

THE THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT
DECEMBER 13, 2020

ST. PAUL'S LUTHERAN CHURCH, FALLS CHURCH, VA

SERVICE OF WORD AND PRAYER



PRELUDE *The Advent of Our King* Setting: Jan Bender

WELCOME

ENTRANCE HYMN #331 *The Advent of Our King*

- 1 The advent of our King
Our prayers must now employ,
And we must hymns of welcome sing
In strains of holy joy.
- 2 The everlasting Son
Incarnate deigns to be,
Himself a servant's form puts on
To set His servants free.
- 3 O Zion's daughter, rise
To meet your lowly King,
Nor let your faithless heart despise
The peace He comes to bring.
- 4 As judge, on clouds of light,
He soon will come again
And His true members all unite
With Him in heav'n to reign.
- 5 Before the dawning day
Let sin's dark deeds be gone,
The sinful self be put away,
The new self now put on.
- 6 All glory to the Son,
Who comes to set us free,
With Father, Spirit, ever one
Through all eternity.

CONFESSIO AND ABSOLUTION

In the name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid:
**cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of Your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love
You, and worthily magnify Your Holy Name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, Jesus Christ, to save us from our sin, be our advocate in heaven and bring us to eternal life. Let us confess our sins in penitence and faith, resolved to keep God's commandments and to live in love and peace with all.

(Silence is kept)

Almighty God, our heavenly Father,

we confess that we have sinned against You and against our neighbor in thought, word and deed; through negligence, through weakness and through our own deliberate fault. We are truly sorry and repent of all our sins. For the sake of Your Son Jesus Christ, who died for us, forgive us all that is past and grant that we may serve You in newness of life, to the glory of Your Name. Amen.

Almighty God, who forgives all who truly repent, have mercy upon you, pardon and deliver you from all your sins, confirm and strengthen you in all goodness and keep you in eternal life, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

KYRIE

Kyrie, Kyrie eleison. Kyrie, Kyrie eleison.

For peace in our hearts as we gather for worship, and for the peace of the whole world and the unity of all, let us pray to the Lord

Kyrie, Kyrie eleison. Kyrie, Kyrie eleison.

For the proclamation of the Gospel in this and every place, and for the calling of all to faith, let us pray to the Lord.

Kyrie, Kyrie eleison. Kyrie, Kyrie eleison.

For grace to await our Lord's coming again in glory, and for the joyful anticipation of his coming into our hearts today, let us pray to the Lord

Kyrie, Kyrie eleison. Kyrie, Kyrie eleison.

HYMN OF PRAISE (omitted during this penitential season)

THE PRAYER OF THE DAY

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ,

we implore You to hear our prayers and to lighten the darkness of our hearts by Your gracious visitation; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.



FIRST LESSON Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor;
he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,

and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
to grant to those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit;
that they may be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified.
They shall build up the ancient ruins;
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations. . . .

For I the LORD love justice;
I hate robbery and wrong;
I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.
Their offspring shall be known among the nations,
and their descendants in the midst of the peoples;
all who see them shall acknowledge them,
that they are an offspring the LORD has blessed.
I will greatly rejoice in the LORD;
my soul shall exult in my God,
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation;
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
For as the earth brings forth its sprouts,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to sprout up,
so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise
to sprout up before all the nations.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

PSALM 126

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.
Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then they said among the nations,
"The LORD has done great things for them."
The LORD has done great things for us; we are glad.
Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like streams in the Negeb!
Those who sow in tears
shall reap with shouts of joy!

He who goes out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
bringing his sheaves with him.

**Glory be to the Father and to the Son
and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning,
is now, and will be forever. Amen.**

SECOND LESSON 1 Thessalonians 5:16–24

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.

Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

CHILDREN'S SERMON

GOSPEL VERSE # 338 St. 1 Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus

**1 Come, Thou long-expected Jesus,
Born to set Thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us;
Let us find our rest in Thee.
Israel's strength and consolation,
Hope of all the earth Thou art,
Dear desire of ev'ry nation,
Joy of ev'ry longing heart.**

GOSPEL John 1:6–8, 19–28

The Holy Gospel according to St. John, the 1st chapter.

Glory to You, O Lord.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. . . .

This is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." So they said to him, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said."

(Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water, but

among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.” These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

Praise to You, O Christ

SERMON

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ:

Today the church calls us, for a second week in a row, to think about John the Baptist. Last week we read about him from Mark’s Gospel account, since Mark is the primary source of this year’s readings. This week, because Mark’s account was so brief, we get to read about him from the Gospel of John.

John the Evangelist begins his account of John the Baptist by describing him as a man sent from God. He doesn’t tell us how God sent him. Luke, you may recall, goes into great detail describing John’s calling by an angel – the one who spoke to his father Zechariah. Matthew and Mark ground his calling in a prophecy of Isaiah. John simply tells us he was sent from God, and then takes us right to the point of the sending: God sent him to be a witness.

The word “witness” is used three times in that short opening paragraph. This is a clue, of course, to its importance. And in that paragraph, there is also another clue. We’re told that John came “to bear witness... that all might believe through him.” And when he says: “through him,” he means John. John is God’s instrument for conveying the message so that people may believe.

John had a call to witness to Jesus – here called “the light.” Jesus is the “light of the world.”

And John’s calling is also our calling. When the light is given to us, we become light bearers too. “You are the light of the world,” Jesus would say to his disciples. Later he would say to them: “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you” (John 20:21). And again: “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Last Sunday, December 6, the church remembered one of its great witnesses: Nicolaus, Bishop of Myra, better known as St. Nicolaus. Nicolaus gave witness to Christ through his many years of serving as a bishop. And, most famously, Nicolaus gave witness through his generous gift-giving—some of these gifts even saving people’s lives.

This Sunday we remember another great witness of the church: Lucia of Syracuse, also known as Saint Lucia or Saint Lucy. Lucia also witnessed through generosity, giving much of her wealth to the poor. Her witness is remembered as bringing light, since her name shares the root of the Latin word for light.

And unlike Nicolaus, Lucia also bore witness in another way. She bore witness through her early death. In the year 304, while still a young woman, Lucia was ordered by angry and powerful men to burn a sacrifice to the emperor's image – an act of renouncing her Christian faith. When she refused, she was killed.

During those early days of Christianity many were killed because of their witness. So many, in fact, that the Greek word for witness – *marturia* – has now become our word “martyr.”

As we think about John today, we should remember that he, too, was eventually killed for his faith. His local governor didn’t appreciate his preaching and locked him up. A short time after, John’s head appeared on a platter.

But not before John gave witness. John came to bear witness about the light. That was his calling. And that is what he did.

As we read more in today's text, we see that there is another word which is repeated. The text says: "and this is the witness (here translated "testimony") of John: when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?' He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, 'I am not the Christ.'"

Here we are introduced to the word "confess" – given twice for emphasis. This is the confession of stating what we believe, not that of admitting our sins. It is the confession of publicly taking a stand. And the confession where one willingly accepts the consequences of that stand.

The fact that there are consequences to confession is made very clear to us as John's Gospel account progresses. In chapter nine, when Jesus gives sight to a man who was born blind, an examination of this miracle by the Pharisees ensues. The man's parents try to put off the Pharisees, with John explaining that: "His parents said these things because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess Jesus to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue" (9:22).

Later, in chapter twelve, John tells us that "many of the authorities believed in [Jesus], but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue." John goes on to make clear that such hiding of one's confession is not right, saying: "for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God" (12:42-43).

There are many other passages in the New Testament which also call us to confess our faith. Confessing, we can see, is an essential component of our witnessing. It reminds us that what we believe is not simply a private matter. And that we are never to deny what we believe. John confessed and "did not deny," says the text.

The Lutheran Church, as you should know, was formed based on sharing a specific confession of faith – done at a time when confessing that faith had great consequences. The Lutheran Church came into being as its congregations publicly stated their adherence to the Lutheran Confessions. Our pastors and congregations do the same today.

Our Confessions center us around the word and work of Jesus. And in that regard, they follow the example of John. John, when he was asked to confess his identity, used the opportunity to point to Jesus.

"Who are you?" the people asked him. In answering, John brings up the Christ – the Anointed One, the Messiah, for whom so many people were waiting.

"I am not the Christ," he said, which then led his questioners to ask about other Messianic figures. "Are you Elijah," they asked. Elijah was prophesied to return at the dawning of the new and final age. "No," says John, even though John did fulfill the prophecy. John came "in the spirit and power of Elijah" – to use the angel's words to John's father (Luke 1:16). But John and Elijah were different people.

Then they asked him if he was "the prophet." They had in mind the prophet of Deuteronomy 18 – the one sometimes called "the new Moses" – the one of whom God said: "I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him." Later, after Jesus fed the 5000, the people would wonder if Jesus were this Prophet. He was. And is!

John eventually did speak to his own identity. "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said."

Upon hearing this, John's questioners asked about his baptism. They did this because they understood baptism to be a sign of conversion and, in their thinking, if John wasn't a leader of the Messianic age, then he wouldn't need to initiate converts.

John's baptism, however, was something different. It may have signaled the coming need for conversion, but its primary and most immediate purpose was to call people to repentance. John baptized as a means of "making straight the way of the Lord." His baptism led the people to repent of their sins and turn to God.

But the question to John did allow him to witness further. "I baptize with water," he said. "But among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie."

And with those words, John completed his witness on that day. He had shared enough. More would be said at other times. In fact, the very next day, John would point out Jesus to those around him and say: "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

But on this day, he had no more to say. He had given his questioners plenty to contemplate. And the words he said are plenty for us to contemplate today too.

On this day we take note that John was simply the voice, pointing to one who was greater. And that's an important lesson. We are to witness to Jesus. Not ourselves.

The world teaches us to self-promote. It preaches the power of you and says that because you are the answer, other people should know it.

We say that Jesus is the great one. He's far greater than all of us. Because all of us are sinners.

We witness to Jesus. Not ourselves. And not to the church either.

Churches bring some very good things. They facilitate nice community. And they may even be strong in confession. At least they should be. But they will always have times of failure. They are made up of sinners. And led by sinners. They can only be a voice, never the Savior.

Jesus is the Savior. He's the one who came and dealt with our broken world. He did it by showing the way of faithfulness, holiness and peace. And he did it by paying the price for human sin, so that sinners might be forgiven and made holy in the eyes of our Creator and Judge.

Jesus did all this when he came to our world at the time of John. And we remember, too, that Jesus will come again someday. At that time everyone will see him as the Messiah that he is, and he will usher in the new age. Those who are saved will then experience endless joy in the new creation.

Until that day we witness and confess what he has done for us. We tell of the manger. We tell of the cross. We speak to others. And we remind ourselves.

And, above all, we listen. We listen to Christ as he speaks through the witnesses he has sent – the prophets, apostles and evangelists of the holy scriptures. And we listen as he speaks through the voice of John and all those who faithfully cry out in the wilderness today.

On this day, let us give thanks that the Lord calls to us so clearly. He makes his voice heard – even through all the noise and confusion of this world.

And let us give thanks for his promise that his voice will never be silenced. He will continue to send forth among us those who preach.

And finally, let us give thanks for his leading and guiding as we witness and confess in our day. God is with us. And he will protect and care for us.

May you rest secure in this faith. In the name of Jesus, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

HYMN OF THE DAY #345 Hark! A Thrilling Voice Is Sounding

- 1 Hark! A thrilling voice is sounding!**
"Christ is near," we hear it say.
"Cast away the works of darkness,
All you children of the day!"
- 2 Startled at the solemn warning,**
Let the earthbound soul arise;
Christ, its sun, all sloth dispelling,
Shines upon the morning skies.
- 3 See, the Lamb, so long expected,**
Comes with pardon down from heav'n.
Let us haste, with tears of sorrow,
One and all, to be forgiv'n;
- 4 So, when next He comes in glory**
And the world is wrapped in fear,
He will shield us with His mercy
And with words of love draw near.
- 5 Honor, glory, might, dominion**
To the Father and the Son
With the ever-living Spirit
While eternal ages run!

APOSTLES' CREED

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.

And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. He descended into hell. The third day He rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. From thence He will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

OFFERING Hark! A Thrilling Voice Is Calling Setting: Malcom Archer

PRAYERS OF THE CHURCH

In peace, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

Brief silence

For all Christians, that the Lord would keep them from every folly that would turn them from His words of peace, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For the Church, that the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world would richly and daily forgive our sins and the sins of all believers; and for our pastors and leaders in Christ, that they would remain faithful and not deny but confess Your truth, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For our children and families, that every darkness would be lightened by Your Son's gracious visitation; and that God would preserve them from dangers to body and soul, guide them by His Word in wise paths, and keep them firm in the faith till life's end, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For our nation and its leaders, that God would preserve our land and its citizens in peace and harmony, guide all who are in authority over us and those who are newly elected, and protect all who serve in harm's way, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For students and workers who face extra challenges at this time, for those who have lost their jobs or their homes, and for those who work to bring healing and care to others, that God would extend to them his protection and strength. And for an end to the pandemic, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For those in every circumstance or need, especially the sick, the lonely, the grieving and those who are struggling, (including... _____), and in thanksgiving for the kindness shown to us in Christ and the certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life with Him; let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For those who commune, that God would give faith to believe the New Testament in His blood, seek His Holy Supper for the forgiveness of sins, and confess His truth with honest hearts in communion with one another, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

Into Your hands, Father, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in Your mercy; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

THE 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 in 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
and the power and the glory
forever and ever. Amen.**

BENEDICTION

The Lord bless us and keep us.
The Lord make His face shine on us
and be gracious to us.
The Lord look upon us with favor and ✠ give us peace.

- 1 **Hark the glad sound! The Savior comes,
The Savior promised long;
Let ev'ry heart prepare a throne
And ev'ry voice a song.**
- 2 **He comes the pris'ners to release,
In Satan's bondage held.
The gates of brass before Him burst,
The iron fetters yield.**
- 3 **He comes the broken heart to bind,
The bleeding soul to cure,
And with the treasures of His grace
To enrich the humble poor.**
- 4 **Our glad hosannas, Prince of Peace,
Thy welcome shall proclaim,
And heav'n's eternal arches ring
With Thy beloved name.**

ANNOUNCEMENTS

DISMISSAL

Go in peace. Serve the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

POSTLUDE Hark, the Glad Sound Setting: Paul Manz

Altar Flowers: *In celebration of my mother's birthday and in honor of Lucia, saint and martyr. Gaudete!*
by Jennifer Z.

Acknowledgments

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