



Celebrate

Third Sunday of Advent
December 17, 2023

“Rejoice always,” begins the reading from 1 Thessalonians. Isaiah and the psalmist make clear that God is turning our mourning into laughter and shouts of joy. “All God’s children got a robe,” go the words of a spiritual. It is not so much a stately, formal, pressed outfit as it is a set of party clothes, clothes we are happy to wear. We receive that robe in baptism, and in worship we gather for a foretaste of God’s party.

Prayer of the Day

Stir up the wills of your faithful people, Lord God, and open our ears to the words of your prophets, that, anointed by your Spirit, we may testify to your light; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

First Reading

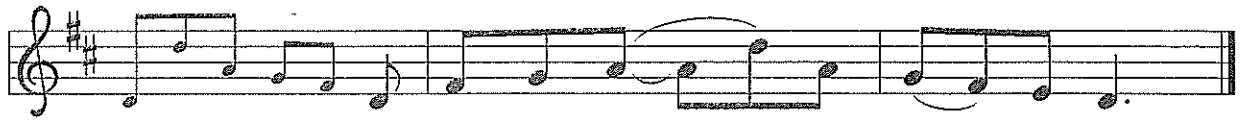
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Though the people had returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon, they continued to face hardship and oppression. In the language of the jubilee year described in Leviticus 25, the prophet, moved by the spirit of God, announces deliverance for those who are oppressed and comfort for those who mourn.

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 brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
²to proclaim the year of the
LORD’s favor,
and the day of vengeance of
our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
³to 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.
⁴They shall build up the ancient
ruins,
they shall raise up the former
devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many
generations.
⁸For 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.
⁹Their descendants shall be known
among the nations,
and their offspring among the
peoples;

continued



The LORD has done great things for us.

When the LORD restored the for-¹ tunes of Zion,
then were we like ¹ those who dream.

²Then was our mouth filled with laughter,
and our tongue with ¹ shouts of joy.

Then they said among the nations,

“The LORD has done great ¹ things for them.”

³The LORD has done great ¹ things for us,
and we are ¹ glad indeed.

⁴Restore our for-¹ tunes, O LORD,
like the watercourses ¹ of the Negeb. **R**

⁵Those who ¹ sowed with tears
will reap with ¹ songs of joy.

⁶Those who go out weeping, carry-¹ ing the seed,
will come again with joy, shoulder-¹ ing their sheaves. **R**

or Luke 1:46b-55; refrain, Luke 1:52 [not printed]

all who see them shall acknowledge
that they are a people whom the
LORD has blessed.

¹⁰I 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.

¹¹For 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.

Second Reading

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Paul concludes his letter to the Thessalonians by encouraging them to live lives of continual joy, prayer, and thanksgiving. The closing blessing is grounded in the hope of Christ's coming.

Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray without ceasing,
¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances; for
this is the will of God in Christ Jesus
for you. ¹⁹Do not quench the Spirit.
²⁰Do not despise the words of proph-
ets, ²¹but test everything; hold fast
to what is good; ²²abstain from every
form of evil.

²³May the God of peace himself
sanctify you entirely; and may your
spirit and soul and body be kept
sound and blameless at the coming of
our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴The one who
calls you is faithful, and he will do
this.

Gospel

John 1:6-8, 19-28

John's gospel describes Jesus as the "light of the world." John the Baptist is presented as a witness to Jesus, one who directs attention away from himself to Christ, the true light.

There was a man sent from God, whose
name was John. ⁷He came as a witness
to testify to the light, so that all might
believe through him. ⁸He himself was
not the light, but he came to testify to
the light.

¹⁹This is the testimony given by
John when the Jews sent priests and
Levites from Jerusalem to ask him,
"Who are you?" ²⁰He confessed and
did not deny it, but confessed, "I am
not the Messiah." ²¹And they asked
him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He
said, "I am not." "Are you the proph-
et?" He answered, "No." ²²Then they
said to him, "Who are you? Let us have

an answer for those who sent us. What
do you say about yourself?" ²³He said,

"I am the voice of one crying out
in the wilderness,

'Make straight the way of the Lord,'"
as the prophet Isaiah said.

²⁴Now they had been sent from the
Pharisees. ²⁵They asked him, "Why
then are you baptizing if you are nei-
ther the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the
prophet?" ²⁶John answered them, "I
baptize with water. Among you stands
one whom you do not know, ²⁷the one
who is coming after me; I am not wor-
thy to untie the thong of his sandal."
²⁸This took place in Bethany across
the Jordan where John was baptizing.

Prayers of Intercession

The prayers are prepared locally for each occasion. The following examples may be adapted or used as appropriate.

With hope and expectation, we offer our prayers for the church, the world, and all who await God's day of restoration.

A brief silence.

Fill our mouths with laughter and our tongues with shouts of joy as we bear witness to the great things you have done. Give your church a spirit of gladness as we gather and as we are sent. Merciful God,
receive our prayer.

Let the trees of the field sing your praise. Protect forests, orchards, rainforests, and all wooded areas from disease and deforestation. Keep us grateful for their gifts of oxygen, food, shade, and shelter. Merciful God,
receive our prayer.

You love justice and promise your favor to those who are oppressed, brokenhearted, and incarcerated. Grant wisdom and compassion to those who work for public safety and all who work within prisons, jails, and courts, that mercy may increase and violence wither away. Merciful God,
receive our prayer.

Give us strength to pray for our world without ceasing and provoke us toward love and good deeds for all who are in need (*especially*). Provide for all without adequate housing, food, employment, or access to health care. Empower us as helpers and advocates. Merciful God,
receive our prayer.

Open our hearts to those who serve as truth-tellers in our church and in our society. Bless leaders in church and society in their task of proclamation. Amplify voices of peacemakers, advocates, and especially those whose voices are ignored or marginalized. Merciful God,
receive our prayer.

Here other intercessions may be offered.

With gratitude we rejoice in the saints (*especially*) who witnessed to your life in all circumstances, in whom your Spirit was not quenched, even in death. Through them, teach us always to hold fast to what is good. Merciful God,
receive our prayer.

Listen to these and all our prayers, O God of hosts, and restore us with your great and everlasting mercy.
Amen.

Preparing for Next Week

Monday Psalm 125. **Tuesday** Acts 3:17—4:4. **Wednesday** (commemoration of Katharina von Bora Luther, renewer of the church, 1552) Mark 9:9-13. **Thursday** Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26. **Friday** Hebrews 1:5-14. **Saturday** John 7:40-52. **Fourth Sunday of Advent** 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Luke 1:46b-55 *or* Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38 *OR* **Nativity of Our Lord, Christmas Eve** Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14 [15-20].

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