

Third Sunday in Advent

Isaiah 35:1-10



When Isaiah first penned these verses, God's people were living in a time of uncertainty. Some things that were going on looked really good, while other parts of life were frightening. Those who trusted in God found themselves living in a "nation of unclean lips" as Isaiah once called it. (Isaiah 6) Like Isaiah, they also recognized their own sin and unworthiness. Sounds familiar, doesn't it? We have the same frustrations within us, but these Old Testament believers did not yet have the comfort of knowing the resurrected Christ.

To His people, whose problems in this world were just beginning, God through Isaiah presented an assuring picture that it would all turn out well in the end. It's been over twenty-five hundred years since Isaiah wrote, but we still celebrate that assurance. We understand God's assurance more fully now. We have heard how John's disciples asked Jesus if He were the One to come, and we know that Jesus replied to them through the words that Isaiah had written. We know that Jesus has already come and conquered the power that sin and death held over us, but we still live in a world that struggles; we still have struggles within ourselves. We still give in to Satan's wiles.

Isaiah's words continue to be a comfort to us because God isn't finished yet. In Isaiah's prophecy we have the same assurance that his listeners did. The day will come, whether tomorrow or a hundred years from now, when Jesus will come again and we shall know peace and freedom in His presence that we can now only dimly imagine.

Jesus' return will be joyous for us, but if we do not share that joy with those who do not yet know Christ, His return for them will be horrific. Isaiah points out that on that "Highway of Holiness" (vs. 8) only the redeemed will travel. In this Advent season of contemplation and celebration, may each of us share our joy with someone who is close to us but does not know our Lord.

Now is the best time to join a Bible study.

(A message from your Iowa District West Education Committee)

Third Sunday in Advent

Isaiah 35:1-10



1. The theme for the 3rd Sunday in Advent is joy. Find (and perhaps underline) all the joy words in these verses.
2. How do we see the prophecy of Isaiah 35 fulfilled in Matthew 11? (Hint: compare Is. 35:5 with Matthew 11:5)
3. There are several references to the "desert" (vs.1, vs.6). Describe a spiritual desert? Have there been desert situations in your life?
4. Where do we find the Advent gospel in vs. 4?
5. Describe the "Way of Holiness" (vs. 8ff.). How do we get on the Way of Holiness? What is the journey like?
6. Has the Advent season been a time of joy for you? Have you shared your joy in Jesus with others?

Third Sunday of Advent

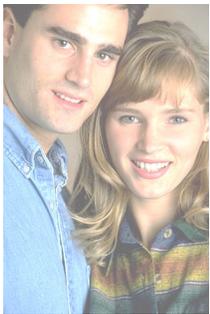
Isaiah 61:1-3,10-11

This is a beautiful passage painting for us a picture of the Messiah. The prophet speaks in the first person, as though the words might be spoken by the Messiah Himself. He will bring good news to the captives of sin and those imprisoned by it. He will bind up and heal the wounds which go far below the surface of the skin, and He will proclaim God's victory over evil. What a great word picture for the season of Advent when we again anticipate Christ's coming.

Can we, however, see more in this passage than Jesus? Can we place ourselves in much of this picture? Are we not to proclaim God in much the same way? Ephesians 2:10 says that we are "created in Christ Jesus to do good works...." Matthew 28 tells us what the greatest of the good works is—to spread the good news which is so beautifully expressed here by Isaiah.

There is, of course, not only a similarity between the Messiah and ourselves in these verses, but also a difference. We cannot be the Messiah. We can only share His love and compassion with others. Only He could accomplish the work that allows the giving. He is the One Who first loved. He is the One Who first acted. He is the God-Man Who came to our world to defeat sin.

As we move out into the world to imitate our Lord, we realize that there is more to the joyful task of sharing than merely "telling." The words of Isaiah paint a picture of action. Jesus was involved with His people and we are called to do the same. Words like *bring*, *bind*, and *comfort* describe an active and caring lifestyle; a lifestyle that demonstrates Jesus' compassion and not merely explains it.



How can we accomplish such a task? He has clothed us with salvation and wrapped us in His own righteousness (vs.10). He provides the time, the strength, and the wisdom. When God calls us, He will also walk with us.

Renew your walk with Christ through a Bible study this week!
(A message from your Iowa District West Education Committee)

Third Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 61:1-3,10-11

1. What words in the first verses describe our sinful and separated condition? (poor, brokenhearted, . . .)
2. Read Luke 4:16-21. How does Jesus fulfill the words of Isaiah 61:1-3?
3. Reflect on the word picture of verse 10. How does God dress us? When did God dress you in these clothes?
4. There is another word picture in verse 11. What is God planting? Are His seeds growing in you?
5. The theme of the third week of Advent is joy. How is this theme expressed in this prophecy of Isaiah?
6. Through the Spirit God calls us to "preach good news," "bind up the brokenhearted," and "comfort all who mourn." With whom will you share an Advent message of hope and joy this week?



Third Sunday of Advent

Zephaniah 3:14-18

The book of Zephaniah makes it clear that Judah will be punished for her wickedness along with her enemies. She deserved it. God's nation had been in rebellion against Him for hundreds of years. They had at times even taunted the prophets, daring God to do His worst. Yet in today's passage we also see evidence of joy. Why?

Beginning in chapter 3, verse 9 God says that the coming punishment will bring purification to the faithful; that He will bring believers even from faraway nations and all will join in praising God. The faithful remnant will find peace at last. The people will rejoice because their God is with them and has taken away their shame. God's power saves; God's love comforts; God's voice rejoices over the remnant "with singing."

Some of this picture we know has come to pass with the first advent of our Lord Jesus. Jesus brought salvation to all who believe in Him, both to the people of promise and to all peoples of the world. He granted us His gift of spiritual peace and joy. As Zephaniah closes, however, it becomes clear that not all of the picture is yet completed. Though believers no longer need fear even death, for it cannot separate them from the love of God; the last verses of Zephaniah seem to indicate more: that God will restore his people to a place of honor; that there will literally be no more enemy to fear. God will bring them home in a world of peace.



At His second advent, Jesus will take away the last manifestations of evil that beset God's people. He will restore peace in a way that we have never seen. Can any of us imagine a lion lying down with a lamb, or swords and weapons being gone forever? As we consider God's gift of salvation in Christ's first advent, isn't it wonderful to know that we can look forward eagerly to the restoration of harmony that He will bring in His second coming?

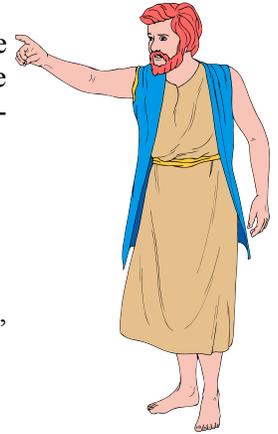
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A message from your Iowa District West Education Committee

Third Sunday of Advent

Zephaniah 3:14-18

1. Zephaniah is a short 3-chapter book. Skim the book. What is the general mood and message of the book? Why does Judah (and her neighbors) deserve this message?
2. What is the mood and message of chapter 3, vs. 14-18?
3. Zephaniah reminds his audience that they do not need to fear. Why not? (vs. 15 and 17)
4. The theme of the 3rd Sunday in Advent is "joy." How is that theme expressed in this text? What is the source of our Advent joy?
5. Verse 17 states "He will quiet you with his love." Have there been unsettling and "noisy" times in your life? How has your Savior's love quieted you?
6. There are several encouragements to sing in this text. How does singing add to the joys of the Advent season and the joys of life?



Third Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 35:1-10

Isaiah's words of joy were written to a people entering judgment for their rebellion against God. The prophet frequently followed news of God's wrath with news of His grace. In today's verses he tells of a time when God's wrath will no longer be part of the rebels' lives.

We also are rebels against God, even though we love Him and serve Him. All Christians struggle in the dual lives that we lead. On the one hand we love Jesus and want to act like Him in everything, while we also resist God's love and pursue our sinful nature. What is the difference in us? Why do we not receive God's wrath?

God told His people through Isaiah that there would come a time when punishment would no longer be part of their lives. The reason, however, was not that the people would cease sinning and therefore be righteous. Like us, they could never accomplish that goal. Instead, God would arrive on the scene, saving the day in a more spectacular way than any fiction writer could imagine.

Isaiah paints a picture of a time that has been and will be fulfilled. Nature itself rejoices that God has come and will come again. The prophet says that when God (Messiah) arrived "*the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf will be unstopped. ...the lame will leap like a deer and the tongue of the mute will shout for joy.*"

We saw all of those things happen in the ministry of Jesus. They happened not only physically, but spiritually. The blind, the deaf, and the lame were healed by His hand, and those who were blind, deaf, and lame spiritually were lifted up and their lives changed forever. We too are changed by Jesus and our entrance into God's presence is assured because God sees not our sin, but the blood of His Son that has cleansed away our separation from Him. There is no more wrath to come upon those who believe in Jesus as Savior.

But there is more joy to come! Yes, we are saved. We are destined for eternity with Christ, but the complete fulfillment of Isaiah's words will come when Jesus returns in glory!

Learn more about Jesus in a Bible study this week.

A message from your Iowa District West Education Committee.

Third Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 35:1-10

1. How would Israel's restoration be like a refreshing rain on a desert area? (vs. 1,7)
2. How would the Messiah's appearance be like a physical healing? (vs. 5 and 6) What healing would the Savior bring?
3. How does Isaiah picture the faith journey? (vs. 8-10) From where would God's people return? What would be their destination?
4. What is the Law message of verse 4? What is the Gospel message of this verse?
5. Today's advent theme is "joy." (The pink candle is lit on the Advent wreath.) Where do we find the message of joy in this prophecy? Why could Isaiah rejoice even as a time of captivity is anticipated?
6. Has the Advent season been a time of joy in your home and in your church? With whom can you share Advent joy in Jesus this week?

Third Sunday in Advent

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

In this chapter, Paul has a lot to say about the conduct of a Christian. Paul knows that there are specific marks of character that should be evident in a believer's life. In today's verses Paul concentrates on the spiritual conduct of believers, and our life in the community to which we are called.

"Rejoice," "pray," and "give thanks" are the three positive instructions that we see in verses 16-18. Not only are we to be doing these things, but we are to do them constantly and in any situation. Paul doesn't tell us to give thanks only when neat stuff happens in our lives, but in every situation. Why would we give thanks to God when evil comes into our lives? Because we are giving thanks that He can do what needs to be done to support us and rescue us in any situation. He is always with us.

Paul goes on to say that we should never "quench the Spirit." We do that every day of our lives. If we did not, the community in which we live would be alive and moving with the love of Christ. Christ's reputation would be one of greatness, giving, and love in every home. The Holy Spirit moves us to action, love, service, prayer, forgiveness, and all good attitudes and works. If these do not fill our hearts and minds constantly, then we are guilty of "quenching the Spirit." Not one of us is innocent in this matter.

Paul continues, instructing us to listen to every idea and message presented as Godly and holy, and to examine them diligently. In other words, all of us, including our leaders, need to be constantly communicating with God and with each other about what God wants of us as individuals and as congregations. We are to support one another, add to one another's understanding, work together to complete or adjust each idea so that it truly serves God. In that arena of trust and support we can be sure to "Hold on to the good" and "Avoid every kind of evil."

Wow! What a list. What an impossible task. But, we are blessed. As Paul concludes, "Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass." The God who sent His Son still comes with the power and direction of His Word.

Learn more about God's power in our lives in a Bible study this week.
A message from your Iowa District West Education Committee

Third Sunday in Advent

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

1. According to vs. 16-22, what are the "do's" of the Christian's response to Christ?
2. According to these verses, what are the "don'ts" of the Christian's response?
3. Advent reminds us of Christ's second coming. When He comes again (vs. 23) how are we to appear? How is such a presentation possible? (Galatians 3:26-27)
4. How are we especially reminded of God's faithfulness (vs. 24) during this season of the year?

For Family Reflection

5. As a family reflect, on the listing in vs. 16-22. What has been your family's Advent attitude?
6. Some of us take tests in school or part of our job. What does it mean to "test everything" (vs. 21) when it comes to matters of faith? What Good News does God have for us when we fail our tests?

Third Sunday of Advent

Philippians 4:4-7

How much power do you grant God in your life? How much have you decided to entrust to Him? Paul consistently urged his flocks to trust God for all; to relax in His loving arms; to allow God to grant them peace and joy in their lives.

In our culture individuals demand power over their own destinies. We are all, to one extent or another, “control freaks.” Some of us can write confidently on this topic because in the “How to Tell if You are a Control Freak” survey, we scored one hundred percent! We are the ones who determine during every worship service that this is the week we will let God be in control, but then pray—make that “beg”—God to let us have our own way. To tell the truth, “rejoicing” in the Lord is tough while trying to maintain complete control over one’s life.

In Luke 12 Jesus explained to His followers that to worry about anything is useless. None of us, Jesus says, has even the power “to add a single hour to his life.” He then says, “If then you cannot do even a very little thing, why do you worry about other matters?” (Luke 12:26) Our Lord considers the power to extend life “a very little thing.” No wonder Paul could confidently urge us to “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say rejoice!...Be anxious for nothing....!”

Paul says that when we turn our controlling nature over to Christ, “the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, *will* guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Paul does not say “maybe” or “probably” or even “most likely.” He says that in trusting God we “will” know His peace and His joy in our lives.

This is not only the peace with God that is our gift through Jesus’ death on the cross. That peace is already ours. We will live in joy and peace eternally with our Lord in heaven, but we can also have joy and peace within our hearts every day, no matter what the challenge. The Holy Spirit is ready to help us begin to give up our stress-filled, controlling nature in favor of trusting God, but will we let Him? This is the time of year that we celebrate Christ’s birth and His return. Advent also begins a new year. What a time to start the prayer-filled journey of truly trusting our Lord.

Learn more about trust in a Bible study this week.

A message from your Iowa District West Education Committee

Third Sunday of Advent

Philippians 4:4-7

1. The theme of this Advent Sunday is “joy.” How do we find that theme expressed in this text? Where do we find true joy?
2. How is the second (and final) coming of Jesus emphasized in this text (vs. 5)? How should the reality of Jesus’ second coming affect our waiting?
3. Verse 7 is sometimes used as a sermon conclusion. Why might these words be a good sermon ending?
4. At first glance Paul’s words in vs. 9 might seem to be boastful. Would Paul want us to admire him? Who was Paul’s example? What was Paul’s motivation?

For Family Reflection

5. The word “whatever” is sometimes used to express nonchalant attitudes or behavior. Is that the attitude of Paul? Which “whatever” in the list especially speaks to you?
6. What do you worry about (vs. 6)? What encouragement does this verse give to you? Join your family in prayer and “with thanksgiving present your requests to God.”

Third Sunday in Advent

Matthew 11:2-15

John, a cousin of Jesus, found himself in a prison dungeon for daring to confront Herod Antipas (a son of Herod the Great) with the truth that he was breaking God's Law by seducing his sister-in-law and divorcing his own wife in order to live with his new conquest. John stood up for what was right, and he told the people what they needed to hear, even knowing that it could well mean losing his life. Thus Jesus described him as a man who was not a reed that could be shaken by the wind. He was instead "more than a prophet."

John sent his disciples to Jesus to ask if He were the "Expected One"—the Messiah. Whether he asked the question for himself or his disciples, we can only speculate, but Jesus' reply is remarkable either way.

Jesus did not say, "This is who I am," or "I promise you that I am Messiah." Instead, He said, "...report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the Gospel preached to them." Jesus' actions and teachings proclaimed who He was to all who could hear and see with an honest heart. The things that He did were proof of His identity. Leprosy, for instance, was thought to be a curse from God, and only He could cure it...and who but God could raise the dead?

As you live each day in the power of God's grace, do people wonder who you are? Or do they see Jesus in your life by every action and word that comes from you? If you have a sticker on your car or a bracelet on your wrist that proclaims your faith, do others relate that symbol to your actions? Jesus proclaimed who He was by His words, but also by His actions. How about us?

In the season of Advent we anticipate Jesus' return as well as celebrate His birth. In the midst of all of the rush and stress of preparing for the holiday season, are you living in the peace of Christ? Jesus invites us to lean on Him, think about His birth and His love, to be filled with joy and peace, looking at everyone we meet as an opportunity to demonstrate Jesus by our attitudes, actions, and words.

Learn more about God's power in our lives in a Bible study this week.
A message from your Iowa District West Christian Education Committee

Third Sunday in Advent

Matthew 11:2-15

1. Why was John in prison (Matthew 14:3-5)?
2. What were the evidences that Jesus was the Messiah (vs.5)?
3. What comments does Jesus make about the significance of John (vs. 9-11)? According to vs. 11b who is even greater than John? Why?

For Family Reflection

4. People of Jesus' day were looking for "proof" of His Lordship. Do people today still want divine signs of Jesus' Lordship? What proof do we have that Jesus is Lord?
5. John was a messenger for Jesus (vs. 10). Who are Jesus' messengers today? What message do they share about Jesus?
6. John was imprisoned (and eventually killed) because of his message. What challenges do you face as Jesus' messenger? Would you be willing to sacrifice your life for Him?

Third Sunday in Advent

John 1:6-8, 19-28

John came to “testify about the Light,” and for this he was challenged and finally executed. He was a wilderness man living on locusts and honey; a grimy, itinerate preacher among many, yet he threatened many and brought ultimate hope to many more.

Instead of bowing down to the Word, as John describes Jesus, men came to John who had chosen to continue in rebellion against God; against the logic of Christ found in their own sacred writings. Their questions of John were not sincere, but concocted as a plot to discredit what they thought was dangerous rhetoric.

After pursuing John, they turned on Jesus and would eventually succeed in hanging Him on a Cross.

Instead of considering the truth of our own guilt and sin as contributors to Jesus’ death, let’s for a moment consider John’s courage in the face of opposition. Today, we also face formidable opposition to the Gospel, but how do we react to it?

Consider the significance of all the things that you know and believe about Jesus. The whole story of His life, as it unfolds in the gospels, is true. He was at the beginning of creation; He is God’s Son; He knows the end the story; He loves us though we disobey Him; He chose to die a criminal’s death—and separation from His Father for us. He has the power and the authority to “zap” us out of existence right now, but He chooses to love us, and to enable us to love Him. He has given us eternal life! What a gift we have.

In our country we suffer very little when we bring up Jesus in a conversation. Thousands of Christians in other parts of the world suffer torture and even death for that simple action. John would identify with them. John faced a nation of spiritually starving people; we face a nation of spiritually starving people. John was adamant and courageous in sharing the truth; we tend to be shy about the truth, and unwilling to chance embarrassment or ridicule. John made a difference in thousands of lives because he trusted God to provide him an opportunity to do so; if we share Jesus with even one person, we could see them in eternity.

We learn how to answer our foes through the study of God’s Word!

(A message from your Iowa District West Christian Education Committee)

Third Sunday in Advent

John 1:6-8, 19-28

1. John the Baptist was born of human parents (Luke 1:5-25; 57-66). How does the Gospel of John introduce his origin (vs. 6) and his ministry (vs. 7-8)?
2. John describes himself according to who he was not. Who wasn’t he? Who was he?
3. How did John see himself in relationship to Jesus?
4. One of the key words of the Gospel of John is the word “light.” (vs. 7-9) What brought about darkness? How is Jesus the answer to our darkness?

For Family Reflection

5. If someone asked you, “Who are you?” what would you say? Who are you in relationship to Jesus?
6. How is Jesus your light? Who needs to see the light of Jesus? Sing “This little Gospel light of mine . . .”

Third Sunday in Advent

Luke 7:18-35

John the Baptizer's disciples were following Jesus, witnessing the miracles and listening to His teaching. After collecting their observations, they went to John, who was imprisoned because of his criticism of Herod Antipas and his wife, Herodias.

John sends a question back to Jesus by way of his disciples, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" (NIV) Jesus' reply to this question is wonderful for all of us to hear because by it Jesus reassures John that, "Yes! The Messiah has come!"

After John's disciples depart, Jesus turns to the crowd and tells them about John, affirming that John was the one foretold by the prophets who would prepare the way for the Messiah.

Then Jesus throws us a curve, saying that the least in the kingdom of God was greater than John. Most believe that what Jesus meant was that John would not live to see this side of the Cross. We are more blessed than John because we have the Cross as our witness to the truth that John preached.

Though they were saved, like us, by grace through faith, John and all believers before him did not have the blessing of seeing exactly how God would accomplish that salvation.

Luke says that those who understood John's baptism of repentance believed Jesus' words, but those who did not accept John also rejected Jesus' words.

Jesus then compares the religious establishment to children who become angry when others do not readily agree with them. They were angry because Jesus and John seemed to reject them and their religious laws and false beliefs about salvation. On the other hand, no matter what Jesus and John had done in their own ministries, the religious leaders could find fault. John and Jesus were different, yet both were rejected out of jealousy and fear.

Today many continue to reject Jesus for similar reasons: fear of turning their lives over to God; wanting to control their own salvation; wanting to control their own lives; to be "beholden" to nobody, even God. People in fact want to be their own gods. As believers, we have a task much like John's—to let people know that the Savior has come and will come again.

Have you invited a friend to attend a regular Bible study with you?

(A message from your Iowa District West Christian Education Committee)

Third Sunday in Advent

Luke 7:18-35

1. According to vs. 26-28 how does Jesus affirm the person and message of John?
2. How did John and others know that Jesus was the One sent from God (vs. 22)? How do we know that Jesus is the One sent from God for us?
3. How did different groups react to John's message and Jesus' ministry (vs. 29-30)?

For Family Reflection

4. Are you greater than John the Baptist (vs. 28)? What makes us great?
5. What eventually happened to John the Baptist (see Mark 6:14-29)?
6. John the Baptist was the last prophet to prepare the way for Jesus. Who are some of the other Old Testament prophets? What was their message? What can we learn from these prophets?