

Cereal and Oyen United Church
December 12, 2021 Third Sunday in Advent

Welcome and Announcements

Candle Lighting

We light the Christ Candle, aware of God around, among and within us. In a moment of silence, we prepare ourselves to celebrate God's presence in our community.

Gathering Song VU #2 Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus

Call to Worship

God's messenger is coming to prepare the way.

We rejoice that God loves us enough to send him.

God's messenger has some challenging words to bring us.

We are ready to listen and to reflect.

God's messenger will call us to action.

We will work to make the necessary changes.

Gathering Prayer

We will not find you, Loving God, in the busy stores, or among the Christmas lights.

But where a young couple struggles to get basic housing, you are there.

We will not find you, Caring God, in the packed casino, or on the Internet.

But where a refugee seeks a safe place for her family, you are there.

We will not find you, Compassionate God, at the back machine, or in a high-class restaurant.

But where a newly bereaved person searches for a comforting presence, you are there.

Ever-present God, we will follow you,

faithfully, calmly, as we proceed on our Advent journey. Amen.

Our Prayer for Grace

Do you hear the challenge of John the Baptist?

Sharing is in style!

In John's day, food and clothes.

Today? Tax breaks for the poor,

low- cost housing, and aid for developing nations.

Do you hear the challenge of John the Baptist?

Don't abuse power!

In John's day, cheating tax collectors.

**Today? Unfeeling government officials,
and our selfish control of other persons.**

Do you hear the challenge of John the Baptist?

Don't accuse anyone falsely!

In John's day, bullying soldiers.

**Today? Those who spread rumors,
and tarnish the reputations of others.**

Do you hear the challenge of John the Baptist?

Take Jesus seriously!

In John's day, the Chosen One of God.

**Today? The same Jesus, whose acceptance tests us,
Whose Cross-death challenges us.**

Our Words of Assurance

You have heard the challenge of John, you have been called to repent.

**We will reflect carefully,
will weigh our options diligently,
and we will go forward in the Way,
and in the strength of Jesus Christ.**

Pardon and peace will assuredly be yours!

Thanks be to God! Amen.

Hymn VU #684 Make Me A Channel of Your Peace

Advent Candle Lighting Advent 3 (Light candles from Advent 1 & 2)

We join with the writers of the Bible in shouting for joy that God is always with us. God calls us to be part of the healing of the world – to bring real joy. That joy spreads as we follow Jesus' words and actions.

In this season of giving, and on every day of the year, help us to say and do those things that will help bring Christ's compassion and caring to all.

(Light third candle)

Advent Hymn VU #7 Hope is a Star vs 1 & 2 & 3

Cereal Faith Story

Scripture Readings

Philippians 4:4-7 Common English Bible

Stand Firm with the Lord

⁴Be glad in the Lord always! Again I say, be glad! ⁵Let your gentleness show in your treatment of all people. The Lord is near. ⁶Don't be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks. ⁷Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus.

Luke 3:7-18 Common English Bible

Message from John the Baptist

⁷Then John said to the crowds who came to be baptized by him, "You children of snakes! Who warned you to escape from the angry judgment that is coming soon? ⁸Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives. And don't even think about saying to yourselves, Abraham is our father. I tell you that God is able to raise up Abraham's children from these stones. The ax is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be chopped down and tossed into the fire."

¹⁰The crowds asked him, "What then should we do?"

¹¹He answered, "Whoever has two shirts must share with the one who has none, and whoever has food must do the same."

¹²Even tax collectors came to be baptized. They said to him, "Teacher, what should we do?"

¹³He replied, "Collect no more than you are authorized to collect."

¹⁴Soldiers asked, "What about us? What should we do?"

He answered, "Don't cheat or harass anyone, and be satisfied with your

pay.”

Responses to John

¹⁵The people were filled with expectation, and everyone wondered whether John might be the Christ. ¹⁶John replied to them all, “I baptize you with water, but the one who is more powerful than me is coming. I’m not worthy to loosen the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷The shovel he uses to sift the wheat from the husks is in his hands. He will clean out his threshing area and bring the wheat into his barn. But he will burn the husks with a fire that can’t be put out.” ¹⁸With many other words John appealed to them, proclaiming good news to the people.

May God bless to our understanding these readings from holy scripture.

Message Getting There by Rev. Dr. Robert Baggott

Hymn **MV #15 Deep in our Hearts**

Our Prayer

You keep us waiting.
You, the God of all time,
want us to wait
for the right time in which to discover
who you are, where we must go,
who will be with us, and what we must do.
Thank you...for the waiting time.

You keep us looking.
You, the God of all space,
want us to look in all the right and wrong places
for signs of hope,
for people who are hopeless,
for visions of a better world which will appear
among the disappointments of the world we know.
Thank you...for the looking time.

You keep us loving.

You, the God whose name is love,
want us to be like you –
to love the loveless and the unlovely and the unlovable;
to love without jealousy or design or threat;
and, most difficult of all,
to love ourselves.
Thank you...for the loving time.

And in all this,
You keep us.
Through hard questions with no easy answers;
through failing where we hope to succeed
and making an impact when we felt we were useless;
through the patience and the dreams and the love of others;
and through Jesus Christ and his spirit,
you keep us.
Thank you...for the keeping time,
and for now,
and for ever.

Amen.

M & S

Offertory

For health and safety reasons, we will not pass the offering plate. It is at the back of the sanctuary on the table and you may leave your offering there.

Offering Prayer

O God, sometimes the choices you offer are hard choices:

to share rather than to take for ourselves,

to befriend rather than to ignore,

to tell the truth rather than evade,

to stay faithful, rather than stay with the crowd.

Then you face us with John the Baptist, and his challenge to repent,
and you face us with Jesus, and his Way of love, and the right choice is

clear.

May these offerings enable us to make the faithful choices, which bring glory to you, O God, and bring closer your realm of peace and mutual respect. Amen.

Song for the Journey VU #5 All Earth is Waiting

Commissioning

Time for a change!

We will speak out when we find injustice!

Time for a change!

We will work carefully to nurture community!

Time for a change!

We will face loss with gentleness and reality!

Time for a change!

We will forgive the deepest hurts gradually!

Time for a change!

We will prepare for the coming of Christ thoroughly!

Our Closing VU #967 Amen, Amen, Amen.

Changing the Christ Candle

In the light of Christ, shining into all corners of the earth, showing us where we are and where we are meant to be.

The Spirit of God. Breathe it in.... and know that God is with us where we go.

Have a great week and celebrate God's presence!!

Getting There

The Rev. Dr. Robert T. Baggott

3rd Sunday of Advent - Year C

Luke 3:7-18

Well, with Christmas nearly here, there is probably not one among us whose thoughts don't stray towards Bethlehem with real longing. Do you want to go to Bethlehem? Well, getting there hasn't always been easy.

Back in the 1980's when I first started leading groups on pilgrimage to the Holy Land, getting to Bethlehem required disembarking our tour bus at an armored check point outside the town, having our passports checked, then walking a full block under the watchful eye of heavily armed Israeli soldiers. Only after successfully navigating this pulse-quickenning walk could we board a Palestinian bus to finally take us into Bethlehem. In the 1990's the process changed a bit. Our tour bus still had to stop at a checkpoint before entering the city, but then instead of requiring passengers to get off, armed soldiers got on. They walked up and down the aisles checking passports and asking questions. After a few anxiety-producing minutes, when the all clear was given, we could drive to the other side of the checkpoint, change buses, and enter Bethlehem. When we last traveled to Bethlehem, just last winter, the process of getting there had eased dramatically. There was no passport check on the way in. Nor did soldiers board the bus. We simply drove to a kiosk where our bus driver spoke to a guard for a few moments. Then we were waved on, with the greatest impediment being the speed bump that lies at the gate of the twenty-five foot cement wall which now sadly separates Israel from the West Bank. And that is how you get to Bethlehem these days, at least physically.

But let me hasten to say, that if getting to Bethlehem physically seems a bit challenging, it is nothing compared to the difficulty of getting to Bethlehem spiritually. At least that is what John the Baptist would have us understand and what the church has been reminding us, because at Advent there is no getting to the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem without first passing through the check point manned by John the Baptist. And John is certainly not merrily waving everyone in. On the contrary, as the Gospel of Luke tells it, John is taking names and checking passports. His first inhospitable greeting to the gathered throngs who have come for him to baptize them in the Jordan is, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" He seems to say, "Do you really think coming to the river for a quick baptism will save you from God's judgment? You'd better think again." Then after this unnerving opening, John launches into an interactive sermon employing three penetrating points. The first is the people's need for absolute, full bore, no holds barred repentance. Judgment is on its way, after all, and anything short of thoroughgoing repentance will result in God's rejection. So what counts as thoroughgoing repentance?

Well, John can tell you what it's not! Undoubtedly along the way in response to his preaching, John must have seen many demonstrations of halfhearted repentance, the kind that we are capable of. Maybe we, like the folks of John's day, tell ourselves our halfhearted repentance for wrong-doing is adequate if we simply feel a little badly about what we have done or left undone. But John seems to say, simple sentimentality like that is insufficient. It's not a mark of full repentance. Or maybe we think, like the folks of John's day, that our halfhearted repentance for wrongdoing is adequate because of our identity as decent church folks who are part of the Christian family. Maybe we think that identity gives us extra credit points and ought to protect us from God's wrath. But John says otherwise. He says trying to depend on one's heritage doesn't demonstrate full repentance either.

Let's face it, John says, your tender feelings aren't enough. And your pedigree as children of Abraham isn't enough, either. What matters most, John says, is how your rubber hits the road. What matters is what you do, and how you live.

A number of years ago Norman Cousins wrote an editorial in *The Saturday Review* in which he reported a conversation he had on a trip to India. He talked at length with a Hindu priest named Satis Prasad. The man said he wanted to come to our country to work as a missionary among the Americans. Cousins assumed that he meant that he wanted to convert Americans to the Hindu religion. But when asked, Satis Prasad said, "Oh no, I would like to convert them to the Christian religion. Christianity cannot survive in the abstract. It needs not membership, but believers. Not people who talk about their faith but live their faith. The people of your country may claim they believe in Christianity; but from what I read at this distance, Christianity is more a custom than anything else. I would ask that you either accept the teachings of Jesus in your everyday life and in your affairs as a nation, or stop invoking His name as sanction for everything you do. I want to help save Christianity for the Christian."

Prasad has hit precisely upon John the Baptist's point here, I think. God needs not church members, but believers--not talkers, but doers. And when John the Baptist's little riverside congregation hears this alarming word they begin to ask him for more clarification.

Some in the crowd asked, "What then should we do?" And John responds in effect, "Share with one another. If you have two coats give one to someone who has none. If you have more food than you need give some away to someone who is hungry." In other words, demonstrating repentance in one's life will involve *generosity*. Be generous, John says.

But the tax collectors in the crowd were apparently still not clear and they shouted, "Teacher, what should we do?" Now, the tax collectors in John's day paid the Roman overlords for the privilege of collecting tolls and tariffs and customs fees. Then they extorted as much money as possible from the people to recoup their initial outlay and make a profit. And John says to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed." In other words, a demonstration of repentance will be absolute *honesty and dependability*, John says.

And maybe these questions and answers were beginning to make the soldiers in the crowd that day a little worried because they asked, "And what should we do?" These soldiers certainly did have a right to be nervous, because their compensation as local mercenaries working for the Romans was not lavish. Their pay was small, but custom allowed that they might extort a bit of money from the population while the authorities turned a blind eye. And to the soldiers John responds, "Be satisfied with your wages." In other words, a demonstration of repentance will be an end of grasping greediness and the adoption of *contentment*.

Generosity, integrity, contentment: signs of a life that has undergone thoroughgoing repentance...proof that faith is more than talk. No one in those crowds at the Jordan River who had come for John's baptism seemed to escape John's demand for a better life. No easy outs, no short cuts, no excuses. No matter who came, John could see in their lives potential for improvement. I wonder if that is why John drew such crowds. It can't have been his charm, his polish, or his winning smile. It must have been something else. People must have kept coming to John because he asked something significant of them. He asked them to see themselves and their lives' potential in a new way.

John the Baptist was never shy about asking his listeners to do something great. He asked them to repent of all wrong-doing and live new lives clearly marked by generosity, integrity and contentment. And why aspire to this greatness? Not for some personal ennoblement, but in order to be ready for the coming Messiah.

And have no doubt, John says, the Messiah is definitely on the way. John is awed by the majesty and mystery of the One coming. He claims he is not even worthy to untie the Messiah's sandals, a task which a common servant would be asked to do. All John's exhortations to the crowds and to us are just his way of helping us be ready to step into the presence of greatness, the greatness found in Bethlehem, without the self-consciousness of any misdeeds and wrong-doings clinging to us. Let the past go, John says, be rid of it, repent of it, lay it down.

Take up new lives, worthy of the one whose presence you seek.
And that my friends, that is the identity you want on your passport
when you make for that gate to Bethlehem and ask it to open for you.