


3 Advent Year C — St Helen's, Abingdon  
15 December 2024



Zephaniah 3:14–20 / Philippians 4:4–7 / Luke 3:7–18

With many other exhortations, John proclaimed the good news to the people.

 In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit – Amen

**I**T IS 1759. The Seven Years' War roils on, devastating regions throughout Europe and the colonies around the world. The bad news of the horrific earthquake, tsunami, and fire on All Saints Day in Lisbon, 1755, still haunts Christians' memories. Closer to home, Joseph Newcome, the long-time rector of St Helen's Church, died two years ago, and recently the parish has begun parking a fire engine in the North aisle. And in 1759, editions of a new French novel published anonymously, but widely assumed to have been written by Voltaire, have been circulating in French, Italian, and English to great acclaim and greater scandal.

The book was *Candide*, a ferocious satire against the idea that God's world is good, *must be* good, because God *made* it and our all-gracious deity *cannot* will any evil to creation, especially not to humanity. *Candide* begins with the main characters living in a comfortable castle, who then suffer a series of disastrous setbacks which they somehow always survive, after enduring deeper and deeper torment, degradation and injury. Candide himself maintains his confidence that all is for the best in this best of all possible worlds almost to the very end — when he at last decides that we should just stay home and tend our own gardens.

It is 1759. No, I *mean* it — Candide suffers from different endless wars, different environmental catastrophes, different corrupt officials, and different disappointing representatives of the church, but in many, many

ways we are living out our own version of the world Voltaire described. Under the shock of bleak news of torture or plague, of starvation or terror, of deaths closer to home, or some combination of *all* of these, our sense of time goes all misty, and our twenty-first century worries merge with the long-ago disasters that drove Candide to give up his trust in the goodness of God's creation. In what sense can we call a world 'good' when so much suffering and horror, so much cruelty, greed, and venality jostle for our attention day after day? Better, perhaps, that we should just give up and cultivate our own gardens.

Candide's reasoning reflects an honest worldly wisdom; it acknowledges no lord but nature, the annual sprouting-forth of a new but short-lived world, the key to a life made happy by not setting *unrealistic* goals. From the rising of the sun to its setting, women labour, men toil, children hunger, all things prosper, wither and die. The kings of the nations make war, and the promise of Emmanuel strikes Voltaire's ears as naïve optimism. Candide rejects hope with the plain premise that through hard work, and diminished expectations, we can carve out for ourselves modest wee pockets of comfort and beauty, if we only tend to our own gardens.

Under pressure, pressing down on the daily life, 2024 merges with 1759, and down by the Thames, or in the market square, into a miasma of permanent war, religious intolerance, and public corruption strides a hairy prophet, a stern moralist who preaches to anyone who'll listen to him. John the Baptist fits right into Candide's world, from his outlandish diet to his furious social criticism. John steps into the world we share with Candide and denounces the powers that cause such devastating havoc: "You snakes! Thieves, and extortionists! This is the beginning of the end, and it's good news!" And where John preaches, where John offers the world a *clean start* in the name of the God of life, there the pragmatic obviousness of *worldly* enlightenment *itself* pales and falters. Candide's sensible garden fades away to a sepia-toned unreality and a stronger, deeper, more ancient Garden —

you know the one I'm thinking of — an ancient Garden blossoms into view.

The deep saturated hues of that primal Garden tell us the truth about God's wisdom that *Voltaire's* vision misses. Where *Candide* urges us to content ourselves with ordinary shades of gray-green, the *good news* of that true OG (Original Garden) toward which John the Baptist points us, splashes vivid *crimson, purple, lime, gold*, across leaf and lawn. That ancient Wisdom unfolds with intensity in startling saturation, seeping even into the most grievous suffering so that *no* plague, *no* cruelty can endure the presence of God's grace. Wisdom comes into a world that Wisdom wrought: it outlasts our spoliation of beauty, our denial of redemptive hope. Wisdom accompanies us as we *err* in our own headstrong destructiveness, and Wisdom ever offers us the good news of a wisdom greater than our own, a Garden more fruitful than any we cultivate.

John's Garden points us *beyond* Nature's endless cycles of death and birth, of big bang and heat death, of heartless necessity. Where Nature impartially presides over a succession of *temporary* beauties that fade, blur, decay in the futility of mortal strife, *John's* Garden praises a Lord in whose sight no loveliness perishes, no generosity exhausts, no corrosion afflicts. *We affirm* John's Garden in our *trust* that death does *not* speak the final word, in the good news that God has raised up Jesus Christ — and *will raise us*, as members of Christ's Body — in a victory over the merely *natural* forces of pain, desire, and decay. The laws by which John's Garden thrives are the manifold blessings of the One Lord: trusting, and loving, and hoping.

The Root of that Garden reaches deeper than potting soil, deeper than rich loamy topsoil, deeper than any earth itself, into the metaphysical stuff of *being's* own origins. Truth's roots reach back through generations of saints and prophets, of sisters and brothers who *will not let go* of their ancestors nor abandon their children. Our Root extends across ages and *binds us together* despite our preferences, holding us in a single net with hypocrites and haters, holy women and helpful men, reaching further and

holding more securely than garden fences, stakes, arbors, ties and trellises. The Root of John's Garden reaches beyond time, and in that Garden our hopes will blossom and bear fruit.

All these signs of the Garden gesture for our attention from behind the *plainness* by which common sense tries to fend off disappointment, grief, sorrow, weariness. Candide's garden locks its door against the wide world, and hides the Key. Perhaps once upon a time, when we couldn't smell the pungent blossoms of John's Garden, we might be content in Candide's; perhaps if we had never seen the intense hues of the true Garden, we wouldn't notice how modern practicality has muted the tones of the world. But the Key of the Garden releases us from defensive walls that *enclose* our aspirations, and that Key sends us out into a limitless glory wherein we *will* suffer loss, we *will* know disappointment, but we *will always* freely partake of the Truth that *no* loss, *no* disappointment can lock down.

Even now, that Truth dawns among us. We hear it in the resonance of harmonious choirs, summoning us into the courts of angels and archangels, and *all* the company of heaven. We see the Dawn radiant in our children's open-hearted, loving beauty. We smell the Dawn in the scent of home cooking, of our loved one's hair, of great books and gorgeous bowers, we recognize the Dawn with *every sense* and indeed with faculties yet unnamed, for that Dawn rises *in our hearts* and *understanding* and *in our outstretched hands*, with joy in *building, touching, HEALING* in God's name.

Dawn comes to the Garden brilliant in amazing grace, and draws *all* open hearts to its light, illumining the basest and the best, inviting the temporal powers to lay aside their crowns. Those insignias of coercion *exhaust* their charity, trammel their liberty, weigh down their brows with cares that obscure the open majesty of the Garden and its own gentle King. In the Garden to which John points us, no will can coerce, no violence compel, for *love's perfect liberty alone* rules here; in this Garden, the King sets us free to rejoice.

The borders of *Candide's* garden try to *lock out* suffering. But beyond the

borders of Candide's garden, the vibrant sound of loud, festal singing shimmers in the morning sun. We *know* about death here, we've *seen* the devastation that evil and wickedness can inflict — we know them, but more truly and more finally we know their *limits*, and in the holy Garden beyond the limits of want and death we draw water with rejoicing from the springs of salvation and say — no, we *sing* the praises of the Lord who *has done* great things; our bells ring out our joy. Tomorrow, *I will be there*; we *all* will be there. Our King is in our very midst, the Dawn shines, the Key turns, the Root blossoms, the Lord reigns, and Wisdom gathers her children from among all the peoples of the earth to sing together, 'Come, thou long-expected Jesus; Come, O come Emmanuel!'

In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit —

**Amen**