

BASINGSTOKE AND READING METHODIST CIRCUIT

An Order of Service for the Third Sunday in Advent

What then shall we do?

The words of the hymns are on the last page

Welcome and Notices: Steward

Advent Candle Lighting Liturgy:

This or some other candle lighting liturgy may be used:

Advent 3 — John the Baptist

Jesus said, 'No one more important than John the Baptist has ever been born; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.'

Amen. Come soon, Lord Jesus!

The first, second and third candles are lit

This response is used

Jesus is the light of the world.

A light no darkness can ever put out.

Introduction:

In our readings today, the prophet Zephaniah reassures God's people of the joy of the Lord in the restored city (Jerusalem). John tells those who have come to be baptized that their faith needs to make a difference to their everyday living. And Paul told the Philippians that their faith is one of joy, love, and peace in Jesus.

Call to Worship and Gathering Prayer:

Some words from Isaiah 12:2-6 (Canticle)

Surely God is my salvation;

I will trust, and will not be afraid,
for the LORD GOD is my strength and my might;
he has become my salvation.

With joy you will draw water from the wells of
salvation. And you will say in that day:

Let us Pray

God of our Salvation,
We gather to offer you our worship.
May the flames of our Advent' candles
be for us a sign of the light
that reveals to us our path through life,
that inspires us to live simply and generously,
after the example and call of John the Baptist,
that we ourselves may be signs of the good news we proclaim.
In Jesus' name. **Amen**

Give thanks to the LORD,

call on his name;
make known his deeds among the nations;
proclaim that his name is exalted.

Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously;
let this be known in all the earth.

Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion,
for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

Opening hymn: StF 54 – I will worship (I will worship) – Dave Ruis – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VZ3lZ2Ozby0>

Prayers of Approach and Adoration

O Lord our God,
God of the prophets and God of the now,
you are with us.
Your power gives us victory.
You take delight in us.
And in love, you give us new life.
Hear us as we come to you today.

God of glory,
you brought the universe into existence,
and raised up witnesses
to your greatness and love.
We praise and adore you.
Grant that by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit
we may worship and serve you,
and praise your holy name;
through Christ our Lord. **Amen**

Prayer of Confession and Assurance of Forgiveness and the Collect

Let us confess our sins to God,
trusting in his mercy and forgiveness.

Holy and forgiving God,
we have sinned against you and each other
in thought and word and deed.

We have turned from your life-giving word,
and ignored the message of those you sent.
We are unprepared for the coming of your Son.

**Have mercy upon us and forgive us,
that strengthened by your love
we may serve you more faithfully;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen**

Silence

‘I am making all things new’, says the Lord.

This is Christ’s gracious word:

‘Your sins are forgiven.’

Amen. Thanks be to God

Collect

God of mercy and power,
whose Son rules over all,
grant us so to live in obedience to your holy will,
that at his appearing
we may be raised to eternal life;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

Reflection:

Many of you may have heard the expression — *home is where the heart is* — this expression is generally attributed to the Roman naval commander, Gaius ‘Plinius Secundus’, known to historians as ‘Pliny the Elder’ (a.d. 23-79), although there is no credible verification that he actually said it. The prophet Zephaniah began his prophecy announcing to Judah God’s approaching judgement but, Zephaniah ends with profoundly hopeful words: *I will bring you home* (v.20). These words have meant and mean so much to God’s people living in exile, far away from home:

Many of us may be able to identify with the ‘longing for home’ — it may be a longing for the safety of home or to be safe in the home you are in. We can think of many who share this longing, such as — the people in Mexico or Palestine separated from loved ones by walls; those who have been and/or are still separated from loved ones because of COVID 19; those enslaved against their will longing for freedom; refugees fleeing from war seeking a place of safety; children neglected and abused longing to be loved and protected; and the list can go on. For these and many others, the longing for good news is often grounded in the context of a longing for home, a place of safety and security. The thought of home is always an emotive one because home will always be the place for which you feel the deepest affection, no matter where you are.

God through the prophet Zephaniah speaks good news to his people, promising to *bring them home*. But Zephaniah suggests that Jerusalem can only be *home* when God is there himself. Home therefore — is not so much where the heart is, as much as where God is!

Let us now hear our first two **Readings** from:

- Old Testament: Zephaniah 3:14-20
- Epistle: Philippians 4:4-7

Second hymn: StF 418 – We have a gospel to proclaim – *Edward Joseph Burns (b. 1938)* - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E-SPYAgCtkw>

- Gospel Reading: Luke 3:7-18

Sermon:

The book of Zephaniah in general is **not** cheerful reading. Zephaniah serves as prophet to Judah (the southern kingdom of Israel), during the reign of king Josiah, the last good king of Judah. It is believed that Josiah's attempts to reform the nation and turn it back to God were probably influenced by Zephaniah. Apart from a brief family tree, very little is known of Zephaniah.

The verses set for today's reading are so untypical of the book of Zephaniah, that they are generally thought to be a later addition, to give a more optimistic ending to an otherwise gloomy book. The purpose of this brief book (three chapters) is to shake the people of Judah out of their complacency and urge them to return to God. The book moves from the condemnation of Jerusalem, to dire warnings for most of the surrounding nations, to this sudden hopeful passage we read today, which could have come straight out of the book of Isaiah. That being said, our passage today from Zephaniah has a distinct logic to it. In verses 12-13, the only people left are 'a people humble and lowly', and it is to them that God comes. Finally, God chooses to come and live in Jerusalem and his presence makes it home. There is a sudden change in verse 18 from the third person to the first person, suggesting that God himself is promising to bring his people home. As we heard in our brief reflection earlier, 'home' conjures up a lot of emotions. There has always been a lot of debate over who has the right to call Jerusalem home. But Zephaniah suggests that Jerusalem can only be 'home' when God is there himself. The words of Saint Augustine echo this sentiment, 'Our hearts are restless till they find their rest in thee'. There is an invitation to train our hearts to feel at home only where God is. Suggesting that there is a longing within us that can only be satisfied when we find fellowship with God and experience God's love. It is only in God that our restless hearts can rest.

One may be tempted to say there is hardly any good news in the gospel reading, but John's message of repentance is one of grace — it is a privilege to be able to prepare for God's coming. In a very symbolic way John says that God's judgement is near for those who give no evidence of repentance — (*the axe is already at the root of the tree*). In response to the people's question 'What shall we do then?' John said that words alone would not prepare them for God's coming and that ancestry (being Abraham's descendants) is not enough either. I could hear John saying to us too, much more is required than being born into a Christian family or professing to be a Christian, or attending church (although all of the above is wonderful). Like John's audience we must 'bear the fruit of repentance' in order to be prepared for the coming of God. It is so easy to feel at home in one's ancestry or one's material possessions. But John, like Zephaniah, said it is the works of faith (doing what is just and good), are the only way to prepare oneself for God's coming. John offered his audience plenty of practical advice about the path they choose and about how their actions make them prepared or unprepared for God's coming. Paul's words of advice to the Philippians 'to let their gentleness be evident to all' is not a call to be doormats — rather, it means that our faith must be clearly visible and, as John suggests, each of us must live out our faith in authenticity in our individual circumstances.

When Paul told the Philippians to 'rejoice in the Lord', we need to keep in mind that Paul was writing to a Roman colony where Caesar was revered as 'Lord' — and his birthday was marked with great celebration. Philippi, like many other cities in the Roman Empire, relied heavily on the *pax Romana* (the peace of Rome, which had come after the civil war a hundred years before), and which was maintained by heavy-handed and often brutal rule. So it is against such fragile peace and security that Paul said '*the peace of God which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus*'. This is indeed a military concept depicting a watchman standing guard — and Paul used it to speak of God's protective 'care' of those who are in Christ living in a context of fragile peace and security. The advent hope that God's peace will one day rule in the world certainly enables it to now rule in our hearts.

It is often said that John the Baptist stands on the cusp of salvation-history, between the Old and new Testaments, not really belonging to either. In that sense, John was the ideal person to prepare the way for the homeless God, since John dispossessed himself for the sake of God's calling. While John was central to God's work in salvation-history, John was clear that he was no more than a 'voice crying out in the wilderness', and that he would only succeed in what he had been called to do when he was made redundant.

So John was born to tell us, 'The Lord is near,' be prepared for his coming — and we must see John's message of repentance as one of grace, affording us the privilege to be able to prepare ourselves for God's coming. Paul says 'the Lord is near' and admonishes us to live our lives in such a manner that enable others to see that God is about to arrive. And after a series of gloomy messages, God through the prophet Zephaniah speaks good news to His people, promising to *bring them home*. But Zephaniah suggests that Jerusalem can only be *home* when God is there himself.

In the backdrop of our Advent readings is the heavily pregnant Mary close to her time to give birth to the Son of God in a manger. Mary too, like us, had to learn to be at home where God is. God was willing to be homeless so that we can find a home in him — this is what we celebrate at Christmas — and this is what we spend Advent trying to imagine and to prepare for.

Third hymn: StF 272 – From heaven you came helpless babe – *Graham Kendrick (b. 1950)* - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vpwfDXcKrNQ>

A Prayer of Thanksgiving

Praise to you, Lord God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
We praise you for the gift of witnesses to your love.
We give thanks for the witness of John the Baptist
and his message to the people and its relevance for us today.
In his story and his teaching, we see the heart of your being,
fairness and justice and equality for your people.
We give you thanks for the ordinary everyday life
that witnesses to your power and glory.
We give thanks that you are always surprising us
and meeting us right where we are.
We give thanks for your light in our times of darkness,
for your hand in times of aloneness,
for your leading in times of uncertainty.
To you, our triune God,
we offer our praise and thanksgiving. **Amen**

Prayers of Intercession

Good and gracious God, we pray for your church,
take us as we are and cultivate in us
a heart that truly longs for your coming.
We open ourselves to your love
that you may keep us steadfast in the faith.

Lord, our deliverer
You are our refuge and strength.

God of justice and of mercy, we pray
for those entrusted with great wealth,
that they would see where they could make changes and enrich others;
for those entrusted with great power,
that they would make changes for the good of those they serve;

Prepared by: Revd Audrey D Browne / Third in Advent / Resources used: Roots, MWB

for those entrusted with great influence,
that they would make changes that would inspire others.

Lord, our deliverer

You are our refuge and strength.

Lord, God, who takes great delight in your people,
we rejoice that you are with us in our homes.
Make us sensitive in our dealings with each other,
attentive to the needs and desires of our loved ones.
We pray for all homes where there is fear and abuse...

Lord, our deliverer

You are our refuge and strength.

We pray for those in any kind of need (names),
those who are sick (names),
those who are weary and weak,
those who are in pain or suffering hurt.

We remember and give thanks for the life of those who have died recently (names)
Comfort those who mourn (names),
may they know your strength and grace upholding them in their grief.
We rejoice with all who have left behind the troubles of this world
and now experience the glorious liberty of the children of God.
We pray that we too might change and become more like your Son,
Jesus Christ, our Saviour. **Amen**

*We conclude our prayers by saying together “**The Lord’s Prayer...**”*

Closing hymn: StF 94 – To God be the glory – *Frances Jane van Alstyne (Fanny Crosby) (1820-1915)* -
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a2EaA7E0aXk>

A Sending Out Prayer and Blessing

As *we/you* go from this place;
may *we/you* be of good courage;
may *we/you* hold fast to that which is good;
strengthen the faint-hearted;
support the weak;
honour all people;
and love and serve the Lord.

...and may the blessing of God,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit
be within *us/you* and among *us/you*,
and remain with *us/you* always. **Amen**

I will worship (I will worship)

With all of my heart, (with all of my heart)
I will praise You, (I will praise You)
With all of my strength (all my strength)
I will seek You (I will seek You)
all of my days (all of my days)
I will follow (I will follow)
all of Your ways (all Your ways)

*I will give You all my worship
I will give You all my praise
You alone I long to worship
You alone are worthy of my praise*

I will bow down (I will bow down)
hail You as King (hail You as King)
I will serve You (I will serve You)
give You everything (give You everything)
I will lift up (I will lift up)
my eyes to Your throne (my eyes to Your throne)
I will trust You (I will trust You)
I will trust You alone (trust You alone)

We have a gospel to proclaim,

good news for all throughout the earth;
the gospel of a Saviour's name:
we sing his glory, tell his worth.

Tell of His birth at Bethlehem —
not in a royal house or hall
but in a stable dark and dim:
the Word made flesh, a light for all.

Tell of His death at Calvary,
hated by those He came to save;
in lonely suffering on the cross
for all He loved, His life He gave.

Tell of that glorious Easter morn:
empty the tomb, for He was free.
He broke the power of death and hell
that we might share His victory.

Tell of His reign at God's right hand,
by all creation glorified;
He sends His Spirit on His Church
to live for Him, the Lamb who died.

Now we rejoice to name Him King:
Jesus is Lord of all the earth.
This gospel-message we proclaim:
we sing His glory, tell His worth.

From heaven you came helpless babe

entered our world, your glory veiled
not to be served but to serve
and give Your life that we might live

*This is our God, the Servant King
he calls us now to follow Him
to bring our lives as a daily offering
of worship to the Servant King*

There in the garden of tears
my heavy load He chose to bear
his heart with sorrow was torn
'Yet not My will but Yours, ' He said

Come see His hands and His feet
the scars that speak of sacrifice
hands that flung stars into space
to cruel nails surrendered

So let us learn how to serve
and in our lives enthrone Him
each other's needs to prefer
for it is Christ we're serving

To God be the glory great things He has done!

So loved He the world that He gave us His Son
who yielded His life an atonement for sin
and opened the life-gate that all may go in

*Praise the Lord, praise the Lord
Let the earth hear His voice
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord
Let the people rejoice*

*O come to the Father, through Jesus the Son,
and give Him the glory — great things He has done!*

O perfect redemption, the purchase of blood
to every believer the promise of God
and evert offender who truly believes
that moment from Jesus a pardon receives

Great things He has taught us, great things He has done
and great our rejoicing through Jesus the Son
but purer, and higher, and greater will be
Our wonder, our rapture, when Jesus we see: