

ORMOND UNITING CHURCH



11 DECEMBER 2022

ADVENT 3



WORSHIP AT HOME

This time is an opportunity to be still, seeking to be aware of the presence of God within.

Carve out a time for this practice; prepare yourself, as you might for a usual Sunday morning and remember that there are others from the congregation gathering at the same time as you. There are also many from the church around the globe who are gathering to seek the presence of God as we are.

Prepare a space in the house; find a comfortable chair, light a candle, turn off distracting noises and close the door if that will help you to be still. This is something that does not need to be hurried.

HYMN TIS 276 There's a light upon the mountain...

Prayer for today

This third week of Advent, let us remember that the good news of Jesus' birth has the power to bring us great joy this Christmas season. Our joy isn't dependent on what is going on in our life, in our world, or the people that we are with. It doesn't depend on the gifts we give or the gifts we find under the tree. No earthly thing can ever give us complete joy. Our joy comes from you. That joy that flooded the hearts of the shepherds, the angels, the wise men, the hosts of heaven, and Mary and Joseph is the joy that still has the power to overwhelm our hearts with rejoicing.

Father, you offer that same joy to us now if we know you and recognize Jesus as our Saviour and Lord. You gave us a reason to celebrate when you gave us the unspeakable gift of Jesus Christ. You came to dwell among us. You went to Calvary's cross for us. You overcame death and rose from the dead for us. You forgive our sins and give us eternal life when we believe in you.

Our joy doesn't come from our jobs, our family, our relationships, our finances, or our success. Our joy doesn't come from what we have on earth or who we are with. Our joy is a gift. It is the gift that you gave us that first Christmas in Jesus Christ. Our joy is encompassed in our Saviour, King Jesus. Flood our heart with joy this Advent season as we reflect on the good news of Jesus' birth. In Jesus' precious name we pray.

Amen.

Hope Bollinger

Confession

Holy Lord, in this time of Advent, we confess we often are distracted by the season's busyness, by the stress of commitment, and even by putting our own traditions ahead of the true meaning of Christmas. We confess we also often prefer being sentimental to being sacrificial. Forgive us for all the times we have missed seeing You in our midst, for all the times we have doubted Your presence, and for all the times we have failed to hold the holidays as holy days. Pour peace into our lives and let us be bearers of Your peace to others. Remind us that this is a season of waiting and preparation for the greatest Gift of all. In the holy Name of our Saviour, Jesus, we pray. Amen.

Memorial Drive Presbyterian Church

When we allow darkness to overcome the light,
forgive us, Lord.
When we reduce Christmas to plastic and tinsel,
have mercy on us, Father.
When hardness of heart keeps us from seeing
and hearing and touching the needs of others,
let your grace consume us, O God.
When the wars around us are of no concern,
forgive us, Lord, and move us to compassion
for those who suffer.
When our caring is not extended to action,
move us to seek justice for our brothers and sisters.
We come to confess our sinfulness
before you and before each other.
Remove all barriers that divide us,
and let there be no obstacle to our love for you
and for one another.

Amen.

Assurance Of Forgiveness

Here is Good News! God is willing to cleanse us from our pride, our blindness, our stubborn insistence on having things "our way". Through God's grace we are washed and forgiven.

Thanks be to God

Amen.

HYMN TIS 265 O come, O come, Emmanuel...

Scripture

From the Hebrew scriptures

Isaiah 35:1-10

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 singing. 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 unstopped; 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 traveller, 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.

From the New Testament

Matthew 11:2-11

2 When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples 3 and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" 4 Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: 5 the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. 6 And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." 7 As 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? 8 What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. 9 What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 10 This 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.

A Pastoral Letter:

Part of a sermon to be preached at Ormond Uniting Church on Sunday, 11th December 2022.
Refer to Matthew 11:2-11 above.

- - - or are we to wait for another?

John the Baptist is asking a really serious question. Herod has thrown him into jail for being a nuisance. He dared to question Herod 's morality - for Herod had married what amounted to a close relative. But, secretly, Herod quite likes John, and from time to time he slips down to the cells for a chat. But John is not so taken by Herod. John is more interested in his cousin Yeshua who he baptised not so long ago, and who he declared to be "the one" - the coming rescuer of the people - the Messiah no less. John wants to verify his first intuition, so he sends out a message to Yeshua - "Are you the one?". "Did I get that right?"

In Jesus ' time there was no lack of messiahs. There were plenty of people who claimed to be one, or had it claimed on their behalf. There was no end to the people who would swear black and blue that this "messiah" or that personified rescue from the ills that beset them. "Listen to me: I've got the answers!"

Amongst them were magicians and illusionists and tricksters. And the woods were full of them. So John asks a reasonable question. "How do I choose? By what criteria will I be able to judge the genuine from the false?"

Of course every age has more than its fair share of tricksters and charlatans - more than its fair share of proclaimers of salvation. Our own age is no exception. They used to be called "snake oil salesmen" but they have other better-sounding names these days. And there are thousands of them competing for our attention.

There are people selling solutions. There are people selling contact with the dead. There are people selling peace of mind. There are people selling friendship - selling love – selling forgiveness. There is a vast marketplace of ideas, hopes, ambitions, joys out there. Think of it as a feast - a smorgasbord of solutions for absolutely everything. A marketplace - yes! A smorgasbord - yes! A madhouse - perhaps!

So, back to John. What a sad figure he cuts in that cell. John - the forerunner, the foreteller, the guy clearing the way for "the one" - now in a cell. It seems that all his efforts have come to nought. He predicted a messiah, and even fancied that he had met him - set him on his way even. But Herod put an end to that. John desperately wants assurance - don't we all! Tell me it was not all for nothing! Tell me my life was not pointless! Are you the one, Yeshua - or should I look for another?

And Yeshua's reply - don't ask silly questions, John! Look! The blind see, the deaf hear, the dead have risen. It's all happening, John! this is what call messiahs do. They change things! Really! No tricks. No illusions. No fifteen minutes of fame. A real Messiah makes a difference.

And so it is with us. Faced with the mad marketplace of ideas, the overloaded smorgasbord of hopes, the madhouse - we can ask John 's question : "Are you the one, or should I look

elsewhere?" The answer, should we be prepared to hear it, is the same. Where are the blind given sight? Where are the deaf enabled to hear? Where do we see new life? That, of course, is how we judge who to follow. Follow the one who does something. Follow the one that makes a difference. Follow the one that brings life, not illusions.

Follow the evidence! But wait - there's more. Follow the care! Follow the compassion. Follow the comforting. And avoid the snake oil! Avoid the judgementalism. Avoid the legalism. Avoid the folk who claim to speak for God. Avoid those who can't forgive. Avoid those who put belief before action. Avoid those who think they are a cut above others - who rejoice in their skin pigmentation or their superior learning.

Should we look elsewhere? Well, yes, of course we should, but don't just stand at the table and pick at random. Have at least this standard: is there healing? Is there love? Is there "God talk?" Well, maybe - but remember God talk is skin deep. Deeds count!

Karel Reus: Minister.

HYMN: TIS 153 God is love, let heav'n adore him...

Prayer – Prepared by Ron Townsend

This is a responsive prayer.

To the prompt:

‘Lord, bring joy into our grief and darkness,’

Could you please respond:

‘and singing into our mourning and shadows.’

Lord, bring joy into our grief and darkness,
and singing into our mourning and shadows.

Let us pray.

God our holy, gracious and unshakeable friend, we seek your undergirding joy for planet earth, its people, creatures and all their dwelling places.

Where there is conflict, terrorism and war, disarm the aggressors, and bless all those who work for peace and reconciliation.

Lord, bring joy into our grief and darkness,
and singing into our mourning and shadows.

Where there is exploitation of the weak and the poor, strengthen these vulnerable ones, and bless those who work to deliver them.

Lord, bring joy into our grief and darkness,
and singing into our mourning and shadows.

Where there are refugee camps, prison compounds, and ethnic discrimination, break shatter our prejudices and biases and bless those who work for justice and liberty.

Lord, bring joy into our grief and darkness,
and singing into our mourning and shadows.

Where there is addiction to drugs, alcohol and gambling, challenge those who profit from such harms and bless those who provide programmes for rehabilitation.

Lord, bring joy into our grief and darkness,
and singing into our mourning and shadows.

Where there is hunger, malnutrition, disease, and despair, upend all inequality and bless the agencies that bring compassion and practical help.

Lord, bring joy into our grief and darkness,
and singing into our mourning and shadows.

Where the planet, which is our home and gift from you, is plundered, remind us plunderers of your gift of Heaven on Earth, and bless all those who devote themselves to environmental and climate integrity.

Lord, bring joy into our grief and darkness,
and singing into our mourning and shadows.

Where there are the lonely, the suffering, the sorrowing and the dying, release and renew them with your abundant life, and bless those who are present for the broken with their love.

Lord, bring joy into our grief and darkness,
and singing into our mourning and shadows.

Where the church is weak and struggling against gigantic odds, proclaim again and again to your people, your hope, peace, joy and love, and bless all those resolute souls who keep the faith and practice your love.

Lord, bring joy into our grief and darkness,
and singing into our mourning and shadows.

And finally, for ourselves; where we struggle and fall, lift us up, filling us with your joy and blessing all those who sing, dance and rejoice for us and give us their love and support, no matter what.

Lord, bring joy into our grief and darkness,
and singing into our mourning and shadows.

Lord's Prayer

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and forever Amen.**

Blessing

A Joyful Benediction

Be a person of joy.

Let joy live in your heart and share the joy of Christ with all you meet.

Share joy by seeing the good in each other.

Share joy by remembering good times and hoping for good times to come.

Share joy by praying for our world.

In this Advent season, we need to see, feel, and share joy.

As you go out into the wonder of God's creations, share joy, peace, and hope with those you meet.

Amen.

HYMN: TIS 409 O breath of life...

Thoughts for the week to come

Advent Hands

I see the hands of Joseph.
Back and forth along bare wood they move.
There is worry in those working hands,
sorting out confusing thoughts with every stroke.
“How can this be, my beautiful Mary now with child?”
Rough with deep splinters, these hands,
small, painful splinters like tiny crosses
embedded deeply in this choice to stay with her.
He could have closed his hands to her,
said, “No” and let her go to stoning.
But, dear Joseph opened both his heart and hands
to this mother and her child.
Preparing in these days before
with working hands
and wood pressed tight between them.
It is these rough hands that will open
and be the first to hold the Child.

I see the hands of John,
worn from desert raging storms
and plucking locusts from sand ripped rocks
beneath the remnant of a Bethlehem star.
A howling wind like some lost wolf
cries out beneath the moon,
or was that John?
This loneliness,
enough to make a grown man mad.
He’s waiting for this, God’s whisper.
“Go now. He is coming.
You have prepared your hands enough.
Go. He needs your servant hands,
your cupping hands to lift the water,
and place his feet upon the path to service and to death.
Go now, John, and open your hands to him.
It is time.”

I see a fist held tight and fingers blanched to white.
Prying is no easy task.
These fingers find a way of pulling back to old positions,
protecting all that was and is.

Blanched to white. No openness. All fright.
But then the Spirit comes.
A holy Christmas dance begins
and blows between the twisted paths.
This fist opens
slowly,
gently,
beautifully,
the twisted fingers letting go.
Their rock-solid place in line has eased.
And one by one the fingers lift
True colour is returned
And through the deepest of mysteries,
The holiest of holies,
O longing of longings
Beyond all human imagining
this fist,
as if awakened from Lazarus' cold stone dream
reaches out to hold the tiny newborn hand of God.

Catherine Alder

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Postlude

You can find a copy of today's sermon along with other congregational information on the church website.

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Music: Peter Hurley

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