

## Tamworth City Uniting Church

Worship on 13<sup>th</sup> December 2020

### THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT



#### Acknowledgement of Country

As we enter this time of worship we acknowledge the custodianship of this land by the Gamilaroi peoples - the traditional owners of this land, and pay respect to their elders – past and present.

#### Call to Worship

Come together, people of God.

Pray, praise, and listen to familiar words of revolutionary change.

The Living God does great things for us, and Holy is her Name.  
She tumbles the mighty, raises the humble, scatters the schemers,  
feeds the hungry and dismisses the overfed.'

Come together, people of God.

Pray, praise and listen to familiar words of revolutionary change.

My soul glorifies the living God, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.

Come together, people of God in hope of revolutionary change!

#### Song *Hark the glad sound*

Hark the glad sound! The Saviour comes, the Saviour promised long;  
let every heart prepare a throne and every voice a song.

On him the Spirit largely poured exerts its sacred fire;  
wisdom and might and zeal and love his holy breast inspire.

He comes the prisoners to release in Satan's bondage held;  
the gates of brass before him burst, and iron fetters yield.

He comes the broken heart to bind, the bleeding soul to cure,  
and with the treasures of his grace to enrich the humble poor.

Our glad hosannas, Prince of Peace, your welcome shall proclaim,  
and heaven's exalted arches ring with your beloved name.

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### **Prayer of Confession**

God, take our guilt  
**and replace it with transcendent love** (pause)

Take our sorrow,  
**and water our lives with compassion** (pause)

Take our selfishness,  
**and reform it with a love for justice** (pause)

Take our barrenness,  
**and impregnate us with hope** (pause)

Take our conflict,  
**and infuse it with peace** (pause)

Take our world,  
**and cram it with joy** (pause)

God renews, restores, reconnects us,  
And we rejoice!

### **Words of Assurance**

Living and loving God, we praise and adore you  
for calling us out of hiding, accepting us in Christ,  
forgiving our sin, and setting us free.  
With mind and body, heart and voice,  
we rejoice and exult that you are who you are,  
for ever and ever. **Amen!**

**Song**            *Halle, halle, halle-lu-jah!*

Halle, halle, halle-lu-jah! Halle, halle, halle-lu-jah!  
Halle, halle, halle-lu-jah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

### **Lighting of the Third Advent Candle**

A prophet tells us how God comes –  
through someone who receives God's spirit,  
and through a community that hears and bears witness to, the good news:

We light our third candle, as a sign of hope  
that the Spirit of God may anoint us to show God's liberating love.

(The third candle is lit)

Living God, you proclaim liberty to captives.  
**Set us free, that we may free others.**  
**Bind our wounds, that we may heal others.**  
**Fill us with your Spirit, and anoint us with your love.**

**The Hebrew Scripture**      *Isaiah 61:1-4; 8-11*

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me;  
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken hearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners;  
<sup>2</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour, and the day of vengeance of our God;  
to comfort all who mourn;  
<sup>3</sup> to provide for those who mourn in Zion to give them a garland instead of ashes,  
the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.  
They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.  
<sup>4</sup> They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations;  
they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.  
<sup>8</sup> For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing;  
I will faithfully give them their recompense,  
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.  
<sup>9</sup> Their descendants shall be known among the nations and their offspring among the peoples;  
all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed.  
<sup>10</sup> I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God;  
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,  
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,  
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.  
<sup>11</sup> For as the earth brings forth its shoots,  
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,  
so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

**The Gospel**      *John 1:6-8; 19-28*

<sup>6</sup> There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>7</sup> He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. <sup>8</sup> He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. <sup>9</sup> The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.<sup>[a]</sup>  
<sup>19</sup> This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" <sup>20</sup> He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." <sup>21</sup> And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." <sup>22</sup> Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" <sup>23</sup> He said,  
"I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,  
'Make straight the way of the Lord,'"  
as the prophet Isaiah said.  
<sup>24</sup> Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. <sup>25</sup> They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" <sup>26</sup> John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, <sup>27</sup> the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." <sup>28</sup> This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

## Message

For my introduction to this week's message I'm drawing on an article I read last week from the Christian magazine 'Sojourners' as I think it's pertinent to some of the thoughts I have on our gospel reading.

The article talks about life involving a lot of waiting:

Waiting in line at the supermarket check-out.

Waiting in the doctor's office.

Waiting for the traffic lights to change.

Waiting for test results.

Waiting nine months for a child to be born.

Parents waiting for children to grow up and act more maturely.

Teachers waiting for students to finally grasp a concept.

At this time of year – children waiting for Christmas and the arrival of Santa Claus.

In the church year – this time, known as Advent, is often seen as a season of waiting.

We hear talk about waiting for a saviour to come and free us from whatever is holding us back.

We wait with hope, for God to intervene in our lives – and the life of the world and to take the whole of creation in a different direction.

When we see that the world hasn't changed much from this time last year, we might well ask 'When will our waiting end? When will God come and release us from whatever it is that binds us and our world?'

Unfortunately, religious practices can degenerate into nothing more than waiting.

We wait for God to respond to a prayer and make things go the way we want.

We wait for God to right a wrong.

We wait for God to set things straight.

We wait for God to change the world and to change our lives.

But wait!

What if we've got things around the wrong way?

What if – instead of us waiting on God, God is waiting on us?

I don't know about you, but I find these to be fairly provocative words: What if – instead of us waiting on God, God is waiting on us.

In our gospel reading we have a slightly different take on John the Baptist to what we encountered in Mark's gospel last week. Last week the focus was on repentance and preparing the way for Christ. This week, the emphasis in John's gospel is not on the content of John the Baptist's preaching, but on his role as a witness — our reading says: he came as a witness to testify to the light, a witness to the one who was among them but whom they didn't know. A witness to the one who was so much greater that John felt unworthy to untie his sandals.

This account is all about bearing witness.

I am not the one, says John, but I am the voice crying out to bear witness to the one. John didn't sit back and wait for God to do something. Rather, he saw his role as getting out there and telling people about what God was doing in the form of Jesus, the person whom he identified as 'the light' – the true light which enlightens everyone.

I believe our passage highlights what we – Jesus' 21<sup>st</sup> century disciples, should be doing – and that is bearing witness and testifying to the light. Here, identified in our passage, as Jesus, God's son who brought the light and love of God into the world.

We might ask ourselves what bearing witness and testifying means. Well .... In our context I think it means professing and proclaiming Christ as our Lord. It means proclaiming that in and through Christ and his Spirit, we can know the love of God – a love that is for everyone!

In legal terms to testify means to give evidence. In faith terms it means us giving an open declaration of our faith. Testifying to Christ as the light, means stating clearly that we know – through the story of Jesus as told in the gospels, and through our lived experiences, that the dark places in our lives can be illuminated by the light and love that Jesus brings; that the things that separate us from God can be dispersed by the light of acceptance and forgiveness of Christ.

We are called to be witnesses to God's abundant mercy, love, justice and forgiveness shown in the life of Christ and in our own lives.

How do we do this? Well .... we might take as a starting point, the passage from Isaiah.

This reading speaks of significant acts of witness. It's a passage that Jesus quoted from when, at the commencement of his public ministry, he stood up in the synagogue at Nazareth and read from the scriptures. In the passage Isaiah speaks of an anointed one who brings good news to the oppressed, proclaims freedom for those who are captive in any way, release to those who are imprisoned and announces that God's time has come.

When Jesus used this passage, he cut it short - deliberately leaving out Isaiah's reference to "the day of vengeance of our God". Jesus regularly edited scripture like that as he bore witness to a God who is entirely free of vengefulness.

Jesus, in his life, bore witness to the love of God as he accepted people for who they were – sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors, lepers, Samaritans, and fishermen. He sat down with them, listened to their stories and shared God's love with them – both by word and deed. He taught them about a God who loved them. He taught people that their lives could be free of the things that imprisoned them – whether that be their lifestyle, their mental state, their illness, or their attitudes towards others.

We are called to be witnesses to this light that Christ showed.

We are called to follow his example – at all times making clear that our actions, our love, our acceptance, our compassion and our concern are a result of Christ first loving us.

We are called to openly declare our faith in Christ who is a light to the world.

As I reflected on the report that the Rev Corkin wrote about the workshops he held with the three congregations in the Tamworth area I was struck by his comments that talked about the seeming lack of understanding by the congregations of what the mission of the church is, and whether most of the things the congregations hope to achieve include witnessing to the Christian faith (outside of the weekly worship). His words give us food for thought

John came as a witness and to testify to the Jesus – the light.

We, Jesus' followers, are called as well to testify to the light: not just by our actions, but also by our words. As a community of faith we are called to say why we do what we do – not just assume that, because we are a church, people will automatically understand what we're on about. We are called to name Jesus as the reason for being who we are. We are called to openly give evidence about the one who brings us life and light, hope and encouragement.

God called John the Baptist to testify to point to Jesus, God's son.

It would seem that John didn't have to be pushed or prodded to do this. He didn't hang about waiting to see whether God would act in another way. No! He stated things as he saw them and pointed to one who was coming after him.

John didn't have the benefit of hindsight. He didn't know how Jesus' ministry would unfold. But what he did know was that he had been sent by God to witness and to testify to the one who was God's light to the world.

We have the benefit of knowing about Jesus' life, ministry and teaching.

We know what that has meant to us – both individually and as a community of faith.

Let's not wait for God to act!  
Rather, let's get out there and witness and testify to how Jesus' life has changed our lives and can change the lives of others.

### **Words to Reflect on**

God has chosen me, to bring good news to the poor.  
God has chosen me to bring new sight to those searching for light.

God has chosen me, chosen me.  
To tell the world that God's kingdom is near,  
to remove oppression and break down fear,  
yes, God's time is near.

God has chosen me to set alight a new fire,  
God has chosen me, to bring to birth a new kingdom on earth:

God has chosen me, chosen me.  
To tell the world that God's kingdom is near,  
to remove oppression and break down fear,  
yes, God's time is near.

God is calling me, in all whose cry is unheard.  
God is calling me, to raise up the voice with no power or choice:

God is calling me, calling me.  
To tell the world that God's kingdom is near,  
to remove oppression and break down fear,  
yes, God's time is near.

Bernadette Farrell. Copied under CCLI Worship Licence No. 604439

### **Prayers of the People**

(Prepared by Paul Turner)

Gracious and loving Father God, at this time in our worship of You, we would bring to You in prayer those matters that are of concern.

Lord, if this seems like a shopping list, forgive us, but you have said in Your word, that we should do this, even if we have difficulty articulating our concerns, for You have also said that Your Holy Spirit knows our thoughts, and will bring them to You. This we do, for there is so much that is on our minds.

Heavenly Father, we bring to You our world and its people. There is so much happening at present, that we struggle to understand what is going on. Such is the turmoil of events. We perceive wars, and hear rumours of wars; nation against nation; people against people; absence of love and peace. Yet we do know dear Father, that good things are still happening. Some wonder whether the time is near for Jesus' return. But You have told us that the time is not yet, for these are but signs. We are urged to remain faithful to You, and to be ready for this event, whenever this may be.

Lord, we pray for our own beautiful country Australia. We thank You for our freedoms that we enjoy, and we thank You for stable government. We thank You for rain that has fallen, from which we have received a bountiful harvest, after years of drought. We thank you that due to government control, there has been a significant fall in the incidence of the COVID-19 disease. But we do pray that this will continue to decrease throughout our nation. We pray for the leaders of our nation, and ask for them wisdom, in knowing how to deal with the

continual attacks through the electronic media, from the nation of China. Help us to be strong  
in resisting this.

Gracious God, we pray for the congregations of our Uniting Church in Tamworth. We have attended conferences discussing the future of our churches, and we now have to get together and seek Your will as to our future. At this time, it is not clear how we should deal with the problems facing us. Help us dear Lord, in our discussions, to meet in a spirit of cooperation and love, seeking the guidance of Your Holy Spirit. We realise, if we would admit it, that changes will need to be made, and this may cause anxiety and grief, in the process. In our own congregation, leadership has changes (and will change further), and we ask for wisdom and patience for those who now have to guide us, for the going will not be easy. And we do continue to pray for our Rev Betty, who continues to guide us into the future.

We pray for ourselves and each other. For all of us who are elderly, change is rarely welcomes, and may cause a certain amount of anxiety and sadness. Loving God, help us through this difficult time. Help us to continue to place our trust in You, for we know that if we do, in the end, all will be well.

Now dear Father, we would take a moment in silence, to bring to You those matters that are private.

*TIME OF SILENCE.*

In conclusion O Lord, please lift up the light of your countenance upon us. May Your peace rule in our hearts, and may You continue to be our strength. We commit ourselves and families into Your care, and may Your grace be all sufficient in us. Keep us from sin, may our lives be a witness to our faith and trust in You, and may we live together in holy love and peace. All this we ask and pray in our saviour Jesus' name, who taught us to pray:

Our father in heaven, hallowed be Your name,  
Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth, as in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins,  
As we forgive those who sin against us.  
Keep us from temptation, and deliver us from evil.  
For the Kingdom and the power and the glory are Yours,  
Now and forever. Amen.

**Song**            *Come, thou long expected Jesus*

Come, thou long expected Jesus, born to set your people free,  
from our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in thee.

Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth you are;  
dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart.

Born your people to deliver, born a child and yet a king,  
born to reign in us for ever, now your gracious kingdom bring.

By your own eternal Spirit rule in all our hearts alone;  
By your all sufficient merit raise us to your glorious throne.

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**Blessing**

Go into the coming week knowing that you are loved by God.  
Go into the coming week knowing that Jesus – the light of the world walks ahead of you.  
Go into the coming week knowing that the Spirit is with you – in everything. **Amen.**