And our Heavenly Father will watch over us. So let us do all that we can and be all that we can as we prepare our hearts for the coming of our Emmanuel, our God with us. That we remember the birth of a child born and laid in a manger to give us hope in the truth. That we may believe in the truth and that we may share that truth joyfully. May the joy of the season inspire us all to love more deeply and to care more deeply in Jesus' name. 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 eternal life. 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 – Signs of the Season

Our Advent series is "Signs of the Season." Advent is the start of a new year of waiting, but it is an active and watchful waiting, observing the signs we see. We tap into the world's longing for redemption, salvation, and transformation. We look forward to the time of God's will being done on earth as it is in heaven. All of earth is waiting for this fulfillment. In worship, we can see the signs of the nearness of Emmanuel, God with us.

11/30: Signs and Times	12/7: Signs and Stories	12/14: Signs and Truths
12/21: Signs and Faithfulness	12/24: Signs and Glory	12/28: Signs and Powers
1/4: Signs and Journeys		

Neoga Grace UMC

752 Walnut
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Worship 10:30am

Toledo UMC

Madison & Ohio St
PO Box 267
Toledo, IL 62468
Worship 8:15am

Etna UMC

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