

DECEMBER 13, 2020 – THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

WELCOME – PASTOR CALEB

Good morning and welcome to Alexanderwohl through a screen!

It is a joy to have this avenue of worshipping together at a time when it is not safe to worship the way we normally would.

In a little bit, I'm going to encourage all of you to turn on your camera's if you are comfortable doing so, and simply wave a greeting to one another.

Today's theme is the song of Mary, also known as the Magnificat. It is a beautiful, hopeful song with some teeth, so we look forward to hearing what challenges pastor Lois has for us through these words and the words of Isaiah.

I encourage you to pay attention to the reflection questions Lois has provided during the sermon time which you can find in the bulletin.

1. *Are there dark, painful areas in your life or that you are aware of where The Holy Spirit might be given space to bring new life?*
2. *Are there ways you could prepare for or participate in this transformation?*

You'll have an opportunity to share responses later in the service.

PRAYER OF INVOCATION

Faithful God,

In our advent waiting, today we wish to embrace the joy that Mary expressed even before the birth of Jesus. Let us be aware of your presence this morning, confident of the movement of your Spirit as we prepare ourselves to receive the gift of your Son.

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR CALEB

Loving God,

We glorify you and our spirits rejoice in you.

Your love expressed in Jesus is the true governing principle of history.

You bring down rulers from their thrones.

You scatter those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

You promise to clothe your people with garments of salvation and praise.

We dare not put our ultimate hope in any power except your power revealed in a little child.

We give you thanks for the blessings of each day. Your mercies are many and are made new each morning. We name just a few of the praises on our minds.

We celebrate Allison Baumgartner's graduation from Fort Hays State University, studying Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages.

We thank you, God, for the new Voices Together worship resource that will be launched virtually this afternoon. We are grateful for those who have offered their gifts to produce this resource and we pray your blessing on all who will use it to worship.

We thank you for Janice Voth's recuperation from surgery and pray that you would strengthen her and continue to buoy her up with hope in the coming weeks.

We also name a few of the prayer concerns that we carry, trusting that you hear our prayers even when we are in a time of waiting.

We pray for those that are keenly feeling the losses of family and friends gathering during these holiday times. Minister to those who are feeling isolated and help us to find ways to feel connected and supported while staying safe.

We pray for teachers and students wrapping up these final days of the first semester; grant them a sense of completion and accomplishment in spite of the difficult and unusual learning circumstances. We pray for renewed strength for teachers that have had to put forth much extra effort to accommodate these circumstances.

We pray for the increased and growing number of people both locally and in our nation and world who are feeling the material burden of these hard times. We pray especially for families with children struggling to be able to offer nutritious meals to their children.

We pray for your transformation in our national justice system as ten people have been executed recently by the federal government. We pray for God's mercy for the families of the executed, for the five who are scheduled to be executed in the coming weeks and for those who are ordering and carrying out the executions.

We pray for communities across our country and our world that continue to be impacted by the outbreak. We feel numb as this pandemic continues to rage. We can't process what it means that more people are dying each day from this virus than died in September 11, or that Covid has become the leading cause of death in Kansas and a number of other states.

We are numb and tired. We don't know exactly what impacts we will feel right here in our community. We pray for your mercy and comfort. We pray for tired hospital and care home staff. We pray for resolve to take our own actions to help slow the spread of the virus.

Help us know how in our busy lives to join your work of proclaiming good news to the poor, binding up the brokenhearted, proclaiming release from darkness for prisoners, and comfort for those who mourn.

We wonder how we can sing a song like Mary did, while our world seems to get worse?

Give us sight to see how the One who came in our midst as the humblest of children is in fact Lord of the universe.

Just as a pregnant woman is always aware of the new life growing within her, we want to be always aware of your presence.

Turn our minds and hearts toward you. Cause new life to grow with in us.

We pray that the hope of the world be born in us as well.

In the name of Jesus, Amen

PRAYER OF DEDICATION – PASTOR CALEB

Our giving God,

You have called us to come, buy, and eat – without money and without price.

You have invited us to feast at your abundant table.

Now it is our privilege to share from this abundance,
so that we might take part in your work
of lifting up the humble and filling the hungry with good things.

Bless our gifts to your work. In the name of Jesus...

SEEKING JOY IN THE DARKNESS OF THE WOMB – PASTOR LOIS

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 and Luke 1:46b-55

The traditional word that has tied together the readings for this third Sunday of Advent is joy. That's the English word that has been chosen. But, as is often the case, the Greek and the Hebrew words are more complicated and the meanings are deeper than what one English word can hold or describe. So we also use words like magnify, and rejoice, glorify and exalt. The Greek words that Luke used when he wrote about Mary communicate that there is movement in what Mary was trying to express – almost a restlessness, like the movement of cattle when they're released from the stall. It's uncontrollable, like gusts of wind and it also includes notions of upward movement, arising, leaping, the way the child leapt in the womb of Elizabeth, Mary's pregnant relative, when Mary went to visit her.

And there is a similar kind of "joy" expressed in the Isaiah passage, "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God."

But the language in both of these passages is reaching beyond the experience of just an individual or even a couple of people; it's pointing towards something much bigger.

The prophet is talking about having been sent to bring God's messages of good news – for all those who have lived under oppression or injustice, for those who are broken, for those who've been imprisoned or held captive, for those who've been overwhelmed with sadness and mourning, God's message is that none of this is going to last forever, in fact, God is on the move and is preparing to make some big changes for these folks. Freedom, justice, healing, comfort – those are the things that are on their way, that God is bringing. And, of course, these words from God are in response to the cries from God's people; they've been in exile and they want to go home.

In the second part of the Isaiah reading, we're reminded that God loves justice and hates wrongdoing. We're reminded that God has made promises to a faithful people – a people who've been part of a covenant with God and that God intends to keep those covenant promises.

Mary's Song is similar. Again, it's just spoken by one person, but it's really talking about the joy that will be experienced by everyone who realizes the greatness of God, the justice and mercy of God, the ways God cares for those who are faithful and the ways God keeps the covenant promises down through the generations.

Now, both the prophet Isaiah and the young, pregnant Mary were in precarious positions to be loudly proclaiming these words. They were both speaking truth to power from very powerless positions. They were using revolutionary language at times and in places where that was a dangerous thing to do. They were essentially pledging their allegiance to God rather than to the political leaders of their time which was risky. There was plenty of heavy-handed oppression, kings and governors demanding loyalty, ruling with iron fists, enslaving, taxing, lording it over those they governed. Those times were dark and difficult for God's people.

I'd like to leave the prophet now and focus on Mary. As an unwed, teenaged, mysteriously pregnant woman in the first century, I'm always intrigued by the notion of Mary expressing joy. It seems to me that perhaps her youthful naivete was holding her in good stead. As Luke tells the story, she had been to visit Elizabeth, her older cousin who was also mysteriously pregnant – but she was, at least, married! Elizabeth and Mary had shared encouragement and had taken great courage from one another. In fact, the two women shared a deep trust in their belief that God was afoot, bringing some new, life-giving plan that the powers that be could not thwart or change or stop. They shared a longing for fundamental and broad, systemic changes in their world. They believed that the goodness of God could be working through their bodies, through the children they were carrying – imagine! Two Jewish women, one old, the other young, in the midst of the powerful Roman empire believing that God could work through them. They were trusting that God was working through their darkest, innermost being; in their womb God was transforming that darkness into Light that would change the world. But, for Mary and Elizabeth there was incredible humbling – even humiliation while this transformation was happening. There was pain in the judgement from other people, there was the need to release any sense of control they may have had, there was uncertainty – no guarantee of how things would turn out.

They had both grown up in the faith. It was the faith of their families going back for generations. They could have taken it for granted, going through the motions like so many others. But God saw and honored their humble longings, their belief in the Spirit's power.

What would it take for us – for you and me, for all of us – to prepare and open the darkest parts of ourselves to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit? Can we humble ourselves or allow ourselves to be humbled so that God can work through us? How do we see God working in the current darkness of our world? Can you begin to see any new things that might be born out of this horrific pandemic? It's easy to be discouraged, to be overwhelmed, to absorb the sadness and grief that is very real – and all of that is honest and true.

So in the midst of that, are there ways can we tap into the deep, trusting joy that is described in today's scripture lessons? How can we encourage one another to watch for opportunities? How can we witness and work with the Holy Spirit in bringing justice, to lift up those who need a lift, to fill the hungry, to move beyond our comfortable, familiar, lives and make ourselves available to God's surprising work?

How can each one of us and we, together, as a congregation, become pregnant with God's Spirit – making space in our lives, in our bodies, in our minds and souls for growth, something new and unexpected. It will stretch us, it will hurt, there will be labor and it will be messy. And God will be with us, according to the promise made to our ancestors.