

## Third Sunday of Advent

### Third Sunday of Advent – 15 December 2019

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Rev Liz Crumlish, Path of Renewal Coordinator, for her thoughts on the third Sunday of Advent.

Our new online music resource is now live: [here](#) you can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4). The search function allows you to bring up a list of songs by keyword, tune, theme, author, composer and metre, covering all of the indexes in the hymnbook. The site features Weekly Worship and thematic/seasonal playlists, alternative settings and background information on the hymns.

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Isaiah 35:1-10.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Psalms 146:5-10.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>James 5:7-10 .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Matthew 11:2-11 .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Sermon ideas .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Prayers .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Alternative Material.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Musical suggestions .....</b>	<b>13</b>

## Introduction

This third Sunday of Advent is also celebrated in some places as Gaudete Sunday – *gaudete* means Rejoice! Some Advent rings or wreaths may contain a pink candle, symbolising joy, which is lit today.

This far through Advent, as preparations for Christmas ramp up and life, for many, spirals out of control, it is helpful, in worship, to sit with the joy that has become a traditional theme for the third Sunday of Advent. There is the opportunity to celebrate joy, its exuberance, its bubbling up as mirth. But there is also a chance to experience the quiet joy that infuses our hope-filled wait for the Incarnation. Perhaps many who come to worship will appreciate a quieter, more reflective antidote to the rush and noise of the season that is taking over elsewhere in our community life.

Our readings speak of joy and anticipation, the breaking out of an alternative, long-awaited release for a people who were living under oppressive regimes yet still clung to the hope that things might be different and held on to their faith that the Messiah would come.

In the midst of blaring Christmas music accompanying daily life – in shops, coffee shops, on the daily commute, paring back to the more subtle sounds of Advent, highlighting our waiting for something more might be a welcome interlude and may help those in worship find meaning and solace in ancient texts that speak of the breaking in of the reign of God in the harshness of daily life.

*Rejoice!*

*Just as the steps begin to weary  
on a journey that began  
with so much promise and hope  
there comes a brief respite  
while we pause in our journey to Bethlehem.*

*That pause is filled with expectation,  
of rest and renewal  
of joy and anticipation.*

*We salute Mary the mother of God  
and take a moment  
to ponder, with her  
how far we have come  
and the journey that we continue  
and resolve, as we light the pink candle*

*to say yes!  
to an awesome journey  
with the God who loves  
to take us on a journey  
we would never have imagined  
and who gives us the courage  
to go along  
on a bumpy ride  
of discovery.  
Rejoice!  
(Liz Crumlish)*

I love to sit with the Lectionary texts, each in turn for a while, reading them over a few times and then reflecting on any words or phrases that particularly capture my attention – a very simple form of Lectio Divina. As well as musing on the words, I also pay attention to any memories they evoke, perhaps words of a song, or of times I've heard the passage in the past, recalling where and with whom. All of these things shape how I receive and interpret the text in the present.

### **Isaiah 35:1-10**

In this passage, I am struck by the words: *the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus*. Here, in the cold, damp season of winter, we are a few weeks, perhaps even months away from seeing the crocus burst through the frozen or sodden earth, yet we know that it will, bringing welcome colour into the greyness and a reminder of resilience and hope.

I also recall how this text was used as the theme for a conference I attended in Baltimore a few years ago. The conference was entitled "The Desert Shall Bloom" and was a wonderful celebration of hope and abundance in the midst of all the statistics of church decline. The reign of God, like the crocus, breaks through in unlikely places, reminding the people of God of the power of the one in whom we place our trust. And when we see signs of God's reign, everything around is transformed. Nothing God touches is left as it was. And so we also read of streams and pools and swamps appearing, transforming the parched desert landscape.

The end of the passage also brings to mind a song we used to sing:

*Therefore the redeemed of the Lord shall return*

*And come with singing unto Zion  
And everlasting joy shall be upon their head  
Therefore the redeemed of the Lord shall return  
And come with singing unto Zion  
And everlasting joy shall be upon their head  
They shall obtain gladness and joy  
And sorrow and mourning shall flee away  
Therefore the redeemed of the Lord shall return  
And come with singing unto Zion  
And everlasting joy shall be upon their head*

### **Psalm 146:5-10**

The Psalmist not only speaks of hope in God, but highlights the signs that confirm the transforming presence and spirit of God.

As I read this passage, the words in v7 especially stood out: *who executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry.*

Our hopes and longings today are for the same kind of justice that filled the hopes of the Psalmists' contemporaries. We too, long to see people set free from oppressive regimes. We too, long to see the hungry fed.

The words of the Psalmist are echoed in Mary's song – The Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55), a song considered subversive by many, with its talk of the powerful being overthrown and the lowly lifted up.

Reading these words in Advent calls us back to making them a reality in our world today – to practise subversion if you will!

### **James 5:7-10**

Be patient, exhorts James. Be patient. As those words hang around, as they percolate into my consciousness, I find myself conflicted by them. James reminds us of how the prophets were faithful in the midst of suffering, waiting for God to restore the fortunes of God's people.

But I am agitated by the notion of patience today. It seems too passive an attribute for today's world. It also feels too much like a get-out. Instead, I want to be impatient. Impatient for God's reign to be evident. Impatient to see change. Impatient to see an end to poverty and oppression and injustice and war... Patience simply doesn't cut it today. And yet...isn't it possible to work for justice, to feed the hungry, to alleviate poverty while patiently waiting on God? Isn't that a valid way of being patient?

## [Matthew 11:2-11](#)

As I read this passage, the words that stuck were right at the beginning: *When John heard in prison...* It's that stark reminder of how bleak things were for John. He must have had a fairly good inkling that things were not going to end well for him. So he sent his disciples to find out if Jesus, the one for whom he'd prepared the way really was the Messiah? It seems natural that, from the depths of his despair, he would want assurance that his life had not been in vain. There are many joyful words in this reading as Jesus points out to John's disciples the evidence of the kingdom breaking through. But I'm drawn to sit, for a moment, with a man, facing the cutting short of his life, wondering if his life has been worthwhile. Hopefully, it was reported back to him that Jesus called him the greatest man born of woman, but let's remember John the Baptist, sent to prepare the way, spending his last days in prison.

This passage also reminds me of a time I preached as sole nominee in a parish – it seemed very apposite, if slightly tongue in cheek, to hear read: *Are you the one who is to come, or should we wait for another? (Matthew 11:3)*

## Sermon ideas

How can we reflect the theme of joy that we traditionally celebrate at this stage in the Advent season?

All of our texts point to the signs of the kingdom, the ways that we know God is at work.

This would be a good Sunday to celebrate how the people of God – gathered in worship, each in their own way – usher in that kingdom today: we might celebrate our food bank collections, our efforts to tackle poverty, the provision we make to counter isolation, the ways we rejoice together and mourn together... It's an opportunity to remind each other that what we do individually and collectively, as church together and church dispersed, helped to promote God's kingdom today.

It's not too late to gather food for the hungry, clothing for those who need it, gifts for those who have little, redoubling our efforts to make a difference.

Perhaps, with the theme of streams in the desert, it might be possible to begin a new project – ensuring that others have clean water or participating in [toilet twinning](#) or one of the many other global projects that allow us to transform the lives of others and know ourselves transformed.

And, as we celebrate all that is happening, we might also look forward to all that God promises.

Perhaps we may even plant some crocus bulbs, so that, when they emerge, they will be a tangible reminder of God's promise.

The passage from James might become a focus for us not to be passive in our patience, to trust in the timing of God but to do our part in the work of the kingdom now.

And, from the gospel, we might ask: What are the signs to which Jesus would point today: where is the kingdom breaking out in our midst?

## Prayers

### Approach to God and Confession

*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. (Philippians 4:4-5)*

God You invite us to come to You rejoicing.

Rejoicing that Your kingdom is near

Rejoicing that Your promise is true

Rejoicing that here, You welcome us, children of the living God, co-creators with You in the world.

We rejoice that You welcome us as we are,  
with all our faults and failing, with all our unrealised potential.  
Your embrace is wide enough to encompass all.

And it is from that place of love and welcome, O God,  
that we confess all our wrong doing, all the things we neglected to do,  
the ways we didn't love each other as we might,

the ways we failed to reflect Your indiscriminate love,  
the ways we failed to share our abundance with others.

God, forgive us, and call us out to try again, to serve You and one another,  
in ways that honour You.

Bring forth gentleness in us along with kindness in all that we do.

May we live as those who know that the Lord is near,  
rejoicing in all Your goodness, living Your abundant life.

*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. (Philippians 4:4-5)*

Amen

### **Thanksgiving**

For daily bread and those with whom we share it

**Thank You God**

For days full and occupied or quiet and restful

**Thank You God**

For plans and preparations and chance encounters

**Thank You God**

For opportunities to serve and be served.

**Thank You God**

For the anticipation all around as we prepare to celebrate Your birth.

**Thank You God**

For quiet moments when we can pause to contemplate all that Your birth means for us.

**Thank You God**

For the blessing we enjoy and the ways You call us to share.

**Thank You God**

For the joy of giving and receiving

**Thank You God**

For the assurance that You will be born whether we are ready or not

**Thank You God**

For all the ways You call us to transform the world and be transformed.

**Thank you God**

**Amen**

### **Intercession**

God, as we consider Your word for us today,  
in the midst of a world that doesn't seem so very different from the world in which Your prophets spoke,  
as we prepare to welcome Your Son to a world still in need of all that You bring –  
food for the hungry, clothing for the naked, justice for the oppressed,  
healing for those who are hurting, peace for those caught up in war –  
God, we hold on to hope and even to joy for those are Your promises to us.

We hold on to hope and joy, not because we don't live in the real world,  
not because we do not care, or because we, too, aren't hurt or worried,  
but because we know Your promises to be true.

We know that You call us to be patient, not passively patient,  
but actively patient, making a difference where we can,  
knowing that You can multiply all that we do.

We hold on to hope and to joy because there are signs of Your kingdom breaking through.  
There are signs of the thirsty being given clean water.  
There are signs of beauty breaking out in brokenness, of streams in the desert.  
And it is to those signs that You call us, in the midst of darkness,  
to look, to find hope, to rejoice.

God, there is so much in today's world that conspires against hope,  
so much to rob us of joy, yet You call us to persist,  
to persist in doing good and to persist in looking for the good that is all around.

So, God, open our eyes, open our hands, open our hearts to love and serve You,  
rejoicing in every opportunity and in every transformation You accomplish through us  
and in us.

This Rejoice Sunday, we rejoice in being Your servants,  
called, equipped, sent to serve You in all, for Your glory. Amen



## Alternative Material

This material has been supplied by kind permission of Spill the Beans and allows you to explore the readings or theme of the service in creative ways that include everyone gathering for worship.

New material from Spill the Beans is provided in the latest issues available from their [website](#).

### Advent – Prophetic Pathways

During Advent and Christmas we will be focusing on the Old Testament passages from the prophets and thinking about the pathways the prophets encourage us to walk through Advent and beyond.

Here are a couple of suggestions for building pathways through your worship space to help people to remember and reflect on the words of the prophets and the connections those words have with their lives at this time.

#### Pathway Poster(s)

Prepare a large poster sized picture of a pathway. You can either have one poster which you add things to each week or a poster for each of the weeks. These can be hung around your worship space.

#### Pathways

Pathways can be made for your worship space by laying out stones to mark the edges of pathways or by using rolls of thick paper (or vinyl floor covering) cut into a pathway shape, the full width of the paper at one end and gradually tapering to a narrow path at the other end. These pathways could easily be tidied up or rolled away from one week to the other, could be shaped to fit your worship space and could be moved around to different areas of your worship space. It would be good to take a photo of the pathway each week before you put it away and to display images from previous weeks either on PowerPoint or on a display board. If you have some floor space that is not used for other things, you might want to lay out the pathway after worship and join the pathways together to make a mini labyrinth.

### **Isaiah 35:1-10 – Pathway to Wholeness**

*Pathway Poster:* add words ‘Pathway to Wholeness’ and add images of things that come together, for example last piece of jigsaw, a knitted item, people working together.

*Pathways:* lay out small poinsettia plants along edges of pathway. Ask people to scatter sand along the pathway. At the end of worship invite people to take a poinsettia home with them.

### **Bible Notes**

#### **Isaiah 35:1-10 – The High Line**

In 1964 the sociologist Ruth Glass coined the term ‘gentrification’ to describe the rapid changes in urban areas where working-class residents became displaced by the growing numbers of middle-class who transformed what had been run down areas into highly desirable residential areas. In the process, Glass notes, “the whole social character of the district is changed.”

Depending on your location (which can be urban or rural) this may be a process of which people are well aware. It is most documented in urban settings, but the influx of wealthy middleclass retirees to some rural communities has completely transformed those communities in similar fashion over recent years.

There is a positive to this transformation in the increase in financial capital within those areas, but there is also a negative in terms of decreased social capital that is difficult to regain.

While not wanting to labour the mixed illustration of gentrification, nonetheless there are times when an area is so ravaged that nothing but a complete transformation will bring benefit back to the wider community. Such is the case with the High Line in Manhattan’s West Side—a piece of elevated rail track that was earmarked for demolition but that was saved by local residents who have transformed the mile long track to create a life-enhancing park space within the city.

In essence, the doxology from Isaiah is also a celebration of transformation, and thus follows in the same vein as the previous week. These verses celebrate and witness to a God who can transform even the most desperate situations in which people know abandonment, threat and fearfulness. Much of the preceding chapters in the Isaiah collection are taken up with accounting for the predicament Israel found herself in. Here, with a nod back to 29:17-18 we find the affirmation that God can bring restoration. From

the worst situations, God can bring nurture, new life, fresh vision and hope. Even the life-threatening wilderness will become a place where blossoms abound.

These verses, and particular 5-7, do not just talk about the promise of new life and new starts, however, they speak in terms of restored completeness: this is a hymn to wholeness. And, as such, this is wonderful good news for the broken and the hurt. It is, thus, no wonder that the gospel writers saw allusions to the incarnation of Good News whom they wrote about in this and other passages from the prophetic writing. Humanity will find its completeness and wholeness only through the glorious presence and action of God.

Verse 8-10 describe a pathway of holiness, a righteous road (those purity laws were never far away), perhaps even a 'high line', and we might ponder what it means for us in 2013 to stand on this path during the preparation time of Advent. What are the things that leave us fearful, feeling lost and abandoned in the barren wilderness areas of life? What are the areas of our lives that seek transformation and wholeness? In our communities, where do we see glimmers of new life and restoration, and where should our efforts as followers on the pathway of holiness be expended to bring wholeness?

What can we do, alongside creation's witness as described in Isaiah, to witness to the glory of God?

### **Retelling for Young People – *The Road Home***

*You could use the Fischy Music song "We're on this road" during this section.*

- What's the road like between your house and your school?
- Are there pavements? Are there gardens and houses? What else?
- Are there traffic lights? Is there a person to help you cross the road?
- What's the road like between your home and this church?
- Do you walk here or cycle here or come in a car?
- Who do you come with?
- What do you like looking at along the way?
- Have you got a favourite road? What's it like? Has it got a name? Where does it go to?

There's a story in the bible about a road from a country called Babylon to a big city called Jerusalem. This road ran through a hot desert. Listen to what it was like.

Alongside the road were flowers and in some places there were streams and pools of water. The road was a safe road and it was a happy road. People laughed and sang as they walked along it. The road was called 'Holy Way' and no-one travelling on it ever got lost. Best of all it was the road that took people home.

- What do you think you might see on your road home today?

### **Call to Prayer**

Pathways, B roads,  
even A roads and motorways,  
routes of all description,  
all heading in the same direction.  
Where are we heading?  
John came to show the way,  
to point to our wholeness-maker.  
Making way for fellow travellers,  
we keep journeying towards wholeness.

### **Prayer of Intercession**

It can feel, Loving God,  
like we are fit to burst with excitement.  
The time is getting so close—  
the time of celebration,  
the time of giving  
and the time of receiving.

Loving God, bless our waiting:  
that we give true weight  
to the wonder of Christmas:  
that in that baby, in the manger,  
the world is offered the greatest gift  
no money could buy: your very self.

Help us be calm in the waiting time,  
and thoughtful for others  
who need, because of their needs,

to be reassured of your love.  
We pray we give them the gift  
of our very selves, in prayer  
and loving action.

### **Sending**

Leader: May the Lord of all go with us today.

**All: May we,  
the children of the Lord,  
seek wholeness today.  
Wholeness for us,  
wholeness for our church,  
wholeness for our community.**

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### **Musical suggestions**

*You can hear samples of these suggestions in the 'Weekly Worship' section of <https://music.churchofscotland.org.uk/>. This new online music resource will allow you to listen to and search the breadth of music available in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4).*

*You will find hidden gems and alternative arrangements to familiar songs that will inspire creativity and spark fresh curiosity about how we best use music in worship.*

- CH4 284 – “Hope is a candle” - A great candle-lighting song to a Scottish folk tune, add one verse each week.
- CH4 257 – “Singing we gladly worship the Lord, together” – a hymn that speaks of the joy of service and transformation of the world’s darkness
- CH4 259 – “Beauty for brokenness” – a hymn that acknowledges the work of God in the midst of injustice.
- CH4 291 – “When out of poverty is born” – this hymn speaks of preparing the way, bringing John the Baptist in our gospel reading into focus
- CH4 276 – “Wait for the Lord” – The chorus of this hymn might be sung as a refrain in the intercessions

- CH4 277 – “Hark the glad sound” – bringing in the Rejoicing themes of the third Sunday of Advent
- Therefore the redeemed of the Lord by Maranatha Music– YouTube video:  
<https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=therefore+the+redeemed+of+the+lord+lyrics&view=detail&mid=AD32791B358EA0ED1BDDAD32791B358EA0ED1BDD&FORM=VIRE>

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