

worship notes

from the United Reformed Church



Sunday 13th December 2026
The Third Sunday of Advent
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Call to Worship

There is a light that shines in the darkness,
a joy that rises from deepest depths,
a promise woven into the fabric of all life.

The Spirit of God is upon us.
Ancient promises are coming to pass.
New creation is being birthed.

Come, let us open our hearts to the mystery
of God made flesh among us.

Let us rejoice in the light
that darkness simply cannot overcome.

Prayers of Approach, Confession and Assurance of Forgiveness

God, whose ways are not our ways,
open our hearts and minds
so that we might attune to your presence
here and now in this time and place,
you who are holy mystery, wholly love.

Short pause

Christ, who reveals divinity at the heart of humanity,
may love for friend and foe,
be nurtured equally within us
so that we can join fully in divine life
where love for all coalesces with love for God
you who are holy mystery, wholly love.

Short pause

Spirit, who hovers over the genesis of each unfolding moment,
breathe into our expectant waiting,

when platitudes feel empty and hollow,
teach us to sit with the unanswerable,
growing slowly like oaks of righteousness,
through all life's seasons with you our God,
holy mystery, wholly love.

God of light and shadow,
we come aware of tensions within us:
our desire, when confronted with pain and suffering,
to reach for platitudes or easy answers,
to shy away from hard truths,
to retreat into the safety of a closed heart.

Short pause

Forgive us when we try to tidy up holy mystery.

Short pause

Forgive us when we retreat from the costly work of love.

Longer pause

Gentle God, grant us inner grace
so that what we reach for is patient listening,
a willingness to stay present to what is,
and the courage to remain vulnerable,
trusting that love is birthed anew within us
in each unfolding moment of life,
even in the midst of ashes.

Hear these words of hope:
light is not overcome by darkness,
God does not stand far off in judgement,
but knows us intimately from within,
our fragility, our pain and our longing.

Receive the grace that trades beauty for ashes,
and know that divine light shines within you.

Friends, in Christ, we are known,
we are understood, we are forgiven.
Thanks be to God, Amen.

All Age Activity

The mystery of fast vs slow

Props required: an instant food item (like instant noodles, microwave popcorn or a hot chocolate sachet) and an acorn or a pinecone

Script:

Hands up if you like things fast, fast WiFi, fast food, not having to wait to open your Christmas presents.

[hold up instant food]

We live in a world that loves quick fixes. At the push of a few microwave buttons or the boiling of a kettle and the tearing open of a packet, we have delicious (debatable, but worth possibly exploring if differing perspectives between the generations) food and drink. Easy-peasy, no need to wait!

[put down the instant food and hold up the acorn or pinecone]

Now look at this. Do we all know what this is?

What do you think would happen if we put it in the microwave for two minutes? Or if we poured a kettle of boiling water over it? Would we get a full-size oak or pine tree? Of course not, it would probably just get burned or ruined.

To get a big strong tree, such as those we read about in our reading from Isaiah, it would need to be planted in dark soil. And we would have to wait, months and years to see it grow into a proper tree.

Advent is a season of waiting, and it teaches us something. Very often when we feel sad or we are facing something difficult, we might want God to fix things in an instant or give us immediate answers. But God's love doesn't work like that. God's love works like the growing of a tree, slowly, quietly and deep down well before anyone can see it.

Prayer for Illumination

God of mystery and light,
your truth comes to us not in neat explanations or tired expressions
but as a voice crying in the wilderness, pointing us toward the Light.
Give grace to hear these ancient texts with honest ears and clear eyes,
that through poetry and prose
we may encounter the living Word afresh.
Amen.

Readings

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 | St John 1:6-8, 19-28

Sermon Notes

Isaiah

The third Sunday of Advent is traditionally known as Gaudete Sunday and focuses on the theme of joy. In this passage from Isaiah, the promise of joy comes against a backdrop of devastation and uncertainty. Isaiah 61 speaks into the time after the Babylonian exile when the people were faced with the overwhelming task of rebuilding Jerusalem and recovering their sense of identity and belonging. The ruins mentioned in the passage are therefore both literal and symbolic and it's against this backdrop that the prophet announces a new possibility, a future where the broken are comforted and the devastated places of the past are rebuilt. The opening verses describe the speaker as anointed by the Spirit to bring good news to the poor. This is the language picked up by Jesus in Luke 4:16–21. Isaiah's words therefore have a particular resonance for Christians as we approach the celebration of Jesus' birth. But it's important to remember that these words had meaning for their original hearers, speaking into their own experience of suffering and their longing for restoration. I wonder what it might mean to speak of good news to those who are broken-hearted today? I found the description of the people as 'oaks of righteousness' particularly evocative. Oaks are some of the slowest growing trees taking years to establish and develop their strength. There is something here about the nature of healing and restoration, which rarely happen overnight much as we might wish it were so. How might we understand God's work in our lives as something that takes root gradually often in the very places where we have experienced loss or are facing uncertainty? The passage also speaks of rebuilding ancient ruins and repairing devastated places and so restoration is not simply a private or individual experience but something that affects the life of the whole community. I wonder what the promise of rebuilding ruins might sound like to the people in our churches that are facing an uncertain future and the burden of caring for often large and expensive buildings? My sermon explores how we hold on to hope when faced with the reality of human suffering without resorting to easy explanations or theological platitudes. In a season that celebrates new life, the promise of renewal can be difficult to hear for those experiencing grief. Perhaps this passage invites us to trust in the slow and often mysterious work of healing without demanding that people feel joyful before they are ready.

St John

John's Gospel approaches the story of Jesus rather differently from Matthew and Luke with a poetic reflection on the Word's eternal relationship with God from the beginning. The language of light and darkness runs throughout John's Gospel and the opening verses introduce the mystery of incarnation. The opening of John's Gospel speaks of the Word

being with God and being God, before going on to describe the Word becoming flesh. It is a profound mystery holding together the eternal and the human in the person of Jesus. What might it mean to speak of a God who knows human experience from the inside, who knows what it is to be vulnerable, to suffer, to grieve and to love? The image of light shining in the darkness is particularly powerful in Advent when we celebrate the coming of Christ as the light of the world. Yet the presence of light doesn't mean that darkness disappears. I wonder how we hold these things together particularly when faced with the reality of suffering and loss? What does it mean to speak of hope when life feels broken and our questions remain unanswered? In my sermon I explore the mystery of the incarnation alongside the mystery of human suffering. Rather than offering explanations for why people suffer, perhaps we are called to recognise God's presence within our human experience and to bear witness to that presence through the way we love and care for one another. Sometimes it is enough simply to reflect light and love, trusting that the darkness will not have the final word.

The Offering

In gratitude for God's quiet presence with us in every season, we bring now our gifts, a sign of our commitment and participation with God in the work of bringing hope and wholeness to the world.

Generous God bless our gifts, our money and our service.
Use them to bear light and heal broken hearts. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

In this season of waiting,
all around us people are busy preparing for Christmas,
so we offer our prayers for others holding before God
the light and shade of our lives and our world.

We pray for all for whom this is a difficult season
those navigating grief and bereavement,
all who feel overwhelmed by high expectations.

God of mercy, **shine your light, grant peace.**

We pray for our world,
for nations fractured by war,
for all whose lives have been upended by circumstance.

God of mercy, **shine your light, grant peace.**

We pray for all offering quiet, patient care,
for health and care workers, all who sit with others in pain.

God of mercy, **shine your light, grant peace.**

We pray for ourselves as we approach Christmas,
give us grace to slow down,
courage to sit with life's mysteries,
and openness to love being birthed among us.

God of mercy, **shine your light, grant peace.**

We gather these prayers,
those spoken,
those uttered in the quiet of our hearts,
and those we cannot yet put into words,
trusting in the light that shines in the darkness,
which the darkness will not overcome. Amen.

Blessing

Let us go out into the waiting world trusting in the mystery of a God
who knows our human hearts from the inside out.

Let's not rush to fix what is broken,
but be gentle with ourselves and with each other.

May the spark of divinity within lighten even the darkest shadows,
for the light that shines, will not be overcome by darkness.

And may the blessing of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer
go with you and all whom you love, this day and always. Amen.

Music

See the Advent hymn sheet on the Worship Notes page.