

ADVENT 2024 ON THE WAY TO BETHLEHEM



Serve & Enrich
Zion United Church
of Christ

The 3rd Sunday of Advent – Nazareth: A Place of Simplicity

Prelude *Carol of the Bells Fantasy* duet with Martha Main and Judy Prosch

Gathering: Light for the Journey

A Message from our Guide—We move north to the tiny village of Nazareth. Although not so tiny anymore, in those days, Nazareth was a place where “everyone knows your name” since it could only support a limited amount of people from one small well of water. Mary is visited by the angel Gabriel with news that she would bear a son!

Advent Wreath Lighting—Mary’s joy was not limited by the improbability that such a thing could happen in Nazareth. In this simple, tight-knit community of limited resources—a place where survival required interdependence with your neighbors—Jesus would be raised and grow into the teacher he became. This week, we wonder: what joy can we glean from the simplest of moments, the simplest of gifts, allowing ourselves to savor this season, pregnant with possibilities?

Advent Wreath Song

*O little town of Bethlehem,
how still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
the silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
the everlasting light;
the hopes and fears of all the years
are met in thee tonight.*

O Little Town of Bethlehem/We’re On Our Way

*We’re on our way
We’re on our way
Dream of the day
When joy holds sway
With all the earth
In all our hearts
We’re on our way
This is the day.*

Advent Wreath Reading—The journey continues, and this candle will help light our way. We are on our way to more joy. Life can be so complicated and filled with distractions. We are a people who simply want Good News. We need a marker on the journey to tell us to stop and notice the wonder of the moments along the way. God’s light goes before us, we are not alone.

*We’re on our way
We’re on our way*

*Dream of the day
When joy holds sway*

*With all the earth
In all our hearts*

*We're on our way
This is the day.*

Opening Prayer and Words of Assurance—Holy and Living God, we pray for the refocusing of our lives on what really matters. Too often, we allow the complexity of modern life to take over, and we fail to sense your presence in our everyday lives. Call us to a simplified joy. Call us to simply pause in the midst of our scheduled mania and breathe in the possibility that you are asking for our attention. We pray this in the name of your Son, Jesus, the Christ, the Joy of Our Lives. Amen.

Let this be a marker of assurance that we are moving in a faithful direction: God is with us every step of our way toward the Joy of Bethlehem. Jesus is being born into our lives even now. The Spirit is transforming us in this place.

****Hymn**

Hark! The Herald Angels Sing, 185

Prayer—God, Our Source of Joy even in sorrow, we come to you today longing for your presence in our lives and with all those who suffer—in body, mind, or spirit. We pray this day for... *[continue with prayers for those in your community and around the world who are in need of healing and wholeness]*

God of Joy, we come to you today so deeply grateful for celebrations, triumphs, and even small steps toward the lives we seek and the world we desire. We pray this day for... *[continue with prayers of thanksgiving]*

Holy God, we know you are near. We know that every step along the way to Bethlehem in this Advent season is a step closer to renewed life in Jesus, the Christ. We know that your Spirit resides within us, growing day by day into the fullness of Joy. In this moment, we pause in silence, marking your presence with awe and asking you to fill us, guide us, along our journey.

The Lord's Prayer (unison)—Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

Special Reading “*One Solitary Life*” by James Allen Francis, Collin Bennington

We Welcome New Members

Rev. Linda and Rev. Dennis Frische-Mouri

Exploring Together—The Simple Lives of Donkeys

We Hear God's Word

Paula Prange

Romans 15:12-13—¹² and again Isaiah says, “The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the gentiles; in him the gentiles shall hope.”

¹³ May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Luke 1:26-38—²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”^[a] ²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” ³⁴ Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” ³⁵ The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶ And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God.” ³⁸ Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

Meditation

Nazareth: A Place of Simplicity

Hymn

Mary, Did You Know? 192

We Respond to God’s Word with Our Giving

Invitation—God has given us so much... In praise and thanksgiving, let us open our hearts and offer our gifts to God.~

December Benevolence—The Christmas Fund

****Doxology**

To the tune of “Away in a Manger”

*Praise God for these gifts that we offer today
and bless them for good in the world, this we pray.
Praise Jesus, the Christ-Child, our Hope and our Stay,
the Spirit, our Keeper, our Guide on the Way.*

****We Give Thanks**—Abundant God, we give you thanks for these gifts. May you bless them and use them to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and bring

comfort to those in need. And may we offer our very selves as we proclaim your good news of love and grace for all people. Amen.~

A Message from Our Guide—We have checked the signs and markers to make sure we are moving in a faithful direction. With joy, we move on towards Bethlehem, knowing that the Light of Christ shines through the night. We are not alone. We remember to open our hearts to the possibility that God’s work in the world is happening in the most simple and unlikely of places—even within us. The journey continues as we feel the pregnancy of possibility. Joy, not despair, perseveres.

Hymn

Lift Up Your Heads, O Mighty Gates, 176

Benediction—And now as you go forth from this place, know that all the places you encounter in the world will contain signs and markers of God’s work among us. So keep your senses alert, your perception wide, and your heart open to new discoveries along the way.

**Sung Response

*O holy Child of Bethlehem,
descend to us we pray,
cast out our fear, and draw us
near; be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels
the great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us, our
Lord Emmanuel.*

*We’re on our way
We’re on our way
Dream of the day
When joy holds sway
With all the earth
In all our hearts
We’re on our way
This is the day.*

Postlude

Deck the Halls duet with Martha Main and Judy Prosch

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