

Written Service for W&R Sunday 13 December 2020 (Advent 3)

Intro/Call to Worship

A warm welcome to you all to our service on this 3rd Sunday in Advent. During this lead up to all the joyous days of Christmas, we have time to contemplate about the many things that involve us and our lives in our relationships with God and others and the way ahead.

On the third Sunday of Advent we remember the message of John the Baptist to change our ways and prepare for the way of the Lord. He called for religiosity to be less narrow, to think less about rules and more about making sure all are valued.

As Methodist people, we are called to care for ourselves and those around us, to learn more about our faith and to practice hospitality and generosity. We light the third candle to commit ourselves to relearning what putting our faith into practice means, that through our conversations about what we believe, our churches will be centres of care, sensitivity and welcome for all, and to commit ourselves to be prepared to change when we are confronted by God's word brought to us.

God who comes to us in Jesus, we thank you today for those who remind us to look after ourselves and others, for our bible study groups and times of reflection, and for your call to be inclusive as you open your arms to include everyone.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.
Jesus, Saviour of all, come to us again.
Amen.

And now we sing,

Hymn STF 180 O come, O come Immanuel

O come, O come, Immanuel,
and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here
until the Son of God appear:

Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel
shall come to you, O Israel.

O come, O come, O Lord of might
who to your tribes, on Sinai's height,
in ancient times did give the law
in cloud, and majesty, and awe:

Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel
shall come to you, O Israel.

O come, O Rod of Jesse, free
your own from Satan's tyranny;
from depths of hell your people save,
and give them victory o'er the grave:

Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel
shall come to you, O Israel.

O come, O Key of David, come,
and open wide our heavenly home;
make safe the way that leads on high,
and close the path to misery:

Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel
shall come to you, O Israel.

O come, O Day-spring, come and cheer
our spirits by your advent here;
disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
and death's dark shadows put to flight:

Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel
shall come to you, O Israel.

Latin, 18th century, based on the ancient Advent Antiphons translated by John Mason Neale (1811-1866)

Reading Isaiah 61: 1-4

Good News for the Oppressed

61 The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is upon me,
for the LORD has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to comfort the brokenhearted
and to proclaim that captives will be released
and prisoners will be freed.^[a]

² He has sent me to tell those who mourn
that the time of the LORD's favor has come,^[b]
and with it, the day of God's anger against their
enemies.

³ To all who mourn in Israel,^[c]
he will give a crown of beauty for ashes,
a joyous blessing instead of mourning,
festive praise instead of despair.
In their righteousness, they will be like great oaks
that the LORD has planted for his own glory.

⁴ They will rebuild the ancient ruins,
repairing cities destroyed long ago.
They will revive them,
though they have been deserted for many
generations.

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Short talk

These words from Isaiah, inevitably read as they often are just before Christmas, are often seen through the lens of the coming Christ child. It is

Christ who has come to set us free; to heal us and help us, to carry us and to bring us comfort and joy. Reading it in that way certainly does produce a feelgood factor and especially now within the pandemic, we really need to hear of the hope and the promise that Christmas carries at its heart. But of course, you can always read this passage from a slightly different viewpoint. We can read this as not only being about God's amazing longing to heal the broken human condition but as a challenge to all of God's people to not only be the recipients of that reconciling love that that leads to Jesus' birth, but to be the bearers of that love in our time and our place.

If our aim as Christians is to grow more like Jesus as we get to know him better, then surely the description we take from Isaiah to be that of Christ is one way of working out some of the things that we might do to become more like Jesus. So, if we turn the statement into a set of questions, what sort of things is Isaiah asking of us? What are we saying in God's name, that helps to raise up the downtrodden? What are we doing to work with God to bring about healing and justice? How are we working to bring peace? To set prisoners free? Who are our hands reaching out to and our hearts opening up to? Isaiah's words are both wonderful and challenging! Please keep this all in mind for now, because we yet have the gospel reading to add into the pot.

Prayers

There is a response – when I say.
Lord, you are an amazing God. Your response is “**And we praise you.**” Let us pray:

Lord, you are an amazing God.
And we praise you.

We look out upon the cities, towns and villages knowing that this is where you have set us down.
Help us to take the good news to the poor and comfort the broken-hearted.
Help us to proclaim God's freedom to all and his favour to those who mourn.
Lord, in this current pandemic,
spread your joyous blessing
to blow away our despair.
Plant us, like great oaks,
to proclaim your greater glory.

Lord, you are an amazing God.
And we praise you.

We see our footprints in the sand or the muddy path.
And we are reminded that you are always with us.

You are involved in everything both the macro and micro,
we cannot comprehend the vastness of the universe which you have made, and we find it so hard to understand that you should want a relationship with each one of us, we who are infinitesimal dots on the landscape of your timeline.
And yet Lord, it is our privilege that we can call you father and know that we are loved with a love, far greater than we can ever imagine.

Lord, you are an amazing God.
And we praise you.

Lord as we walk through this time of Advent with you,
we think of those prophets who foretold the coming of your son, Jesus Christ.
Today we think of Isaiah and of John the Baptist, of both their words and actions.
Help us to understand their words,
As we anticipate another Christmas
And again, rejoice in the birth of a little baby in a manger.
Lord, let us not be complacent about such wonderful things,
but surprise us, in your energy and bringing of new life.
Lead us to a place where people will live together in peace and harmony,
Where Christ will once again come in glory.

Lord, you are an amazing God.
And we praise you.

And our prayer of confession

Lord,
Forgive us that we have lost our sense of expectation of you.
Content to simply get by, settling for the way things are,
for failing to believe that you can change our lives or transform the world.

Forgive us that we have been too full of our own expectations.
For believing we know everything.
For pushing square pegs into round holes.
For presuming that we know what you're thinking.

Forgive us for our limited vision of life.
For the limitations that we place upon things.
Restricted by the narrowness of our thinking.
Forgive us for reacting to the immediate rather than looking at the long term, eternal perspective.

Lord we thank you that you are a gracious and forgiving God.
In this period of Advent we thank you for the gift of your son.
And we thank you that in his death our sins were forgiven.
Again we thank you for your overwhelming love and grace.

Lord always help us to gain a new sense of expectation
and to gladly respond to your will.
Help us now to catch sight of the wonder of your coming in Christ.
And build our lives around you.
Amen

and now we say the prayer that Jesus taught us:....**Our Father....**

Reading John 1:6-8, 19-28

⁶ There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. ⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

¹⁹ Now this was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders^[a] in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. ²⁰ He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, 'I am not the Messiah.'

²¹ They asked him, 'Then who are you? Are you Elijah?'

He said, 'I am not.'

'Are you the Prophet?'

He answered, 'No.'

²² Finally they said, 'Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?'

²³ John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, 'I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, "Make straight the way for the Lord."^[b]

²⁴ Now the Pharisees who had been sent ²⁵ questioned him, 'Why then do you baptise if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?'

²⁶ 'I baptise with^[c] water,' John replied, 'but among you stands one you do not know. ²⁷ He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.'

²⁸ This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptising.

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**Hymn STF 175 Light of the world,
you stepped down**

Light of the world,
you stepped down into darkness,
opened my eyes, let me see
beauty that made this heart adore you,
hope of a life spent with you.

So here I am to worship,
here I am to bow down,
here I am to say that you're my God,
and you're altogether lovely,
altogether worthy,
altogether wonderful to me.

King of all days
oh so highly exalted,
glorious in heaven above.
Humbly you came
to the earth you created,
all for love's sake became poor.

So here I am to worship,
here I am to bow down,
here I am to say that you're my God,
and you're altogether lovely,
altogether worthy,
altogether wonderful to me.

And I'll never know how much it cost
to see my sin upon that cross.
And I'll never know how much it cost
to see my sin upon that cross.

So here I am to worship,
here I am to bow down,
here I am to say that you're my God,
and you're altogether lovely,
altogether worthy,
altogether wonderful to me.

Tim Hughes

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Sermon

As I started to write this, the first pin-pricks of light in this pandemic were beginning to appear – 3 possible vaccinations, all with good results. Now one pinprick has turned into a light at the far end of the tunnel – a long way away but on the move towards us, having received approval. However, the light of the others is still minuscule because they have to go through various other checks before they can be approved for use. We are still not out of the woods yet and there may be more problems/lockdowns to confront before we come out of the other side. But now there is definite hope together with the other great hope that is in Jesus Christ, with Christmas approaching fast. As Christians who hold onto hope, even in the darkest, shadowy valleys; where can we point, in

order to help people find the anchor and security they need, which will lead them into their finding comfort and strength and peace and joy? I would hope almost a rhetorical question.

The good news of the coming of Christ, talks far more to the life that there is beyond the things that so many are tempted to hold onto and set store by in the present – here and now! Think of those known to you, think of the TV screens and news over the past 11 months. A lot of the time, I would suggest, items of news seem to revolve around relationships in some way, shape or form. A lot has been said about those in the medical and caring professions, especially those who have given their lives in this pandemic, whilst looking after others. No greater gift is there but to lay down one's life for others. We see and hear the stories of those "trapped" in care homes unable to have any contact with other family members. You can see loneliness even though they are among another group of people because those they love can't get up close and personal to show and demonstrate that love. The gift of family relationships and friendships is wonderful, but I think it is worth saying that the gift of being loved into a relationship with God through Christ can top that!

For me, today's gospel reading is interesting for a number of points. Firstly, please note that the translation does not use John the Baptist but simply John. This is a way of emphasising John's primary task – it was not to baptise with water but it was to point towards the Light, towards the Messiah – someone whose straps on his sandals John was not even worthy to untie. Christ was the true light – John denied being many things, including the Messiah, but continued to make the point that he was preparing the way for the Light of the world.

To paraphrase Psalm 121 – I look to the hills from whence cometh my light! God – Christ is light. If we spend more time with Christ, then hopefully we may start to understand the light and that may rub off on us - and I don't mean like a genie and his lamp. As we get to know God in Christ – as we build our relationship with him - then the light that comes from Christ reflects from us (or is that in us?). Spending time with God has to be beneficial in enabling us to balance out our lives. It helps our understanding which in turn helps us to give meaning to some of the things that we do. To the point that the light directs and gives us greater purpose in our lives. The light of God shines out from our faces – Oh that that were always true. With the problems we seem to create for ourselves, it amazes me that anybody sees the light shining out of any of us – although I

think that may be a more personal view of my own predicaments.

So putting my personal thoughts aside, how do we create something better out of the dark place that we have been in and still are in for, give or take, the whole of the year. The lack of being able to enjoy physical contact apart from your personal bubble has certainly restricted personal abilities to do things. Getting close alongside is not one of the phrases I would have used for this year. Covid-19 has made it more difficult to connect with those who mourn and those suffering physically or mentally. Could it be that this year we should spend more time rejoicing in what we have rather than what we might get? As we count our blessings and give thanks what we have, it is worth remembering that we still have much more than many others. We still have the good news of Christ to impart to anyone who will listen. If we are financially well off, we can of course make donations to agencies, that are able to work with people here or across the world. Closer to home we can donate gifts of food to local food banks and you still can volunteer your services to some agencies – You can still give your time for others, even if you don't necessarily make personal contact with them.

Now that our churches have reopened to a certain extent, is there anything extra we can do to ensure that the church provides a welcome to all who visit? – don't necessarily leave it to the few. Do show your interest and share your love of Jesus where you can. Even better – can you think of ways to expand our Christmas vision - to light up the darkened corners of this world around us. We are still restricted in visiting indoors but there is always the telephone or the short chat over a garden wall and appropriate six-foot distance on front drive having knocked on the door! It is still matter of letting people know you care and especially those living on their own who must feel incredibly lonely at the moment. If you are computer literate, then there is always Zoom or face-to-face time in many facets. In everything it is still the personal touch that works – even if it is not physical touching.

It is worth noting that when God wanted to send a messenger foretelling of Jesus being the Light of the world, he chose a human being. John was sent to proclaim the Light. One thing touched me from the passages today, that we are not passengers when it comes to God's mission in the world. We are asked by God to be his co-workers. Christ came to us, to work with us and through us. Why then, should we not be the ones to point to the Light of the world as well.

Today we started with that passage from Isaiah which explains the Light. The 4th gospel challenges us to do as John did and use every opportunity to point to the Light that dispels every darkness – especially at Christmas in a 2020 which has dimmed the lives of so many. This combination of Isaiah and John is pointing out the Light of this world for all to be able to learn, understand, receive, and react. Christ is the light of the world – your world, my world, our world. Our role is to work within that Light and pass it on to as many others as possible.

Amen.

Prayers for others

There is a response - when I say; "Light of the world you stepped down into darkness" - Your response is "**Open our eyes, let us see**"

Let us pray:

Creator God,

We thank you, for your son – the Light of the world.

We thank you to, for those in every generation who have faithfully pointed to him and who have spread his light in even the darkest times.

Lord Jesus,

May we find the courage to point to the hope and comfort and peace you offer, especially in times of difficulty and sorrow.

May we witness to your love and your goodness, your presence and your compassion.

Light of the world you stepped down into darkness

Open our eyes, let us see

And thank you –

for the family of your people meeting throughout the world this day.

We know that you Lord Jesus, can take the tiniest spark and fan it into a raging fire.

Give us courage and the desire to seek to serve you as best we can – and in that service may we reflect the life you lived.

Light of the world you stepped down into darkness

Open our eyes, let us see

We offer you our prayers – those who struggle with this season.

We think the bereaved, we think of those who cannot afford to celebrate as they might want.

We think of those with no one to share a table

we think of those who are physically or mentally not well enough to enjoy the world around them.

Light of the world you stepped down into darkness

Open our eyes, let us see

Lord God you understand and share tears and silences, disappointments and regrets. Bring your comfort, fill with your strength and grant all your peace.

Light of the world you stepped down into darkness

Open our eyes, let us see

We pray too, for places in the world where conflict and violence are rife...

For places where nature has been harsh – and where we have been thoughtless in caring for your creation:

give us greater concern for one another and an even greater willingness to do whatever we can for each other and for the world itself.

So that we may work with you, Lord God, to make this world, the world you intended it to be

–

a world where people care and love and laugh a world where justice rains and peace is evident and where all know they belong.

Light of the world you stepped down into darkness

Open our eyes, let us see

We ask all this in the name of your son, Jesus Christ, our Saviour.

Amen.

Final hymn STF 706 Longing for light, we wait in darkness

Longing for light, we wait in darkness.
Longing for truth, we turn to you.
Make us your own, your holy people,
light for the world to see.

Christ, be our light!
Shine in our hearts.
Shine through the darkness.
Christ, be our light!
Shine in your Church gathered today.

Longing for peace, our world is troubled.
Longing for hope, many despair.
Your word alone has power to save us.
Make us your living voice.

Chorus

Longing for food, many are hungry.
Longing for water, many still thirst.
Make us your bread, broken for others,
shared until all are fed.

Chorus

Longing for shelter, many are homeless.
Longing for warmth, many are cold.
Make us your building, sheltering others,
walls made of living stone.

Chorus

Many the gifts, many the people,
many the hearts that yearn to belong.
Let us be servants to one another,
making your kingdom come.

Christ, be our light!
Shine in our hearts.
Shine through the darkness.
Christ, be our light!
Shine in your Church gathered today.

Bernadette Farrell (b. 1957)

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Publications, 5536 NE Hassalo, Portland, OR
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Blessing

Comfort, joy and peace be yours.
Know how blessed you are
and go to be that blessing to all around you.
And may God Almighty hold you and all whom
you love
in the palm of his hand, this day and always.
Amen.

John Bailey
Local Preacher