



## RESOURCES FOR WORSHIP: MAY 31, 2026

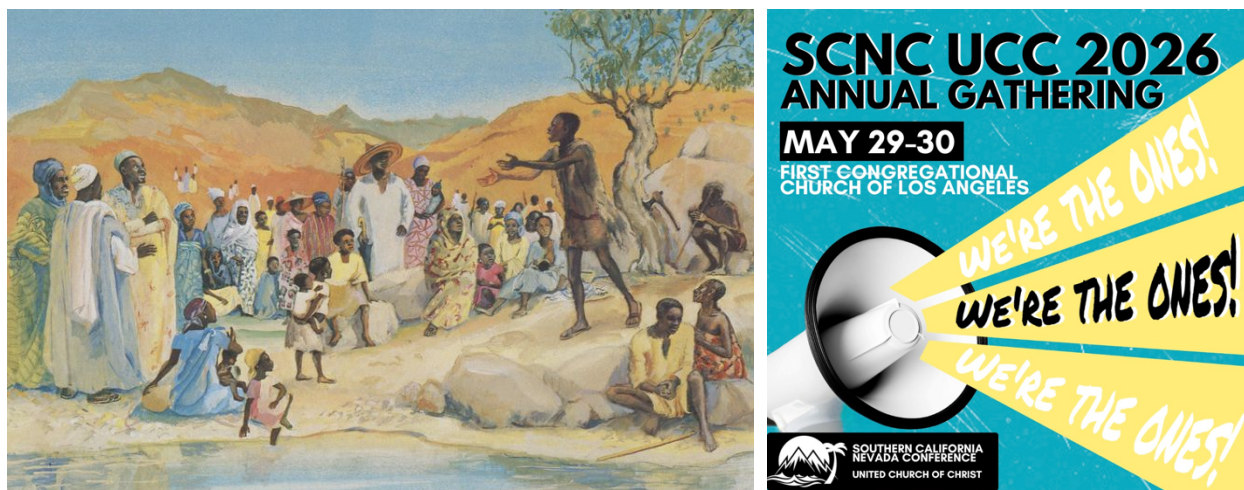
### ART

A great resource from Vanderbilt University is the [Art in the Christian Tradition](#) collection. Browse it to find artwork for bulletins or slides, including this example of John the Baptist preaching in the desert, by the [JESUS MAFA](#) collective.

Our graphics for Annual Gathering are another great choice for bulletin covers and slides for worship.

[Click here](#) to download the PNG file banner from our website.

[Click here](#) to download the JPEG file of social media art from our SCNC Facebook page.



## SCRIPTURE

The Gospel text related to our theme comes from **Matthew 11:1-6**. It's a portion of the text for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent, in Year A of the Revised Common Lectionary – so if you use the lectionary to preach, you might also go back and look at your worship materials and sermon for Dec. 14, 2025! How does that Advent celebration speak to this season of “Ordinary Time” in new ways? Some of the resources suggested for today come from Advent Week 3 materials, for which the theme, appropriately, is **Joy**.

**Matthew 11: 1-6**      *Common English Bible*

When Jesus finished teaching his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in their cities. <sup>2</sup>Now when John heard in prison about the things the Christ was doing, he sent word by his disciples to Jesus, asking,<sup>3</sup>“Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?”

<sup>4</sup>Jesus responded, “Go, report to John what you hear and see. <sup>5</sup>Those who were blind are able to see. Those who were crippled are walking. People with skin diseases are cleansed. Those who were deaf now hear. Those who were dead are raised up. The poor have good news proclaimed to them. <sup>6</sup>Happy are those who don't stumble and fall because of me.”

### **A Note about Ableism in this Passage**

It's important for us to be aware of exclusive language on at least two levels here. “Report to John what you **see and hear**” is a phrase that is not fully inclusive of people with vision or auditory disabilities, including neurological differences in processing and understanding. We can adapt in our translations and in our sermons to say, “Report what you experience and notice” or “Report what you have witnessed.” We can affirm that perceiving the world around us happens in many ways, not just sight and sound.

The language referring to healing of those who are blind, crippled, and deaf is also problematic. For example, being “healed” from deafness implies that deafness is a deficiency, instead of giving Deaf cultures and languages equal recognition. Many important contributions to fields from fine arts and architecture to science and education have come from Deaf people not *despite* their Deafness but because of the diverse perspective they bring. This is equally true for other kinds of “disability,” which highlight the impact of social norms and structures that could easily be adapted or changed. The disability isn't the problem; the lack of willingness to build more accessible and inclusive spaces and cultures is the shortcoming of ableism. Everyone is diminished by the impact of excluding people with disabilities.

At the same time, the Gospels were written in an era when disease and/or disability was often a result of poverty, as well as violence by oppressive forces. To be healed from these conditions represented a kind of liberation from that regime, or a reparation of injustice. We can employ language about healing, equality, and safety from injury, without using ableist terms for physical and intellectual diversity. This text is a call to liberation; and preaching that is carefully attuned to bias will allow us to focus on an empowering message without doing more harm to the billions of people who experience disability worldwide.

### **Additional Suggested Readings**

**Matthew 25:31-46** is referenced in the sermon and is one familiar option for an added reading.

<sup>31</sup>“Now when the Human One comes in his majesty and all his angels are with him, he will sit on his majestic throne. <sup>32</sup>All the nations will be gathered in front of him. He will separate them from each other, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. <sup>33</sup>He will put the sheep on his right side. But the goats he will put on his left.

<sup>34</sup>“Then the king will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who will receive good things from my Father. Inherit the kingdom that was prepared for you before the world began. <sup>35</sup>I was hungry and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. <sup>36</sup>I was naked and you gave me clothes to wear. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me.’

<sup>37</sup>“Then those who are righteous will reply to him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? <sup>38</sup>When did we see you as a stranger and welcome you, or naked and give you clothes to wear? <sup>39</sup>When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’

<sup>40</sup>“Then the king will reply to them, ‘I assure you that when you have done it for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you have done it for me.’

<sup>41</sup>“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Get away from me, you who will receive terrible things. Go into the unending fire that has been prepared for the devil and his angels. <sup>42</sup>I was hungry and you didn’t give me food to eat. I was thirsty and you didn’t give me anything to drink. <sup>43</sup>I was a stranger and you didn’t welcome me. I was naked and you didn’t give me clothes to wear. I was sick and in prison, and you didn’t visit me.’

<sup>44</sup>"Then they will reply, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and didn't do anything to help you?' <sup>45</sup>Then he will answer, 'I assure you that when you haven't done it for one of the least of these, you haven't done it for me.' <sup>46</sup>And they will go away into eternal punishment. But the righteous ones will go into eternal life."

**Psalm 146** is paired with the Gospel for the third Sunday in Advent, Year A. Here is an alternative translation, by Norman Fisher in *Opening to You: Zen-Inspired translations of the Psalms* (New York: Penguin Compass, 2002).

My soul brims with gratitude for you  
Whom I'll praise all my life—  
As long as I am I'll sing your songs.

Don't put your trust in the powerful  
Mere people who can hold but never save  
When their breath leaves them  
They return to the earth they're made of  
And on that day  
All their hopes end

But happy is the one  
Who trusts you for help  
Whose hope rests with you

Who made the heavens, the earth, the sea, and all it holds  
Whose truth is endless  
Who brings justice to the oppressed  
Bread to the hungry  
Who frees the bound  
Teaches the blind to see  
Lifts up the bent over  
Who loves the upright  
Guards the stranger  
Protects the orphan and widow  
And provides the heedless with the trouble they need

You whose way is right forever  
Zion's guide for all the generations—  
Praise is yours

## PRAYERS

The *Worship Ways* resource from the United Church of Christ for [Advent 3, Year A \(2025\)](#) has some elements that fit thematically with this service, including this **Call to Worship**.

One: Joy is the gift God gives us upon waking in the morning  
to see beams of sun dance in dusty corners  
or hear much needed rain, even on a leaky roof.

**Many: Joy is in the delight of tiny precious things.**

One: Joy is the magnificence of the Redeemer  
when the tests come back clear, or when a school test is finally passed,  
or when the spirit is tested, and chooses faith over fear.

**Many: Joy is in the hands that hold our own while we sit silently and wait.**

One: Joy is the patience of Emmanuel  
when petty disagreement turns into great injustice  
and change is slow to bend towards what is right and good.

**Many: Joy is in the small actions we take each day  
to help righteousness and peace abound.**

The Vanderbilt Divinity Library provides thematic prayers related to the lectionary. Here is one prayer that fits well with the theme and sermon; see the [Vanderbilt Divinity Library website](#) for additional examples.

God of hope,  
you call us home from the exile of selfish oppression  
to the freedom of justice,  
the balm of healing,  
and the joy of sharing.  
Make us strong to join you in your holy work,  
as friends of strangers and victims,  
companions of those whom others shun,  
and as the happiness of those whose hearts are broken.  
We make our prayer through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

## **HYMNS AND SONGS**

### *Thematic*

"We are the Ones" by Sweet Honey in the Rock, from the album *Twenty-Five* (1998)

How Clear is our Vocation, Lord (Fred Pratt Green, Tune: REPTON)

Give Thanks with a Grateful Heart (Henry Smith, Tune: GIVE THANKS)

I Will Trust in the Lord (African-American Traditional, Tune: TRUST IN THE LORD)

### *Scripture (Psalm 146)*

When Peace, Like a River (Horatio Spafford, Tune: VILLE DU HAVRE)

Advent music also works for this scripture and theme! And it can be fun to sing music out of season for a change. Here are a few ideas:

The Baptist Shouts on Jordan's Shore (Charles Coffin, Tune: WINCHESTER)

Come, O Long-Expected Jesus (Charles Wesley, multiple tunes)

Awake! Awake, and Greet the New Morn (Marty Haugen, Tune: REJOICE, REJOICE)

## **MESSAGE FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY OF GOD**

Even very young children can begin to play the game "I Spy." If appropriate, you can quickly explain the rules: one person chooses an item in the sanctuary and starts with a clue ("I spy something blue"). Everyone else can ask questions about it – but the question must be something we can answer with yes or no. Make this game more inclusive using a variety of examples: "I hear" or "I taste" or "I feel" can also be expanded to something a person could reasonably hear, taste, or feel at church (music, communion bread, smooth paper in the hymnal), even if they don't hear, taste, or feel it at that exact moment.

When John feels discouraged, Jesus asks the disciples to tell about what they've noticed or experienced to give him (and everyone) hope. Ask participants to share examples of something they noticed in the past week that gave them hope or made them happy – perhaps with some direction. For example, "Ice cream made me happy!" can be expanded to include the occasion for the ice cream, or the people it was shared with. Close with a repeat-after-me prayer asking God to help us notice Good News all around us in the coming week.

# SERMON

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1XsjlW9FU6xNvH0tJoACU540uuvTbnhcR/view?usp=sharing>

*This sermon is written (and recorded) from a first-person point of view, but please feel free to edit for the context and audience in a third-person format. If you first identify the author as "Rev. Rachael Pryor, Conference Minister," she prefers that you thereafter simply use "Rachael," or, if more appropriate for your setting, "Rev. Pryor."*

Earlier this month, the Global Ministries partnership of the United Church of Christ and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) joined our ecumenical allies in Washington, D.C. for a Joint Christian Advocacy Summit held May 5-7. I was thankful to be able to participate along with Rev. Ashley Hiestand, Moderator of the Southern California Nevada Conference. We joined about three hundred other faith leaders, as we received the latest updates about ongoing war and oppression in Palestine and Israel, and prepared to meet with legislators on the Hill.

Yateem, Executive Director for Service and Justice for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. He told us of an 80-year-old Palestinian mother trying to attend her son's consecration as Bishop of the Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land. She had the required permits. She walked with a cane. Yet she was stopped at a checkpoint and prevented from entering Jerusalem. Her son, waiting with church leaders and international guests, said he would not be consecrated unless his mother was present. After nearly two hours of phone calls and pleading, she finally arrived at the Jaffa Gate, shaken by the experience but able to stand beside her son, Bishop Dr. Imad Haddad.

Our pleas to lawmakers in Washington were non-partisan: fulfill your constitutional obligation to take responsibility for the war in the Middle East. Stop sending weapons to governments who violate international laws and treaties that the United States has signed, and many cases, authored. Pay the bills we already owe, and reinstate funding, for UNRWA – the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees that America helped establish in 1949. Allow access to hospitals throughout the region, but especially for children receiving cancer treatments at our partner hospital in Jerusalem.

Our gospel faith – our "Good News" faith – isn't just a vague idea of kindness. It's rooted in the Living Word, Jesus of Nazareth, who compels us to advocate for peace and healing, for compassion and dignity for all people – neighbors and strangers, friends and even enemies.

How will we know if God's beloved community is drawing near? It certainly doesn't feel like we are in the midst of a time of peace, tolerance, and universal prosperity. John the Baptist had the same question. Locked up in prison for resisting a corrupt regime, he was rightly fearing for his life. Maybe he was starting to wonder if it had all been worth it. Maybe he was having doubts about his faith. "Are you *really* the one I thought you were?" he asked Jesus. *Or have I been wrong all along?*

Jesus employs his usual strategy, turning the question back to John. "Pay attention to what's happening around you! Are the injured healed? Are the dead brought back to life? Are oppressed people finding hope in a new promise of freedom and reconciliation? The kin-dom of God is already here!" We just have to make an effort to take notice. It might not show up exactly where, when, or how we expected.

On my way to Washington, D.C., I was feeling low with all the usual regrets. *Am I just wasting my time and the Conference's money? Is this summit going to make a difference? Am I really the one who should be doing this? Do I even have time for this in my schedule?!* I assuaged my guilt during the long flight by getting temporarily caught up on email. In my head, I know every effort matters and that speaking up on behalf our decades-long partners in Gaza is always the right thing to do. But in my heart, I was tired of holding on to hope.

So I was surprised and grateful when we heard from speaker after speaker, that there is a growing feeling of encouragement among Palestinians and other advocates for Middle East peace, who sense that a change is underway. They lifted up the response of protests across cities and college campuses all around the world. They pointed to the increasing international recognition of prison violence, apartheid, and genocide taking place at the hands of the Netanyahu administration. They celebrated the growing awareness of the rich and ancient culture and history of Palestine. And they amplified Muslim and Jewish voices who are naming the harms of Islamophobia and antisemitism that are rising as a result of this war – Muslims and Jews and Christians, all united in a vision of peace and reconciliation.

On the second day of the event, we heard from Mohsen Mahdawi, a student at Columbia University, and a third-generation Palestinian refugee and peace advocate. He was detained when he appeared for a regular immigration check-in, on charges related to his role in a peaceful and lawful student protest against war and against genocide in Gaza. Eventually, a judge ordered his release and issued a restraining order to prevent his deportation.

Mr. Mahdawi grew up in Islam but began practicing Buddhism in his twenties. Yet, his interpretation of the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 25, was one of the most inspiring and insightful I've ever heard. Christians often point to this text as a foundational calling, to practice our faith through works of charity. When we feed a hungry person, when we visit the sick, when we welcome the stranger, we might be helping Jesus. It's easy to slide into an attitude that's a little bit self-serving: am I helping someone because all people are beloved children of God who deserve dignity and basic rights? Or is it only because I could, in some sense, be helping Jesus? Am I doing something for "the least of these" just so that I can "inherit the kingdom that was prepared for [me] before the world began" – instead of being sent into eternal punishment, according to Matthew 25:46? Or am I doing it simply because I believe our God who is love, wants all humankind to treat one another lovingly?

When we get stuck in self-focused mindset, it's easy to unintentionally *impose* our generosity on others, without stopping to find out what kind of support or partnership is really needed. The help we're doing becomes the point, instead of the lives that could be transformed by the relationship, on *both* sides of the giving and receiving. This is true in friendships, in marriages, at work and at school – not only in community outreach.

Mr. Mahdawi reframed Jesus' teaching in this way: we cannot ask people who are grieving or afraid to just take the help and advice we've decided they need. We cannot expect people to organize for a peaceable civil society while they are starving, thirsty, and imprisoned. We cannot ask Palestinians to prioritize compassion for their neighbors while drones fly overhead, dropping bombs on their homes, hospitals, and schools. And yet, many Palestinians and Israelis **do** manage to hold on to their humanity – advocating for peace and reconciliation, even as they fear for their lives.

Jesus was speaking to the leaders and authorities of his own oppressed people, in his own time. What if he was telling them: until we feed the hungry and clothe the naked, we will not have peace. Until we learn to care for the sick and the imprisoned, we will not be a beloved community. Until we give water to the thirsty and welcome the stranger, we will not know Christ. In order to build solidarity, we must first meet the basic needs of the most vulnerable in our communities. It's not fair, Mr. Mahdawi said – it's not fair, and it's not right, to ask terrorized people to put compassion and diplomacy ahead of their own survival.

And so **we** are the ones called to demand humanitarian food and medical aid for refugees and war-torn places, because we know from the teachings of a poor refugee from Nazareth, that the kin(g)dom of God has no room for many to go hungry while a few are feasting. There is no heaven in which children are imprisoned or killed while the wealthy and powerful go free. Diplomacy and ceasefire are the goal; but the first step is food, shelter, and medicine. We don't donate and advocate for this kind of aid because we want to avoid punishment in the next life; we do it to bring an end to unholy and unnecessary suffering in this life.

I suspect that most people hearing this message, like me, will not be able to remember a time when war in the Middle East wasn't a given. In the aftermath of World War II, the Holocaust, and the beginning of colonialism's demise, powerful global leaders made decisions that would have disastrous consequences all around the world. The forced resettlement of Palestinians in 1948 – what is known as the Nakba, the Arabic word for “catastrophe” – kicked off a cycle of violence and human rights violations that has lasted almost 80 years. Meanwhile, Jews continue to be victims of antisemitic violence, and Palestinian Christianity in the birthplace of the Church is under threat of total erasure. We've lived with this reality for so long that it is easy to give in to the temptation of thinking there is no other way. Of feeling like peace is an unattainable dream.

Here is where we can begin to understand what John the Baptizer might have felt like. For centuries, his people have been ruled over by an outside power. Poverty and hunger are a way of life. Taxes, checkpoints, and travel restrictions are all he's ever known. Now he's stuck in jail while his cousin wastes time healing sick people who are nobodies, and making friends with tax collectors and sinners. No wonder he asks, “Are you the one? Is this really what I've been waiting for – what I risked my life for?!” Maybe it isn't exactly the overthrow of Roman imperial forces that John was imagining.

The meaning of this entire passage turns on what Jesus *doesn't* say. John has sent word to Jesus asking, “Are you the one who is to come?” And Jesus *doesn't* say: ***I am. It's me. I'll take care of it all. Just sit back and watch.***

Instead, the answer Jesus gives boils down to the opposite: **It's you.** Look around you. What do you see? You are the ones you've been waiting for.

You are the ones who can get on a plane and fly to Washington, D.C. to demand a meeting with your Senator.

You are the ones, Covina Community Church, who are building a library of restorative justice and sharing a queer-affirming message of love in a California men's prison.

You are the ones, First Congregational Church of Ramona, who are expanding a ministry of Mental Health support through the UCC's WISE covenant, and building an ecumenical youth ministry.

You are the ones, Pioneer Ocean View UCC, who are living out a legacy of faithful merger while refusing to let the stories of Japanese incarceration be erased from American history.

You are the ones, First Congregational Church of Escondido, and the Neighborhood Church of Laguna Beach, who are building apartments on your property in the state with the greatest housing crisis this nation has ever faced.

And in the covenantal ties of our Wider Church, this ministry is all of us, together.

We are the ones, Etena Fou Church, renovating a kitchen to feed hungry neighbors.

We are the ones, Live Oak United Church of Christ, giving a refugee family a new community and a new start.

We are the ones, Altadena Community Church, coming back from a fire with an even stronger commitment to justice and generosity.

We are the ones, First Congregational Church of Santa Barbara, experimenting with new models for Christian community and ecumenical partnership for a new generation of de-churched and post-church seekers.

We are the ones, Lincoln Memorial United Church of Christ, empowering your community through holistic care for health, education, and culture, while dismantling internal and external systems of anti-black racism.

All across this Conference, we are the ones writing the songs and poems and books of the resistance that imagine a holy and beloved kin-dom.

We are the ones planting gardens and nurturing children for a faithful future that will continue beyond our lifetimes. We are the ones turning underutilized property into grants and resources for innovation and revitalization of community-oriented ministry. We are imagining a new vision for how our wider church will continue to do the work of the Gospel, and we are turning what the statisticians are calling the "death" of the church into a reconfiguration of our plentiful resources, for new life and new possibility.

We refuse to be discouraged by the stumbling blocks of profit margins & zoning restrictions, the ICE raids and censorship, because we can rely on what we hear and see and feel:

Our elders holding protest signs, refusing to be silenced.

Our youth building homes in Tijuana, refusing to let a border separate us from our neighbors.

Our seminaries, preparing new ministry candidates for leadership in a time of radical reformation.

Our chaplains, opening our hearts around end-of-life conversations and accompanying our moments of deepest grief.

Our local church pastors, navigating technology with courage and faithfulness, and creating community in a growing epidemic of loneliness.

We don't have to wait at all – and in fact, we've never had to. The moment has always been now. Every time we partner with our communities to overcome hunger, isolation, and oppression, we build the solidarity that God created us for. Every time we celebrate and protect the stories of our diversity – urban and rural, mountain and coastline, Filipino and Latinex, Black and Samoan, Japanese and Hungarian, young and old, indigenous and immigrant, rich and poor, all genders and abilities, families of every shape and size – we proclaim the Kin(g)dom of Heaven that is already here.

The only time we waste, is the time we wait to start. The time we spend thinking that our local impact won't matter, won't be worth it. That we're too small to make a difference.

We are here. We are ready. The wait is over. **We are the ones!** So let's not wait another minute, to dive in and live with hope, generosity, and joy at the beloved community we are growing together, every day. Amen.