

**12.07.25 ~ Advent 2 PEACE**  
**“Announcing Jesus”**  
The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

**Psalm 122** NKJV

*The Joy of Going to the House of the Lord  
A Song of Ascents. Of David.*

<sup>1</sup> I was glad when they said to me,  
“Let us go into the house of the Lord.”  
<sup>2</sup> Our feet have been standing  
Within your gates, O Jerusalem!  
<sup>3</sup> Jerusalem is built  
As a city that is compact together,  
<sup>4</sup> Where the tribes go up,  
The tribes of the Lord,  
To the Testimony of Israel,  
To give thanks to the name of the Lord.  
<sup>5</sup> For thrones are set there for judgment,  
The thrones of the house of David.  
<sup>6</sup> Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:  
“May they prosper who love you.  
<sup>7</sup> Peace be within your walls,  
Prosperity within your palaces.”  
<sup>8</sup> For the sake of my brethren and companions,  
I will now say, “Peace *be* within you.”  
<sup>9</sup> Because of the house of the Lord our God  
I will seek your good.

**Leader: These Are Words of Peace.**  
**People: Thanks be to God!**

**Matthew 3:1-12** NKJV

*John the Baptist Prepares the Way*

<sup>1</sup> In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, <sup>2</sup> and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” <sup>3</sup> For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying:  
    “The voice of one crying in the wilderness:  
    ‘Prepare the way of the Lord;  
    Make His paths straight.’”  
<sup>4</sup> Now John himself was clothed in camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey. <sup>5</sup> Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him <sup>6</sup> and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins.  
<sup>7</sup> But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup> Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, <sup>9</sup> and do not think to say to

yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as *our* father.’ For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. <sup>10</sup> And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. <sup>11</sup> I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>12</sup> His winnowing fan *is* in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

**Leader: These Are Words of Preparation.**

**All: Thanks be to God!**

**Please pray with me:**

God, you are the Lord of Justice and Peace. We come to worship today on this second week of Advent in expectation and hope that our world will become more just and peaceful when Jesus comes to earth. We also know that our human hearts are not always filled with justice or peace, but that we sin, we judge others, and we quarrel. As we study your Scripture today and each day leading up to the birth of Jesus, open our minds and hearts to confess our sin, let go of hatred or bitterness, and begin to heal from wounds of the past. Let us prepare to receive you and experience Christmas in a fresh new way. We cannot do this alone, so thank you for your presence and guidance in the season. Please speak through this message and messenger to both comfort and motivate us to live more fully in you. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

-----

Merry Christmas! Thank you to those of you who supported the Whitcraft, Hicks, and Martindale families yesterday at Sally’s Celebration of Life service. It is hard to lose someone in the late fall and Christmas holiday seasons, even when it may be expected. Leigh coordinated a beautiful tribute to her mother, and Sally’s siblings honored her memory with stories of their childhood and teen years spent in Annandale and with this church. You can read her bio in the extra bulletins on the pew at the middle entrance. Please feel free to take one if you weren’t here. The family was grateful for the reunion here yesterday and the Christmas décor. Some present had not been to this church in a while, yet the hymn singing was triumphant as most had been raised in church. That observation means that we need the body of Christ through

church more than ever today, and even if it is only at these big events. Advent and Christmas Eve are opportunities to speak about Jesus without apology and to invite people to events in this sacred space. Please start thinking of someone you'd like to invite to the Sopranessence concert Saturday or to our annual Christmas Eve Candlelight and Communion service at 2 pm, Christmas Eve day. David is gathering our singers and instrumentalists, so it will be a beautiful service of sacred music, Scripture, and Carols.

Psalm 122 affirms these warm feelings, instincts, and a need to get back to the house of the Lord that many people feel at this time of year. Childhood memories are strong at Christmas; parents want their children to experience and hear the Christmas story of Jesus' birth. Despite church decline, this year, the statistics and reports are showing a return to faith. Yes, it is slow, and hopefully it will be a self-fulfilling prophecy, so we must take heart with a sense of hope and peace that God is working in our world to bring about spiritual revival.

The psalmist, designated as David, recalls his pilgrimage to Jerusalem, Zion, "his city of our God," the holy hill. The name, Zion, evokes history, tradition, and the pride of God's people, Israel. This psalm was to be used at the feasts that drew people to the temple for worship. David prays that God will bring peace and security to the city of Jerusalem, both within and beyond the gates. Did you know that Jerusalem means "foundation of peace?" We should have such a wonderful prayer for our own church, both the people and the building. The spiritual center of the Holy Land attracted members of the twelve tribal nations. They would come in obedience for a faith reunion to

receive instruction from God, give glory to him, and to give thanks. These are some of the same reasons we come to worship each week, but especially during the holidays.

Psalm 122 is under the heading “Song of Ascents” which means “to go up” and in our culture, we think of ascending the pulpit as our colonial American church heritage. Early church construction mimicked European architectural traditions of building churches on holy hills or designing the pulpits high above the congregation with stairs to ascend as if to heaven! But in the psalm context, Jerusalem and what is now the temple mount stands on a hill, and to get there, one had to ascend the landscape, to walk into the gates surrounding the temple Solomon had built. It was almost like a fortress, so David prayed to God for peace, for his brothers, and for prosperity. His words are both literal and figurative: prayers for the physical journey to ascend the holy hill safely and for his people’s spiritual pilgrimage to meet God in the holy temple. Historically speaking, it became more difficult getting to the temple after Kings Hezekiah and Joshua closed all the sanctuaries except for Jerusalem. For us, a comparison would be having to go into DC for church because there were no suburban worship centers!

David’s references to prosperity were also both literal and figurative. For pilgrims, the temple represented God’s provision and lush prosperity. Even providing sacrifices as tithing sustained this theme, but for our purposes this season, let us think of the spiritual prosperity that we have through Jesus and his coming. It is a time to reconnect or reinforce our faith and all that Christ means for us: redemption, forgiveness, new birth, new opportunity, hope, peace for ourselves and our world, and later

this month, the joy and love of a close relationship with our Father in heaven.

That is the message John the Baptist brought, although not in a pretty package! He was rough in his lifestyle of dress, shelter, diet, and brusque communication style, yet was quite effective to prepare the people for Jesus. John was bold enough to confront people about their sin and disobedience, while sharing the hope of a forgiving savior, one who had more divine authority than he himself. I've often thought this was the original and best marketing plan I've ever seen. Preparing the people to receive the real message was brilliant and what we do purposefully now, both in commerce and in the church! We layer our messages in sound bites so that when the real message is presented, our minds or hearts are open and somewhat more willing to absorb the meaning. This wilderness prophet was not only Jesus' predecessor, but he got their attention before the Messiah arrived. Now don't let the timing of this passage confuse you, because we know the two first met in the wombs of Elizabeth and Mary. They were cousins, but John followed God's direction and began to prepare the people to receive Jesus' teachings. He simply made them aware of their shortcomings and misunderstandings of God; even some of the temple prophets were corrupt – "you brood of vipers!" In the Mediterranean many thought of vipers as serpents whose offspring killed their mothers. It was a myth from the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC but was an effective insult and motivator.

Most true prophets, like Elijah, went into exile like John because their messages were so uncomfortable. Although John confronts the people about their sin and judges them, his message is about the coming

Kingdom of God, a non-combatant theological message that most did not want to hear. It was indeed counter cultural. They were used to kings and oppression as slaves, but a Kingdom of God, an authority one could not see much less fully comprehend? For Israel's leaders it was profoundly threatening; so, the person John was announcing must be threatening too. How could a new leader take over their foundational institutions? Could they trust that he was the Son of God, or the Son of Man as he later said? John's description is cryptic yet revolutionary: mightier than John, whose sandals he was not worthy to touch. But the winnowing fan and the fire John described was frightening and perhaps inflamed the approaching conflicts. We know that Jesus would also bring peace, a spiritual peace within and eventually an earthly peace to all who believed in him.

I was moved to tears on Thursday at the Shepherd's Center luncheon with the Annandale High School Singers when they performed "Let There Be Peace on Earth" and let it begin with me! Seeing that young generation dedicating their talents to that message was stirring. It gave me hope for future leaders. Let there be peace on earth and in our hearts forevermore, not just at Christmas! We will keep watch for the birth of Jesus. See you next week in Joy. Amen! ||

**Pray with me now:** Loving and creative God, we pray for a heart and soul of readiness. Help us to digest these words and remember them so that we strengthen our relationship with you and your son Jesus. Guide us in our various holiday celebrations and conversations. Help us to share our stories of peace that Christ gives with others. Make us prosperous spiritually this season as we ask you to fill this sanctuary with those seeking your presence. And please bless these memorial elements in the name of Jesus, we pray, Amen.