

Advent Week 3

Sunday 12/14

The theme this week is *joy*.

The scriptures for this week are Luke 1:46-80.

God of joy,

As we begin this week, open our hearts to sing your praise. Like Mary and Zechariah, may we proclaim your faithfulness with voices of hope and gladness. Prepare us to rejoice in your promises.

Amen.

Monday 12/15

Luke 1:46-56 The Magnificat

This day's format is a little different, leading with the devotion, then moving to the scripture and finally ending with the questions for reflection.

We left our Advent journey last week with Mary going to visit Elizabeth. When Mary greeted Elizabeth, we were told that Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. She concluded her praise of God and Mary, and the baby Mary will have with this statement, "And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." Today, we come to Mary's response, also known as the Magnificat.

The title, Magnificat, refers to the Latin words used in the first verse, "My soul magnifies the Lord." This passage of scripture is also referred to as Mary's Song. If you imagined this Bible story as a musical, this would be when the heroine emerges from the shadows and embraces who she is. Mary is no longer the village girl whose life was on track to be predictable. God, through the angel Gabriel, has shown up in her life in a very unexpected way. Instead of running from the daunting call to be the Mother of God, she embraces the call.

Her song lets us hear her voice- strong, courageous, and faithful. Too often, Mary fades from our memories in the gospel stories. We think of her as a prop, as a means to an end. Or we think she is weak, merely submitting to the events happening in her life. In this passage, we remember that she is none of those. This young woman understands God's call, and she answers it in a proclamation of faith.

Listen to her voice as we come to today's scripture passage from Luke 1:46-56.

And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”
And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

If you were to proclaim your faith in God, would you write or sing a song? Paint or draw a picture? Dance? What gift do you share with the world that reveals your faith? How are you proclaiming your faith in God?

Gracious God,
You have done great things for us, and holy is your name. Give us courage to proclaim our faith boldly and to use our gifts to reveal your love. May we lift our voices in songs of justice and mercy.
Amen.

Tuesday 12/16

Luke 1:57-66 The Birth of John the Baptist

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.
On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, “No; he is to be called John.” They said to her, “None of your relatives has this name.” Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, “His name is John.” And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, “What then will this child become?” For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

Mary stayed with Elizabeth for around three months but went home before it was time for John to be born. Our passage today returns us to Elizabeth, Zechariah, and their baby, John. Again, they are the talk of the neighborhood. On the day of John’s circumcision, the religious ritual that names him and marks him as an Israelite, the gathered religious assembly ready to name the baby Zechariah. Elizabeth spoke up, saying no, he was to be named John. However, in their cultural context, women were not part of the religious ceremony, and so they would not listen to her. Instead, they looked to Zechariah, who motioned for something to write with. He concurred, “His name is John.” With this moment of faithful remembrance, Zechariah is able to speak again, and he begins to praise God. The passage tells us that the neighbors were afraid- not in the sense of fear but in holy awe. They talked about all that had happened, asking “What then will become of this child?” We are told that they knew that the hand of God was on John from the very beginning.

In the Presbyterian tradition, we have a sacrament called baptism. In the waters of baptism, God claims us as God’s own, extending God’s grace to us and inviting us to become a member of the

body of Christ. It is important in our tradition that baptism occurs as part of worship, because the people of the church are asked to be active participants in the faith life of the child. The pastor asks the congregation before the baptism occurs if they will “promise to guide and nurture, by word and deed, with love and prayer, encouraging them to know and follow Christ and be faithful members of his church.”

We should look at every child as if we’ve known the hand of God has been on them from the very beginning. God’s hand *is* on every child, whether we’ve seen their baptism or not. Just like Zechariah’s neighbors had a sense that God was at work with John, so we should also look for God’s presence with the children in our lives.

How will you live into your baptismal vows to guide and nurture, by word and deed, with love and prayer, the children in your life? What does it mean to be a faithful member of the church today?

God of every child,
Your hand has been on us from the very beginning. Help us to see your faithful presence in the children entrusted to our care. May we guide and nurture them, in word and deed, encouraging them to know and follow you.
Amen.

Wednesday 12/17

Luke 1:67-80 Zechariah’s Song

Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.
He has raised up a mighty savior for us
in the house of his servant David,
as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.
Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,
the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness
before him all our days.
And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.
By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

Just as Mary's song is called the Magnificat, this passage of scripture is referred to as the Benedictus, Zechariah's blessing. You will hear the echo of some of the same language, with some of the same sentiment coming from Zechariah as you heard from Mary- praising God, delivering God's people from enemies, seeking God's favor. We could pray these prayers today with some adjustments to names and places and they would reflect our hearts as we cried out to God, too.

Then Zechariah acknowledges that his son will "go before the Lord to prepare his ways." The divine promises of Gabriel come true. All of them. He concludes the blessing of John this way, "By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high has broken upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

Our theme for this week is joy, and the birth of John is a joyous event for Elizabeth and Zechariah as well as the world. God's new reality is upon us as John is tasked with preparing us for Jesus.

Next week, the theme is peace. Let us not forget the prayer of a father to his son, to guide our feet in the way of peace as we finish the third week of our Advent journey.

Have you ever given your blessing to someone? Did you write a letter or was it a face-to-face moment?

Blessings are powerful. Consider giving your blessing to someone, whether it is a family member, a friend, or even someone you might need to reconcile with, as you continue to journey through Advent.

God of tender mercy,
You are bringing light to those in darkness. As you blessed John through his father's words, teach us to bless others with love and grace. Guide our feet into the way of peace.
Amen.

Thursday 12/18

This week we have heard two powerful songs- Mary's Magnificat and Zechariah's Benedictus. Both are ancient prayers, sung and prayed by faithful people for generations. These songs carry our stories of faith, reminding us of God's promises. They proclaim joy and peace, even in the midst of waiting, uncertainty, and struggle.

During Advent and Christmas, music surrounds us. We hear it in grocery stores, on the radio, in our homes, and in our sanctuaries. Some of it is sacred- the hymns and carols that tell the story of Jesus' birth. Some of it is secular- songs about snow, family gatherings, and themes of the season. Yet even in the secular songs, we often find echoes of sacred themes: peace on earth, hope for the world, love that transforms, joy that overcomes darkness.

As we come to the end of our third week of Advent, consider the music that has shaped your faith and your memories of this season. Spend time with either the Magnificat or the Benedictus (or both!) and imagine these verses being sung, by Mary and Zechariah, and by the generations of faithful believers sharing the story once again with their community as we await Jesus' arrival.

How does music create community and memories for you during the Christmas season? What is your favorite Christmas song or hymn? How do the songs of this season- both sacred and secular- prepare you to welcome the Prince of Peace?

God of music and memory,
You speak to us through songs that echo across generations. Whether in sacred hymns or seasonal songs, help us hear your themes of peace, hope, love, and joy. May the music of this season prepare our hearts to welcome the Christ child.
Amen.

Fri 12/19 Sat 12/20

How will you Sabbath with joy this weekend?

Next week we will arrive in Bethlehem, and Jesus' birth!

God of sabbath and celebration,
This weekend, allow us to rest in your joy. As we pause, fill us with anticipation and wonder.
Amen.

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