Worship Resources for December 13th, 2015—Third Sunday of Advent

Revised Common Lectionary: Zephaniah 3:14-20; Isaiah 12:2-6; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

Narrative Lectionary: Rebuilding the Temple, Ezra 1:1-4; 3:1-4, 10-13 (Luke 2:25-32)

The Third Sunday of Advent is Gaudette Sunday, Gaudette meaning “Rejoice.”

The prophet Zephaniah rejoices in God’s restoration of the people in their return from exile. There is hope that there will be no more disasters, no more violence against the people. God is present with them, and they will no longer bear the brunt of oppression. God’s justice will prevail, and God will gather together the lame and outcast, changing their shame into praise. This is the vision that God has given the prophet: God will restore all who have lost. God will bring in those who have been cast out to the margins. God will lift up those who have been forgotten. Rejoice!

A song from the prophet Isaiah is our second selection in lieu of a psalm. Singing praise and joy to God, Isaiah boasts in God’s salvation, because God’s presence has been made known to them. When the people trust in God’s presence, they draw deep from the wellspring of salvation, the wellspring of faith.

Paul calls upon the church in Philippi to “rejoice.” Even though Paul is in prison, Paul rejoices in the good works of the people of Philippi and the way they have loved and put their trust in God. With this trust and rejoicing comes “the peace that surpasses all understanding.”

Luke 3:7-18 contains the ministry of John the Baptist. John was a wild prophet from the wilderness, who could not be tamed by the people or their leaders. He spoke the truth boldly: if they didn’t bear fruit, if they didn’t do the work of God to care for their neighbor’s needs—they might as well be a tree that is cut down. Useless. The people were drawn to John, including the tax collectors—because they knew their own way of making a living might keep them from the kingdom of God. So John’s advice to them was to do their job, but not be corrupt. Soldiers also were concerned, and John told them not to abuse their power. John was preparing the way for Jesus, warning the people what they should do to change their hearts and their lives—but Jesus would come, calling for an entire change to the world.

The Narrative Lectionary finishes its journey for the year through the Hebrew Scriptures, ending with the rebuilding of the temple after the Exile, as told by Ezra. Ezra tells how King Cyrus of Persia declared that the people of Israel could return home to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple that had been destroyed by the Babylonians. The people rejoice when they begin to worship in the ruins of the temple, knowing that God had called them home, and is helping them rebuild. It was God that allowed them to survive, and God that has brought them home. Their weeping and rejoicing is so loud that the neighboring towns can hear it, knowing that the people rejoice in their God, who is faithful forever.

The selection from Luke 2 in the Narrative Lectionary tells of Simeon, a man faithful to God, who came to the temple and saw Jesus being presented before God as was custom. Simeon rejoices, praising God who has brought salvation to the people, and that Simeon was able to see God fulfilling the promises in his lifetime.

In the past month, the past year, and in the wake of the Sandy Hook massacre anniversary, there has been so much violence and destruction in our world in recent memory. Terrorism. Violence. Mass death. How do we sing God’s praises when so many are mourning? How do we rejoice? How do we sing God’s song when everything around us seems to seek death and destruction? We look back at the stories of the people. Even when they were dying, God brought them the hope of the return from exile. Even when they were still waiting, God brought them the promise of a child. Even when they were losing hope, they sang God’s praises. God is faithful. We must remember that, and hold on to that. God’s faithfulness endures forever. Rejoice!

Call to Worship

Surely God is my salvation;

 **I will trust, and will not be afraid.**

With joy you shall draw water from the wells of salvation;

 **I will trust, and will not be afraid.**

Give thanks to the Lord, call on God’s name;

 **I will trust, and will not be afraid.**

Sing praises to the Lord, and let it be known throughout the earth!

 **I will trust, and will not be afraid**

**We come to worship God, in awe and wonder, knowing God will lead us into the fullness of joy.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

God of Light, sometimes all we see is the smoke from the extinguished candle. Sometimes all we know is the fear of losing instead of the joy of loving. Sometimes all we believe are empty promises of long-lost dreams instead of the wonder and awe of trusting You are doing something new. In this time of brokenness in our world, in this space of emptiness, in this realm of hopelessness: restore our faith. Renew our hope. Regain our trust in one another and in the goodness of Your love. Be born in us, again, and again, so that we might live into hope, build peace in this world, and rejoice that You are still ever present with us and will not let the world fall apart. You will not let us fail. Love will never end, but always prevails. Help us to cling to this: that what we know is You are good. You are love. You are light. In the name of Jesus the Christ, for whom all things are expectantly waiting. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance of Pardon

Trust. Believe. Hope. Endure. Know. Forgive. Restore. Love. Love. Above all, love. For what else is there that we can do? You are forgiven, when you set out to do right, to love justice and mercy, and to go forth humbly with God. Amen.

Prayer

Come, Lord Jesus. Come into this world and break it open for Your love. Come into this world and remove the violence from our hearts. Take the weapons from our hands and open our arms to embrace one another. Take the malice from our hearts and replace it with Your unconditional, undying love. Take the fear from our minds and replace it with the assurance that Your presence is always with us. Remove the barriers that we have built up that keep us separated from one another. Restore the bridges we have torn down that have joined us together. Come, Lord Jesus. Remind us that in You, we are one people, one body. Come, Lord Jesus. Remind us that in You all our hope is found. Come, Lord Jesus, Come. Amen.