

2014

adventresource



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How is your Christmas preparation going?

We invite you into an advent preparation journey with us. Sometimes the way will be through Scripture that comforts and gives us hope, sometimes we will read passages that perplex us. We will stop to reflect and pray, and we will keep looking forward with a sense of expectation to 'Immanuel', God with us. In the end we hope to be ready for advent in a new way. We look forward to your company on this journey.

This advent resource is a product of team work through the CTM and wider. We wish in particular to thank

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- > Chris Barnett
- > Merryn Gray
- > Age Greenwood
- > Sharon Hollis
- > Cath James
- > Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon
- > Christina Rowntree
- > Christine Sorensen
- > Geoff Thompson
- > Sean Winter
- > All images unless noted are taken by Zoriah. Used with permission.

What's included

Each reflection contains

- > A Bible Reading
- > A reflection on the passage(s)
- > A question for reflection
- > A short prayer
- > Sometimes there is a link to a video-clip.
- > Weekly Multiage activities

You can find the start of each week at ...

> Nov 24 - 30	2
> Dec 1 - 7	11
> Dec 8 - 14	20
> Dec 15 - 21	29
> Dec 22 - 25	38

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UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA



SYNOD OF VICTORIA AND TASMANIA



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Monday November 24

My favourite part of this Isaiah text is the “Oh” at the beginning. It rings of fatigue and frustration with the world and God.

Oh, OH I wish God you would just do something! Look we have heard you are a great God. We sing songs and tell sacred stories of your love, compassion, justice and power. God you have acted in the past. So can't you act now? Don't we all have fatigue and frustration over war, violence, preventable diseases that kill so many, corruption, persecution, the displaced, discriminated and detained longing for freedom?

I know I let out a regular “Oh”

The text continues recognising the frustrating balance between the knowledge that God is the only one who has ever acted in response to bringing about change versus being swept along in our sins and agendas - blaming God for making us this way. This passage leads us to an awareness that reconciliation rests in God.

We can pray to God the source of healing. While this response may feel like a Sunday school answer in the midst of international disaster, we still pray. A Prayer that is fatigued, angry, and prophetically hopeful - “OH God that you would rend the heavens and come down”

Reflection

Read the Isaiah passage again then watch the World Aids day clip “The Human face of Aids.”¹ <http://youtu.be/0I1hveSQliA?list=UUMMkQR5wFxJ2BEEwJfY98Q>

Prayer:

Oh God that you would rend the heavens and come down

O look on us we pray, for we are all your people.

Isaiah 64:1-9

Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you!

As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil, come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you!

For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you.

Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.

You come to the help of those who gladly do right, who remember your ways. But when we continued to sin against them, you were angry.

How then can we be saved?

All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.

No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and have given us over to our sins.

Yet you, Lord, are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand.

Do not be angry beyond measure, Lord; do not remember our sins forever. Oh, look on us, we pray, for we are all your people.

¹ Throughout this week we refer to advent video resources to assist in prayerful reflection. A clip for world AIDS day, and “Hope.Peace.Love.Joy,” a series of works from Zorlah (humanitarian photojournalist) compiled into four Advent video clips, and a Christmas day mix clip.





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Tuesday November 25

As with the passage from yesterday, here there is a realisation that the troubles and chaos of the world surround us as we pray. Yet this time we begin by remembering God as a shepherd enthroned upon the Cherubim: imagery of protection, promise and hope. My mind travelled to the reruns of “Indiana Jones” in particular to the ‘Ark of the Covenant’. Cherubim with great wings spread out across the ark stir sentiments of providing refuge, relief, and deliverance for the people of God, a God who is present and militarily powerful.

This psalm begins with a reminder of God’s presence and power even in the midst of troubles. The prayer is for restoration by God’s might and power while simultaneously desiring God’s presence.

In the midst of trouble and chaos we often want the trouble to end or for our side to prevail. The Psalmist’s lens recognises not only the presenting problem but that underneath we also long to be known - ‘to have God’s face shine upon us’.

Reflection

How deep is your hope? Watch the Advent Hope clip <http://youtu.be/NpyqYdOHlq4>. This clip is a photo journalist’s idea of hope with images of the chaos of the Boxing day tsunami 2004 and images taken from the same restored spot one year later.

Prayer

Thank you powerful and present God for hope, even when we are surrounded by chaos and trouble.

Ps 80 1-3 Hoping

Hear us, Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead Joseph like a flock.
You who sit enthroned between the cherubim,
shine forth before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh.
Awaken your might;
come and save us.
Restore us, O God;
make your face shine on us,
that we may be saved.
How long, Lord God Almighty,
will your anger smolder
against the prayers of your people?
You have fed them with the bread of tears;
you have made them drink tears by the bowlful.
You have made us an object of derision to our neighbors,
and our enemies mock us.
Restore us, God Almighty;
make your face shine on us,
that we may be saved.
You transplanted a vine from Egypt;
you drove out the nations and planted it.





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Wednesday November 26

How long??

During the hardest part of grief, the pointy end of opposition and the fatigue of seeking justice, I often pray “How Long?”

How long will the tears last? How long will the pain be like this? How long till we find a way through the pressure? How long must we keep crying out for justice?

It feels like God is against us. It feels like God is to blame. Yet at the same time God is both the person, power and place where support and capacity have been found in the past.

What experiences of God grow your courage and capacity to continue in the hard times?

Reflection:

What does it mean for you to follow the ‘Prince of Peace’ in a warring world?

Watch the advent peace clip - <http://youtu.be/TgPxK5hIBZ8>

Prayer:

Oh God Almighty, even as we ask ‘how long’ may we know your close presence.
Amen.

Psalm 80: 4-7

Hear us, Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead Joseph like a flock.
You who sit enthroned between the
cherubim,
shine forth before Ephraim, Benjamin and
Manasseh.
Awaken your might;
come and save us.

Restore us, O God;
make your face shine on us,
that we may be saved.

How long, Lord God Almighty,
will your anger smolder
against the prayers of your people?





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Thursday November 27

This section of the Psalm moves to revealing God as a God who acts and allows our hopes to be realised. The 'Son of Man' has come confirming that we are not alone in our struggle for hope and liberation. We have found the courage and capacity to continue to push in hard times and places of opposition. Once courage is found we respond with greater determination and commitment to be revived and sustained by God. There is something to be celebrated in this journey.

When have you celebrated your commitment to following God? Was your confirmation or baptism a time of joy?

Reflection:

What were the signs of life/joy/progress that helped you gather your courage in the face of opposition?

Watch the 'Joy' advent clip http://youtu.be/TT_KQOfI-so

Prayer:

Restore us O God Almighty; make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved.

Psalm 80: 17-19

Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand,

the son of man you have raised up for yourself.

Then we will not turn away from you;
revive us, and we will call on your name.

Restore us, Lord God Almighty;
make your face shine on us,
that we may be saved.





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Friday November 28

Read the horror of this text. I read it and found myself longing for the false prophet in Micah 2:11 “a liar and deceiver comes and says, ‘I will prophesy for you plenty of wine and beer,’ that would be just the prophet for this people!”

Yes, when we read judgement passages we, like all those hearing the prophecies, look for better news and more palatable messages.

How do you understand this and other texts like this?

How do we think about the families involved in the destruction?

Does it cause any cognitive dissonance or do we just avoid it?

Reflection:

Watch the Love clip - the amazing spirit of people living in poverty, conflict and disaster zones and the love of families and those caring for loved ones. <http://youtu.be/yqQveR0xDcc>

Prayer:

You may like to sit in silence before God

Zechariah 14:1-18

A day of the Lord is coming, Jerusalem, when your possessions will be plundered and divided up within your very walls.

I will gather all the nations to Jerusalem to fight against it; the city will be captured, the houses ransacked, and the women raped. Half of the city will go into exile, but the rest of the people will not be taken from the city. Then the Lord will go out and fight against those nations, as he fights on a day of battle. On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives will be split in two from east to west, forming a great valley, with half of the mountain moving north and half moving south. You will flee by my mountain valley, for it will extend to Azel. You will flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah. Then the Lord my God will come, and all the holy ones with him.

On that day there will be neither sunlight nor cold, frosty darkness. It will be a unique day—a day known only to the Lord—with no distinction between day and night. When evening comes, there will be light.

On that day living water will flow out from Jerusalem, half of it east to the Dead Sea and half of it west to the Mediterranean Sea, in summer and in winter. The Lord will be king over the whole earth. On that day there will be one Lord, and his name the only name.

The whole land, from Geba to Rimmon, south of Jerusalem, will become like the Arabah. But Jerusalem will be raised up high. It will be inhabited; never again will it be destroyed. Jerusalem will be secure.

This is the plague with which the Lord will strike all the nations that fought against Jerusalem: Their flesh will rot while they are still standing on their feet, their eyes will rot in their sockets, and their tongues will rot in their mouths. On that day people will be stricken by the Lord with great panic. They will seize each other by the hand and attack one another. Judah too will fight at Jerusalem. The wealth of all the surrounding nations will be collected—great quantities of gold and silver and clothing. A similar plague will strike the horses and mules, the camels and donkeys, and all the animals in those camps. Then the survivors from all the nations that have attacked Jerusalem will go up year after year to worship the King, the Lord Almighty, and to celebrate the Festival of Tabernacles. If any of the peoples of the earth do not go up to Jerusalem to worship the King, the Lord Almighty, they will have no rain. If the Egyptian people do not go up and take part, they will have no rain. The Lord will bring on them the plague he inflicts on the nations that do not go up to keep the Festival of Tabernacles.





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Saturday November 29

Signs of the coming of the Son of Man.

Recognising signs of the coming of the Son of Man does not lead to taking up arms but is instead a time to 'run for the hills'. Get out and don't stop to listen to prophets saying it isn't that bad or that they know more than you about the time of his coming. You will know when he comes.

This section is heavily laden with Roman imagery:

- as clear as lightning in the sky you will see the signs. Lightning and the power of the heavens were claimed by the rulers of Rome as signs of the support of their gods Jupiter and Zeus. The contrast here is that lightning is not a sign of Jupiter's/Roman sovereignty but of God's coming.
- those taking up arms, find themselves in a clever battlefield reference with corpses and vultures/eagles gathering. The Eagle is the symbol of Roman rule and might, it gathers with the corpses symbolising the death of Rome. The eagle does not fly over them but is with the fallen.
- the cosmic sources of light such as stars, moon and the sun are darkened. Jesus's coming is not only a political challenge but a cosmic transformation. Yet, the Roman powers of the day claimed the blessing of the light from the Sun and Moon as signs of their associated gods' power. This also extended to their own powers with titles such as Nero "the new Sun" and references and artwork of their 'radiant crowns'. This passage is basically saying 'lights out for tyrants'.

When the Son of Man comes we will not miss it. But will we welcome it?

Do the people mourn in this passage because of repentance or fear of judgement?

Reflection:

What world do you hope the Son of Man will bring? Watch the Advent Mix clip.
<http://youtu.be/jCLvmwXQpoE>

Prayer:

Lord, as we await Christmas now, help us to see how we are entrenched in political understandings of today. Let us prepare for your coming: Maranatha, come Lord Jesus.

Matthew 24:15-31

"So when you see standing in the holy place 'the abomination that causes desolation,' spoken of through the prophet Daniel—let the reader understand— then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let no one on the housetop go down to take anything out of the house. Let no one in the field go back to get their cloak. How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath. For then there will be great distress, unequaled from the beginning of the world until now—and never to be equaled again.

"If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened. At that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Messiah!' or, 'There he is!' do not believe it. For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you ahead of time.

"So if anyone tells you, 'There he is, out in the wilderness,' do not go out; or, 'Here he is, in the inner rooms,' do not believe it. For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather:

"Immediately after the distress of those days

"the sun will be darkened,

and the moon will not give its light;

the stars will fall from the sky,

and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.'

"Then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven. And then all the peoples of the earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other:





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<http://www.istockphoto.com>

Household Activities Advent Week 1

Advent and Justice 1 - Shaping and shaped

Isaiah 64:1-9

One of the most striking images that the writer of Isaiah uses is this: We [the people] are the clay and you [God] are the potter

How are we shaped through our relationship with God? How can we then shape the world and change the injustices in the world to better reflect God's love?

Invite everyone person to take a stick of plasticine. (You can get packs of 12 different colours in most supermarkets or art supplies or toy shops.) Invite each person to rub it between their fingers for a while, initially thinking about a situation in the world/their world that is unfair. Continue until the plasticine is soft and malleable, with the further invitation to think about how the situation might be shaped for a fairer outcome. Older people might like to think about a social issue that has changed for the better in their lifetime.

The plasticine can then be moulded into a symbolic shape to reflect the issue or just into any shape they like. The playing with the clay is part of the reflective process.

Give each person the opportunity to place their plasticine on the same sheet of cardboard, building up a collective sculpture. Invite people to share something about the change they would like to see or have seen in the world/their world. Leave the plasticine creation on display for the week.

Mark 13:24-27

Background

Although this part of the Bible mentions the sun and moon and clouds and wind – it's not a weather report; and even though it mention stars and the heavens (which we'd call the solar system) it's not a science report either.

This is 'apocalyptic' writing: it is high drama, high symbols. The first part shows everything being rocked and changed. If the sun didn't shine what would be affected in our lives? EVERYTHING!

The description at the beginning is like a big 'Ta-da' chord that introduces something dramatic happening on stage, but it's not the big thing itself. It's like the crack of thunder and lightening in between the Count.

The 'main event' is the coming of the 'Son of Man'.

The "weather warnings" are just the 'sound and lighting effects'.





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Activity 1 - Poster

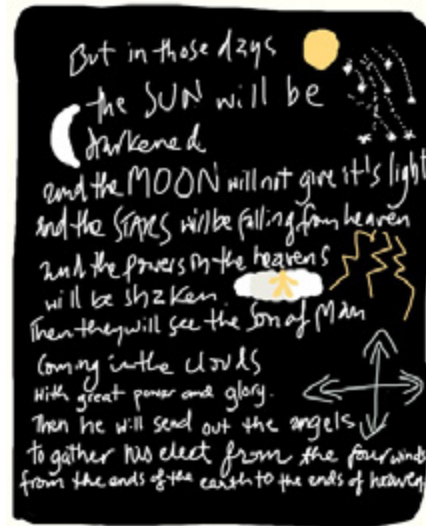
You will need:

- > black card (one large piece and some smaller offcuts)
- > light coloured oil pastels or crayons
- > Bibles

Write out Mark 13:24-27 in white pastel or crayon on the large piece of black card – take turns so that everyone's handwriting is featured on your poster. Add pictures of the elements mentioned in the text – sun, moon, stars, 'powers in the heaven' (lightning), 'Son of Man' (use your imaginations) angel/messengers, wind, gathered people.

Add black fold-over flaps to cover each of the elements.

With your finished poster, perform a reading in which you hide and reveal the pictures matching the reading. If you have household members who are into filming, make a video with stop motion on the changes. In the spirit of the apocalyptic dramatic genre of the text, add a sound track! If you are pleased with your production, send it to chris.barnett@ctm.uca.edu.au and we'll post it on the Children and Families website.



Activity 2 - Compare and Contrast

Mark 13:24-27 paints a picture of dramatic impact on the whole cosmos when Jesus returns. It is an astrophysics showstopper, as you'd expect, but how does it compare to the incarnation, the birth of Jesus?

- > Divide a poster into three columns and make notes (including visual notes!) in each column detailing the descriptions of Jesus' coming in the birth narratives of Jesus (Luke 2 and Matthew 2) and the picture painted here in Mark 13.
- > Talk together about why there might be contrasts and similarities between the way Jesus's arrivals are described.
- > Mark's gospel doesn't give any space to telling the story of Jesus' birth – but does mention Jesus' coming again in several places. Speculate on why this might be...

Activity 3 - Refrains

Psalms 80:1-7, 17-19

Psalms 80 has a refrain that is repeated between sections of the psalm (v3, 7, 19). Practice the refrain together a few times.

Psalms 80:3

Restore us, O God;

let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Either decide on some dramatic inflections or set it to a catchy tune – whatever you do, don't read it like a shopping list. This is drama! This is passion!

Read the passage responsively, reading the refrain together.

Extend this to make your own psalm about where you see God and where you long to see God's ways in the world, repeating the refrain in between short 'verses' of your own creation.





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Sunday November 30 First Sunday in Advent

I occasionally hear the phrase 'being on the right side of history'. When policies and powers are about to crumble or under pressure to change, I want to be on the side that reflects the Kingdom. Also, I am reminded that 'Powers' do fall and this reinvigorates our prophetic hope.

In this text we are encouraged to be ready for when the time is right for the stars and powers to fall. As in yesterday's passage about Roman occupation, today it is again 'lights out for tyrants'. The stars fall, the moon does not give light because the source of power has changed to the coming of the Son of Man. As he comes, he gathers those that have endured.

We are reminded to learn the lesson of the fig tree. Skip back a few chapters (Mk 11) to refresh the fig tree lesson. Jesus cursed the fig tree because it only had leaves but no fruit, interpreted as meaning the destruction of the temple and end times. This fig tree has leaves and it is a sign that these end times are now at hand.

The call is to be ready. This echoes a reference to the 'stages of the watch' in the Passion story at Easter particularly the call to the disciples in Gethsemane... "Stay Awake". Watch.

Reflection:

Go for a walk - reflect on what the people, animals and places are hoping for - what would good news be for them?

Prayer:

Lord what does it take for me to be ready today? For us to be ready as a church?

Mark 13:24-37

"But in those days, following that distress,
"the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light;
the stars will fall from the sky,
and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.'
"At that time people will see the Son of Man
coming in clouds with great power and glory. And
he will send his angels and gather his elect from the
four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends
of the heavens.
"Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon
as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you
know that summer is near. Even so, when you see
these things happening, you know that it is near,
right at the door. Truly I tell you, this generation will
certainly not pass away until all these things have
happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my
words will never pass away.
"But about that day or hour no one knows, not
even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only
the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know
when that time will come. It's like a man going away:
He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge,
each with their assigned task, and tells the one at
the door to keep watch.
"Therefore keep watch because you do not know
when the owner of the house will come back—
whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the
rooster crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do
not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say
to everyone: 'Watch!'"





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Monday December 1

During the first week of Advent we were reminded of the hope of God's coming, a hope which Christians understand against the background of Israel's hope but which they believe has been fulfilled in Jesus. That hope-fulfilment schema can, however, obscure the richness and breadth of the hope. The Micah reading sets out a vision of universal peace and a world devoid of fear. The vision in the Revelation reading invokes the memory of Israel's Exodus from Egypt (the sea, Moses, the plagues) but now describes God's deliverance of all nations. The end point of this vision of a new world is not, however, the new world itself: it is God without whom this new world would not exist. It is his 'just and true ways' (Rev 15:3) which draw forth the praise and worship of the nations.

Reflection:

How wide is your vision of God's ways? Does Advent narrow or broaden that vision for you?

Prayer:

God of justice and truth lead us into your just and true ways as we enter into the Advent hope.

Micah 4:1-5;

In the last days the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as the highest of the mountains; it will be exalted above the hills, and peoples will stream to it.

Many nations will come and say,
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the temple of the God of Jacob.
He will teach us his ways,
so that we may walk in his paths."
The law will go out from Zion,
the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
He will judge between many peoples and will settle
disputes for strong nations far and wide.
They will beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will not take up sword against nation,
nor will they train for war anymore.
Everyone will sit under their own vine
and under their own fig tree,
and no one will make them afraid,
for the Lord Almighty has spoken.
All the nations may walk in the name of their gods,
but we will walk in the name of the Lord
our God for ever and ever.

Revelation 15:1-8

I saw in heaven another great and marvelous sign: seven angels with the seven last plagues—last, because with them God's wrath is completed. And I saw what looked like a sea of glass glowing with fire and, standing beside the sea, those who had been victorious over the beast and its image and over the number of its name. They held harps given them by God and sang the song of God's servant Moses and of the Lamb: "Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the nations. Who will not fear you, Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed."

After this I looked, and I saw in heaven the temple—that is, the tabernacle of the covenant law—and it was opened. Out of the temple came the seven angels with the seven plagues. They were dressed in clean, shining linen and wore golden sashes around their chests. Then one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls filled with the wrath of God, who lives for ever and ever. And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power; and no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed.





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Tuesday December 2

These two readings also broaden the picture of hope and how God's promises are fulfilled. The Micah reading develops the harsh theme of the expulsion of Israel ('daughter of Zion') from Jerusalem into the hands of the enemy 'Babylon' before pointing to Israel's defeat of the 'many nations' assembled against it. The Babylonian image is taken up again in the reading from Revelation where it symbolises all that stands against God and which now faces the judgement of God. Both readings point to the fact that no human power – be it Israel or 'Babylon', the religious or secular – can be immune from God's judgment if it usurps to itself what belongs to God. The imagery of these readings is unsettling but can be read as a summons to humility and a reminder that God is sovereign.

Reflection:

What forces in the contemporary world seek to usurp what properly belongs to God?

Prayer:

Merciful God in a divided and warring world, help us not to claim you for our causes, but to learn how to be your humble servants.

Micah 4:6-10

"In that day," declares the Lord,
"I will gather the lame; I will assemble the exiles
and those I have brought to grief.
I will make the lame my remnant, those driven away
a strong nation.
The Lord will rule over them in Mount Zion
from that day and forever.
As for you, watchtower of the flock, stronghold of
Daughter Zion,
the former dominion will be restored to you;
kingship will come to Daughter Jerusalem."
Why do you now cry aloud— have you no king?
Has your ruler perished, that pain seizes you like
that of a woman in labor?
Writhe in agony, Daughter Zion, like a woman in
labor, for now you must leave the city to camp in
the open field.
You will go to Babylon; there you will be rescued.
There the Lord will redeem you out of the hand of
your enemies.

Revelation 18:1-7a, 9-10

After this I saw another angel coming down from
heaven. He had great authority, and the earth was
illuminated by his splendor. With a mighty voice he
shouted:
"'Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great!'
She has become a dwelling for demons
and a haunt for every impure spirit,
a haunt for every unclean bird,
a haunt for every unclean and detestable animal.
For all the nations have drunk
the maddening wine of her adulteries.
The kings of the earth committed adultery with her;
and the merchants of the earth grew rich from
her excessive luxuries."
Then I heard another voice from heaven say:
"'Come out of her, my people,'
so that you will not share in her sins,
so that you will not receive any of her plagues;
for her sins are piled up to heaven,
and God has remembered her crimes.
Give back to her as she has given;
pay her back double for what she has done.
Pour her a double portion from her own cup.
Give her as much torment and grief
as the glory and luxury she gave herself..
"When the kings of the earth who committed
adultery with her and shared her luxury see the
smoke of her burning, they will weep and mourn
over her. Terrified at her torment, they will stand far
off and cry:
"'Woe! Woe to you, great city,
you mighty city of Babylon!
In one hour your doom has come!'"





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Wednesday December 3

Jewish prophets and the Christian apostles manifest a deep confidence in the promises of God. Yet this confidence was never the basis of easy predictions or false certainties. The Micah reading begins with Jerusalem under siege but with the prophet pointing to unlikely Bethlehem, from 'one of the little clans of Judah', to be the source of the messianic ruler. This prophecy was applied to Jesus by the first Christians. But again, the significance lies not only in its fulfilment, but in the character it portrays of the promised Messiah: a shepherd who 'feeds his flock' and who will be 'one of peace'. God encourages us to be confident in the divine promises, whilst often subverting our expectations. This has its parallel in Jesus' summons to alertness with regard to God's coming rule (the 'day' of the 'Son of Man').

Reflection:

How do you distinguish between the false and true certainties of the Christian faith?

Prayer:

Steadfast God, when our hope fades help us look for your presence in the unexpected and unfamiliar.

Micah 5:1-5a

Marshal your troops now, city of troops,
for a siege is laid against us.
They will strike Israel's ruler
on the cheek with a rod.

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old,
from ancient times."

Therefore Israel will be abandoned
until the time when she who is in labor bears a
son,
and the rest of his brothers return
to join the Israelites.

He will stand and shepherd his flock
in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.
And they will live securely, for then his greatness
will reach to the ends of the earth.

And he will be our peace
when the Assyrians invade our land
and march through our fortresses.

Luke 21:34-38

"Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down
with carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties of life,
and that day will close on you suddenly like a trap.
For it will come on all those who live on the face of
the whole earth. Be always on the watch, and pray
that you may be able to escape all that is about to
happen, and that you may be able to stand before
the Son of Man."

Each day Jesus was teaching at the temple, and each
evening he went out to spend the night on the hill
called the Mount of Olives, and all the people came
early in the morning to hear him at the temple.





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Thursday December 4

The faithful response to God's promises is not an inactive hope. Hosea exhorts the people to 'press on'. But the call is not always heeded. Israel's love for God is transient: it is 'like a morning cloud' or the dew which 'goes away early'. Neither is this hope something enacted merely formally; instead of burnt offerings, God desires 'steadfast love'. But as Paul points out in 1 Thessalonians, learning to hope with steadfast love requires exemplars or models. The Thessalonian Christians are described as 'imitators' of both Paul and his fellow preachers and of 'the Lord'. As a result the Thessalonians became an 'example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia'. Hope is not optimism based on a mood we may or may not have in particular circumstances. It is a way of life based on a confidence in God's promises.

Reflection:

Who are the people who have modelled faith for you? What have you learnt from them?

Prayer:

Gracious God, open our eyes to the examples of faith in our churches that learning from them we might grow in steadfast love.

Hosea 6: 1-6

"Come, let us return to the Lord.
He has torn us to pieces
but he will heal us;
he has injured us
but he will bind up our wounds.
After two days he will revive us;
on the third day he will restore us,
that we may live in his presence.
Let us acknowledge the Lord;
let us press on to acknowledge him.
As surely as the sun rises,
he will appear;
he will come to us like the winter rains,
like the spring rains that water the earth."

"What can I do with you, Ephraim?
What can I do with you, Judah?
Your love is like the morning mist,
like the early dew that disappears.
Therefore I cut you in pieces with my prophets,
I killed you with the words of my mouth—
then my judgments go forth like the sun.
For I desire mercy, not sacrifice,
and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.

1 Thessalonians 1:2-10

We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers. We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.





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Friday December 5

As God fulfils the divine promises, boundaries are broken. In the case of Jeremiah it is the boundary of his own lack of confidence. Whilst rebuked by God for his reluctance, God persists. God promises to be with Jeremiah to enable him to speak, even to nations and kingdoms. A different kind of boundary-crossing is evident in the reading from Acts. Here we read part of the unfolding story of the movement of the gospel from its Jewish origins into the Gentile world. As with other parts of this story in Acts, Barnabas is able to cross the boundary of his Jewish background because once he arrives in Antioch, and encounters the Gentile converts, he 'saw the grace of God'. God crosses boundaries before we do and calls us to leave behind our assumptions and our prejudices. The coming of God is also God going ahead of us.

Reflection:

What personal and cultural boundaries are you called to cross as you seek to follow the ways of God?

Prayer:

Revealing God, make us aware of the boundaries we have drawn in the worlds of our families and friends and enemies. Help us to cross them in hope.

Jeremiah 1:4-10

The word of the Lord came to me, saying,

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
before you were born I set you apart;
I appointed you as a prophet to the nations."

"Alas, Sovereign Lord," I said, "I do not know how to speak; I am too young."

But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am too young.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the Lord.

Then the Lord reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, "I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant."

Acts 11:19-26

Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. Some of them, however; men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.





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Saturday December 6

Jesus is questioned by the religious leaders about the source of his authority. His response seems cryptic, but it is part of his pattern of refusing to fit into the categories people tried to apply to him. Jesus' whole life and ministry poses a question to those around him. It is doubtful that even if Jesus had answered the question directly it would have made any difference to the religious leaders' response to him. As it was, they were unwilling to honour what God was doing through him. The real problem for them was Jesus was outside their control. This is another reminder that God's coming is beyond our control. As the announcement from Ezekiel points out, it is through the renewing work of the Spirit that God comes to us and re-orient us to the outworking of God's promises.

Reflection:

When have you had to let go of in your ideas about and faith in God. What did you learn from that experience?

Prayer:

God who is Spirit, turn us away from our desire to control, and continually re-orient us to your coming.

Ezekiel 36:24-28

“For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. Then you will live in the land I gave your ancestors; you will be my people, and I will be your God.

Mark 11: 27-33

They arrived again in Jerusalem, and while Jesus was walking in the temple courts, the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders came to him. “By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked. “And who gave you authority to do this?”

Jesus replied, “I will ask you one question. Answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John's baptism—was it from heaven, or of human origin? Tell me!”

They discussed it among themselves and said, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will ask, ‘Then why didn't you believe him?’ But if we say, ‘Of human origin’ ...” (They feared the people, for everyone held that John really was a prophet.)

So they answered Jesus, “We don't know.”

Jesus said, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.”





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http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_Hicks#mediaviewer/File:Edward_Hicks_-_Peaceable_Kingdom.jpg

Household Activities Advent Week 2

Advent and Justice 2 - A Peaceable Kingdom

Isaiah 40:1-11

This week's image is of God as one who both stands strong alongside us and comforts us.

He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.

Without God beside us it is often hard to keep going. Sometimes it is hard to keep reading about conflicts in the world. Sometimes it is hard when things don't change at school or at home in the way that we'd ideally like. But having a vision of what sort of world we'd like to see and how we might work towards it is an essential step.

Have a look at this image of 'The Peaceable Kingdom', one of many paintings on the same theme by Edward Hicks. In it is a vision of an ideal world. Invite each person people to consider the painting (either on a screen or providing copies) and what their vision of an ideal world might be. What do they see in the painting?

For more info see: <https://www.stphilipscathedral.org/>

Activity 1 - Rewind Story #8

Time to get ready (John 1:19-28)

Follow up activities

- > make a list of 'getting ready activities' extending John the Baptist's starter list in this story (Get fair, don't be bullies, give others a shot, share stuff around)
- > make our own John the Baptist model from found objects
- > John called people to make their ways straight. Who does call out this message today? Identify some contemporary 'John the Baptists'. If you can't think of any, read up on the participants in the 'Love Makes a Way' movement. Some have been arrested – another parallel with John the Baptist.

Activity 2 – Highlighting Threads

Psalms 85: 1-2, 8-13

Work in pairs or as individuals, depending on how many people are participating and their ages. Give each person or pair a different coloured highlighter and allocate each a letter from the following: S; F; P; G. Make an enlarged print page of the text. Each person/pair highlights the words on the page that begin with their allocated letter. If you are working with varying levels of literacy, use this process to help everyone orientate well to the vocabulary of the text.

When the highlighting process is completed, deliver a communal reading in which one person reads all of the non-highlighted text, and others call out the words they have highlighted. For repeat readings, reallocate 'colours'. Hear how the 'threads' of words weave together.

After reading a few times, put the text away, and see what kind of recall you have collectively.





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Ps 85:1 LORD, you were **favorable** to your land;
you restored the **fortunes** of Jacob.

Ps 85:2 You **forgave** the iniquity of your **people**;
you **pardoned** all their sin. Selah

Ps 85:8 Let me hear what **God** the LORD will speak,
for he will speak **peace** to his **people**,
to his **faithful**, to those who turn to him in their hearts.

Ps 85:9 Surely his salvation is at hand for those who **fear** him,
that his **glory** may dwell in our land.

Ps 85:10 Steadfast love and **faithfulness** will meet;
righteousness and **peace** will kiss each other.

Ps 85:11 **Faithfulness** will spring up from the **ground**,
and righteousness will look down from the sky.

Ps 85:12 The LORD will **give** what is **good**,
and our land will yield its increase.

Ps 85:13 Righteousness will **go** before him,
and will make a **path** for his steps.

Activity 3 - Finding Signs

Mark 1:1-8

This part of the bible tracks the 'signs' of God's plans from way back to just before Jesus arrives.

Print the sections of text from the template provided and hide them in the places suggested (or equivalent) around where you live.

As a group, go searching for the verses.

At each location read the verse you have found; keep them in order as you go. When you have gathered them all, assemble them in order together and read the complete reading.

Allow time for questions and wonderings as you move from place to place.

Verse	Location
The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.	Where your newspapers are kept
As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,	In your letter box where messages are sent
who will prepare your way;	With your shovels or brooms that can clear a path
the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:	Among some wilderness bushes in your garden or a nearby park
'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'"	The straightest path, driveway or corridor where you live
John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.	Among some wilderness bushes in your garden or a nearby park
And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.	By an outside tap
Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist,	In the wardrobe, attached to a coat hanger
and he ate locusts and wild honey.	In the pantry, next to the honey.
I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."	In the bath
He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.	In your shoe cupboard





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Sunday December 7

Today's passages take us to some of the most hope-full passages in the Bible. Isaiah 40 is deeply engrained in the Christian imagination with its echo at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, as seen here in Mark. The reading from 2 Peter is disconcerting with its atypical reference to the destruction of the world, but even there the horizon is positive: 'a new heavens and a new earth'.

And it is that positive horizon which ultimately frames all Christian hope – and we learn that nowhere more clearly than from the way the early Christians appropriated the Isaianic vision. In Jesus God comes to smooth the roughness, to announce good things, to defeat fear, to care like a shepherd, and to lead gently. Notwithstanding the harsh edges to God's judgement, its ultimate goal is a creation at peace with God and itself. When during advent we are again taught to hope, this is what we hope for.

Reflection:

What is it that you hope for on the basis of your Christian faith?

Prayer:

Creating and Redeeming God, expand our vision of your rule to its widest horizons and makes us servants of your universal peace.

Isaiah 40:1-11

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for; that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

A voice of one calling:

"In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.

And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together:

For the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

A voice says, "Cry out."

And I said, "What shall I cry?"

"All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field.

The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the Lord blows on them.

Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever." You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!"

See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power; and he rules with a mighty arm.

See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him.

He tends his flock like a shepherd:

He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.

2 Peter 3:10-15a

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare.

Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.

So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him. Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him.





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Monday December 8

We live in a world with much to distract us. Work, television, computers, games, often take over our lives leaving little time for God or for others requiring our help. We do let “other lords” besides God rule over us and our lives (v 13). God calls us back to a righteous path where we can know God’s presence. This path is not an easy one to follow but it is certainly not a difficult one to find. And when we walk on this path, we imitate the character of God: just, righteous, peaceful, and compassionate are just some of the aspects of God. Imitating God is a challenging one for us human beings, but the requirements are actually clearer in comparison to the ways of the world. God sends us God’s son to offer help, to show us this way – a way that is also ethical among other things.

Reflection:

The way of Jesus is also an invitation to us, for a way is something to be followed. We are invited and encouraged to take the path that Jesus himself took. The way is both receiving Christ and entering into a code of living. Do you recognize the path that you are on? How close is your path to the one shown by Jesus Christ?

Prayer:

O God, give us the spirit of wisdom and revelation and keep us on the path to life in your realm. Amen.

Isaiah 26:7-15

The path of the righteous is level;
you, the Upright One, make the way of the
righteous smooth.
Yes, Lord, walking in the way of your laws,
we wait for you;
your name and renown
are the desire of our hearts.
My soul yearns for you in the night;
in the morning my spirit longs for you.
When your judgments come upon the earth,
the people of the world learn righteousness.
But when grace is shown to the wicked,
they do not learn righteousness;
even in a land of uprightness they go on doing evil
and do not regard the majesty of the Lord.
Lord, your hand is lifted high,
but they do not see it.
Let them see your zeal for your people and be put
to shame;
let the fire reserved for your enemies consume
them.

Lord, you establish peace for us;
all that we have accomplished you have done
for us.
Lord our God, other lords besides you have ruled
over us,
but your name alone do we honor:
They are now dead, they live no more;
their spirits do not rise.
You punished them and brought them to ruin;
you wiped out all memory of them.
You have enlarged the nation, Lord;
you have enlarged the nation.
You have gained glory for yourself;
you have extended all the borders of the land.





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Tuesday December 9

For the people of Israel, the experiences of exile aroused defeat, despair, fear and hopelessness. This passage provides them courage to look into the future, and a lens through which to glimpse it. It enables them to shake off their paralysis borne out of fear and shame and to face a future in which survival is possible. God's people are provided with the possibility of hope rooted in their embrace of God's mercy and forgiveness. The Lord promises to wash "away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleanse the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst" and to protect them. We live in a world today where it seems hard to see signs of hope in the midst of disease, violence and despair. God seems to be absent in the world. But hope believes and pronounces "Immanuel" – God with us amidst perceived divine absence. It is the readiness to look into the future "on that day" when our wrongdoings and our sufferings are washed away by God's love and compassion.

Reflection:

It is this love and pathos of God for us that prompts God to send God's son for the redemption of the world. He is our hope and our future and we are called to join him in addressing the agonies of the world and to foster hope. It is our burden to keep hope alive. How do you participate in this aspect of God's mission to the world?

Prayer:

Gracious and loving God journey with us towards a new tomorrow. We pray because you have put within us an unquenchable hope. We pray because Jesus is our Lord and your reign is in our midst. Amen.

Isaiah 4:2-6

In that day the Branch of the Lord will be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land will be the pride and glory of the survivors in Israel. Those who are left in Zion, who remain in Jerusalem, will be called holy, all who are recorded among the living in Jerusalem. The Lord will wash away the filth of the women of Zion; he will cleanse the bloodstains from Jerusalem by a spirit of judgment and a spirit of fire. Then the Lord will create over all of Mount Zion and over those who assemble there a cloud of smoke by day and a glow of flaming fire by night; over everything the glory will be a canopy. It will be a shelter and shade from the heat of the day, and a refuge and hiding place from the storm and rain.





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Wednesday December 10

The days of Malachi sound much like this day and age. Fear, suspicion, distrust, conflict and chaos characterize the day and maintaining unity, and relationships whether formal or informal is a challenge. Nothing disrupts unity more than injustice and idolatry (verses 10-11) and it shatters the quality of life of the community. We cry and complain, point fingers at others and perhaps even blame God. We cry out for God and raise questions regarding good versus evil and justice versus oppression; we lament and become cynical and God, the prophet says, is tired! Tired of our complaints, our constant bickering and our squabbling (verse 17)! Such doubts and charges against God will not have the final say, because God does not give up on us. God announces the advent of the messenger who will prepare the way for God's appearance in the temple (3:1).

Reflection:

This messenger of the Covenant ushers in a time for us to get back to the basics crucial for the survival and sustenance of the community, namely obedience to the divine commandments and just and respectful dealings with our neighbors. Are you ready for the messenger?

Prayer:

Patient and forgiving God we thank you for not giving up on us. Help us not to give up on you. Amen.

Malachi 2:10-3:1

Do we not all have one Father? Did not one God create us? Why do we profane the covenant of our ancestors by being unfaithful to one another?

Judah has been unfaithful. A detestable thing has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem: Judah has desecrated the sanctuary the Lord loves by marrying women who worship a foreign god. As for the man who does this, whoever he may be, may the Lord remove him from the tents of Jacob—even though he brings an offering to the Lord Almighty.

Another thing you do: You flood the Lord's altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer looks with favor on your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. You ask, "Why?" It is because the Lord is the witness between you and the wife of your youth. You have been unfaithful to her; though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant.

Has not the one God made you? You belong to him in body and spirit. And what does the one God seek? Godly offspring. So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful to the wife of your youth.

"The man who hates and divorces his wife," says the Lord, the God of Israel, "does violence to the one he should protect," says the Lord Almighty.

So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful.

You have wearied the Lord with your words.

"How have we wearied him?" you ask.

By saying, "All who do evil are good in the eyes of the Lord, and he is pleased with them" or "Where is the God of justice?"

"I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the Lord Almighty.





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Thursday December 11

Habakkuk argues with YHWH about crime and punishment. He unveils the wrong doings of his own people – of Israel and Judah - and YHWH will eventually correct these wrongs and restore moral balance through the instrumentality of Babylon (1:6). This does not satisfy the prophet. He is haunted by the idea that God would use an unrepentant nation to bring judgment on God's people. This cannot be divine justice! He continues to complain about the rising violence in the Babylonian empire (2:1). God responds rather ambiguously. God calls attention to the fact that "the righteous live by their faith" (2:4). The dilemma is not resolved. In a world beset by treachery, arrogance, greed and various forms of tyranny (v 5), there is a lot that could/might test our faith. We constantly struggle to find answers to the many disjunctions in life brought on by these realities.

Reflection:

The passage encourages us to hold fast to our faith for this is a mark of righteous living. Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not yet see. Are you equipped for or with this type of a faith?

Prayer:

Help me O God to choose to have faith in you and may this guide and sustain me on the road to life. Amen.

Habakkuk 2: 1-5

I will stand at my watch
and station myself on the ramparts;
I will look to see what he will say to me,
and what answer I am to give to this complaint.

Then the Lord replied:

"Write down the revelation
and make it plain on tablets
so that a herald may run with it.
For the revelation awaits an appointed time;
it speaks of the end
and will not prove false.
Though it linger, wait for it;
it will certainly come
and will not delay.

"See, the enemy is puffed up;
his desires are not upright—
but the righteous person will live by his faithfulness—
indeed, wine betrays him;
he is arrogant and never at rest.
Because he is as greedy as the grave
and like death is never satisfied,
he gathers to himself all the nations
and takes captive all the peoples.





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Friday December 12

Habakkuk chapter 3 is a response by the prophet in the form of a prayer. It is the honest prayer of a man who had endured many difficulties and had many doubts regarding God's goodness and wisdom. It is a prayer in response to the many ruptures and disconnections in life that the prophet and his community were experiencing. But more importantly it is a declaration of steadfast faith, joy and trust in God's power and justice born out of the questions and trials he had undergone. It begins with a petition in which three verbs are used - "renew your deeds," "make known your ways," and "remember compassion" (v 2) and the prophet calls on God to restore or do again what God does best and through this make Godself known again through works of justice, restoring order and peace, but most of all through God's mercy and compassion. The fact that God is capable of doing this comes through a vision that follows in which he sees nature responding to the glory of God. This gives him courage and encouragement to cope with the present and meet whatever is ahead.

Reflection:

When have you allowed nature to speak to you? What within nature exhibits for you the power and glory of God? What is its impact on you?

Prayer:

God of glory and compassion, may I always be mindful of the fact that you are speaking to me through the beauty and movement of nature. Amen.

Habakkuk 3: 2-6

Lord, I have heard of your fame;
I stand in awe of your deeds, Lord.
Repeat them in our day,
in our time make them known;
in wrath remember mercy.

God came from Teman,
the Holy One from Mount Paran.
His glory covered the heavens
and his praise filled the earth.
His splendor was like the sunrise;
rays flashed from his hand,
where his power was hidden.
Plague went before him;
pestilence followed his steps.
He stood, and shook the earth;
he looked, and made the nations tremble.
The ancient mountains crumbled
and the age-old hills collapsed—
but he marches on forever.





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Saturday December 13

The prophet rephrases the question that arises when one is in the midst of a crisis. Instead of asking ‘who is this God who allows this to happen?’ or ‘what kind of a God is this?’ he asks ‘what kind of a God is this who will sustain me in the midst of this crisis?’ The answer is provided in his recalling of the many ways in which God quashed the enemy and vanquished the wicked. The power and possibility of God becomes clear. The prophet is moved by fear. He acknowledges the threat to creation by violence (v 17), then he utters, the “yet” of faith. He will exult in the Lord. He therefore acknowledges the vexations of lived experience, but places in the very midst of them a confident affirmation that God can work through and beyond all such troubles to well-being. Faith and good work is possible even in the midst of difficult circumstances, for “the Lord is my strength” (v 19).

Reflection:

Faithfulness is not only a matter of enduring hardship, but of making even the worst situation better in whatever ways we can. What mechanisms do you employ when in crisis? How is the assurance that comes from God communicated to you?

Prayer:

Accompanying God, stay with me and be my strength every day in my life and in my world. Amen.

Habakkuk 3: 13-19

You came out to deliver your people,
to save your anointed one.
You crushed the leader of the land of wickedness,
you stripped him from head to foot.
With his own spear you pierced his head
when his warriors stormed out to scatter us,
gloating as though about to devour
the wretched who were in hiding.
You trampled the sea with your horses,
churning the great waters.

I heard and my heart pounded,
my lips quivered at the sound;
decay crept into my bones,
and my legs trembled.
Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity
to come on the nation invading us.
Though the fig tree does not bud
and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails
and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen
and no cattle in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the Lord,
I will be joyful in God my Savior:

The Sovereign Lord is my strength;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer;
he enables me to tread on the heights.

For the director of music. On my stringed instruments.





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Household Activities Advent Week 3

Advent and Justice 3 - Seeds and Soil

This week we are offered the image of the garden. God offers life and the promise of justice in places where we think there may be no hope.

Fill a large bowl with soil (or potting mix from a hardware store) or do this outside in the garden. Hand each person a sunflower seed and invite them to say one thing this seed needs to grow (soil, sunshine, water). All the knowledge is stored in the seed, but with soil, sun and water, life can take hold. What do we need to do to keep working for God's justice in the world? Encourage and affirm each other's suggestions (eg. compassion, taking action like writing letters, telling others about the problem, inviting people to be part of the solution). Each seed on its own doesn't seem like much. But working together we can grow a garden. Change in the world takes place when many people come together and say that things are not right. Remember the image of the garden this week.

Activity 1 - Household Light Challenge:

John 1:6-8

In this passage, John is described as 'testifying' to the light (and later the gospel will make it clear that 'the light' refers to Jesus, the light of the word). But John is not the light himself. He shows people where to find the light.

Without walking around your house, together can you 'testify' to where all the sources of light are (light fittings, light switches, candles, torches, lava lamps... whatever sources of light you might have!)

When you think you have a 'true testimony' to the light in your house, go through and check.

As you prepare for advent this week, be conscious of the place of light in your celebrations. Light is often thought of as a 'decoration'.

John the Baptist's role wasn't to point to a decoration, but to witness to, identify, point out, declare the truth of Jesus' light-giving life.





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Activity 2 - Identities

John 1:19-28

> Play a game of 'Who am I?' or 'Celebrity head' using superhero identities

John the Baptist was an odd one, and it made people try to figure him out. Jesus also provoked the same set of questions. Some people asked John if he was 'Elijah' – a radical, courageous, miracle-working prophet from Israel's history. Elijah's reputation was characterized not only for religious action, but also for standing up against the evil and corrupt politicians and leaders of his time.

The people of Israel had hopes that God would send a new Elijah – rough and tough to take on the Romans who had over run their country, and sort things out. Their longings for Elijah were a bit like hoping for a super hero to fly in and rescue the day.

When people met John the Baptist, he reminded them of Elijah's outspoken courage, but John constantly refused to be made into a superhero – he pointed to the one who would really save.

Check out these other parts of Mark's gospel where Elijah is mentioned – there's quite a bit of Elijah 'fanboying' going on.

Mark 6:15	Mark 8:28
Mark 9:11	Mark 9:12
Mark 9:13	Mark 11:32
Mark 15:35	Mark 15:36

Activity 3 – Phrase of the Days

I Thessalonians 5:16-22

This reading is made up of 7 short catchphrases – one for each day of the week.

- > I Th. 5:16 Rejoice always,
- > I Th. 5:17 pray without ceasing,
- > I Th. 5:18 give thanks in all circumstances;
- > I Th. 5:19 Do not quench the Spirit.
- > I Th. 5:20 Do not despise the words of prophets,
- > I Th. 5:21 but test everything; hold fast to what is good;
- > I Th. 5:22 abstain from every form of evil.

At the start of the week introduce the reading.

Try memorizing them collectively, by allocating one or two to each person in the group.

When you are familiar with them, play a game of charades, taking turns to mime one verse each, while the rest of your household guesses which it is.

Throughout the week, feature a different verse each day by:-

- > writing it in a high traffic zone window or the bathroom mirror (use window chalk or whiteboard marker)
- > taping a copy of the verse to a frequently used item in the pantry or fridge (perhaps the milk, or the coffee jar)
- > write it in chalk on your path or driveway
- > write it onto multiple sticky notes and leave these in various places around the house.

At dinnertime turn the phrase of the day into a prayer. Encourage household members to name ways they have seen the verse in action across the day/week.





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Sunday December 14

This passage is a vision of an alternative world, a vision of acts of public imagination that still need to be shaped for implementation. Positively, they are acts that push back the frontiers so that things not before thought are now legitimately in sight. Critically they are an assault on all controlled thinking that insists that the world is presently organized in the only way that it could be. The text simply highlights the prominence of the theme of social reversal: the poor will receive good news, the captives, the rich, and the poor alike will be released; the blind will see again; the oppressed will be liberated. This reversal is possible only when both the privileged and the oppressed come out of their paralysis and work towards helping each other and fostering change in the structures of society. This is required of us because our God is a lover of justice and our doing this is a sign that we have returned to our God, are with God and that we are indeed our God's beloved.

Reflection:

Genuine social transformation should be initiated from within the community. Not only do the marginalized voice their pain, but those in power must be generous in giving and employing a social policy that humanizes governance. To what extent are we as individuals, as the State, Society, Church or Community responding to the protests within?

Prayer:

Compassionate and loving God bring us to our senses and give us faith that renewal and conversion are possible. Amen.

Isaiah 61: 1-4

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor:
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn,
and provide for those who grieve in Zion—
to bestow on them a crown of beauty
instead of ashes,
the oil of joy
instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise
instead of a spirit of despair:
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
a planting of the Lord
for the display of his splendor:

They will rebuild the ancient ruins
and restore the places long devastated;
they will renew the ruined cities
that have been devastated for generations.

Isaiah 61: 8-11

"For I, the Lord, love justice;
I hate robbery and wrongdoing.
In my faithfulness I will reward my people
and make an everlasting covenant with them.
Their descendants will be known among the nations
and their offspring among the peoples.
All who see them will acknowledge
that they are a people the Lord has blessed."

I delight greatly in the Lord;
my soul rejoices in my God.
For he has clothed me with garments of salvation
and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness,
as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
For as the soil makes the sprout come up
and a garden causes seeds to grow,
so the Sovereign Lord will make righteousness
and praise spring up before all nations.





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Monday December 15

In the first few readings this week, we will focus on texts that relate to the Old Testament prophetic tradition. The focus on the first few days is on the prophet Elijah and the trajectory of prophetic hope that develops from his ministry. In today's story we see two main aspects of that prophetic tradition and trajectory. First, Elijah is commissioned by God and therefore speaks and acts with God's authority. Despite Obadiah's fears, Elijah agrees to meet with King Ahab, but that promise is qualified by the phrase 'As the Lord of hosts lives, before whom I stand' (see 18:15). Elijah's only allegiance is to God. Secondly, Elijah speaks truth to power. The accusation against Ahab in verses 17–18 is clear: the troublemaker is not the prophet who speaks the inconvenient truth, but the king who refuses to obey the commandments of God and worships idols. The challenge that Elijah brings to the centre of power lies at the heart of the prophetic vocation.

Reflection:

What connections can you see between this story and today's context? Who are the Ahab's of our world? Who are the Elijahs?

Prayer:

For our failure to speak the truth, Lord have mercy.

For the courage and wisdom to speak the truth, Lord grant us strength.

1 Kings 18:1–18

After a long time, in the third year, the word of the Lord came to Elijah: "Go and present yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain on the land." So Elijah went to present himself to Ahab.

Now the famine was severe in Samaria, and Ahab had summoned Obadiah, his palace administrator: (Obadiah was a devout believer in the Lord. While Jezebel was killing off the Lord's prophets, Obadiah had taken a hundred prophets and hidden them in two caves, fifty in each, and had supplied them with food and water.) Ahab had said to Obadiah, "Go through the land to all the springs and valleys. Maybe we can find some grass to keep the horses and mules alive so we will not have to kill any of our animals." So they divided the land they were to cover; Ahab going in one direction and Obadiah in another.

As Obadiah was walking along, Elijah met him. Obadiah recognized him, bowed down to the ground, and said, "Is it really you, my lord Elijah?" "Yes," he replied. "Go tell your master, 'Elijah is here.'"

"What have I done wrong," asked Obadiah, "that you are handing your servant over to Ahab to be put to death? As surely as the Lord your God lives, there is not a nation or kingdom where my master has not sent someone to look for you. And whenever a nation or kingdom claimed you were not there, he made them swear they could not find you. But now you tell me to go to my master and say, 'Elijah is here.' I don't know where the Spirit of the Lord may carry you when I leave you. If I go and tell Ahab and he doesn't find you, he will kill me. Yet I your servant have worshiped the Lord since my youth. Haven't you heard, my lord, what I did while Jezebel was killing the prophets of the Lord? I hid a hundred of the Lord's prophets in two caves, fifty in each, and supplied them with food and water. And now you tell me to go to my master and say, 'Elijah is here.' He will kill me!"

Elijah said, "As the Lord Almighty lives, whom I serve, I will surely present myself to Ahab today." So Obadiah went to meet Ahab and told him, and Ahab went to meet Elijah. When he saw Elijah, he said to him, "Is that you, you troubler of Israel?" "I have not made trouble for Israel," Elijah replied. "But you and your father's family have. You have abandoned the Lord's commands and have followed the Baals.





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Tuesday December 16

Elijah hands over to Elisha

The image of the passing over of the 'mantle' (probably some kind of sheepskin cloak) has become synonymous with the idea of one generation handing something to the next. Elisha, now with the double portion of Elijah's spirit, performs two miracles which together speak of two further aspects of the prophetic vocation. The parting of the river Jordan, described in 2:13–14, echoes the immediately preceding account of Elijah performing the same miracle (see 2 Kings 2:8) but more importantly it evokes Moses, the Passover Narrative, the Sea Crossing and the associated themes of slavery and liberation (see Exodus 14). The purification of the water and the land, described in 2:15–22, again allude to Moses (see Exodus 15:23–25), but importantly seems to be directed to meeting the needs of the ordinary people of the city. Water (and therefore land) is restored to wholeness or healed, thereby preserving life (see verse 21 especially). Elisha has another side to his character, as the following story in 2:23–24 makes clear. But his calling to the prophetic ministry of liberation and healing is nonetheless clear.

Reflection:

How do the images of 'parting' and 'purification' of water speak today? What barriers to freedom need to be removed? What causes of death need to be healed?

Prayer:

For our failure to work for freedom and healing, Lord have mercy.

For a vision of the healing of the word, Lord grant us sight.

2 Kings 2:9–22

When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?"

"Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit," Elisha replied.

"You have asked a difficult thing," Elijah said, "yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours—otherwise, it will not."

As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. Elisha saw this and cried out, "My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!" And Elisha saw him no more. Then he took hold of his garment and tore it in two.

Elisha then picked up Elijah's cloak that had fallen from him and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. He took the cloak that had fallen from Elijah and struck the water with it. "Where now is the Lord, the God of Elijah?" he asked. When he struck the water, it divided to the right and to the left, and he crossed over.

The company of the prophets from Jericho, who were watching, said, "The spirit of Elijah is resting on Elisha." And they went to meet him and bowed to the ground before him. "Look," they said, "we your servants have fifty able men. Let them go and look for your master. Perhaps the Spirit of the Lord has picked him up and set him down on some mountain or in some valley."

"No," Elisha replied, "do not send them."

But they persisted until he was too embarrassed to refuse. So he said, "Send them." And they sent fifty men, who searched for three days but did not find him. When they returned to Elisha, who was staying in Jericho, he said to them, "Didn't I tell you not to go?"

The people of the city said to Elisha, "Look, our lord, this town is well situated, as you can see, but the water is bad and the land is unproductive."

"Bring me a new bowl," he said, "and put salt in it." So they brought it to him.

Then he went out to the spring and threw the salt into it, saying, "This is what the Lord says: 'I have healed this water. Never again will it cause death or make the land unproductive.'" And the water has remained pure to this day, according to the word Elisha had spoken.





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Wednesday December 17

This passage refers back to Moses and looks forward to the return of Elijah (4:4–5). But the reason why Elijah is needed again has less to do with the evil actions of kings, and much more to do with the everyday failure of the community of faith as a whole. They are failing to give to God what belongs to God. The notion of the tithe (on the background for which see Deuteronomy 14:22–29) reminds us of the connection between honouring God and ensuring that material provision is made for those in need (specifically, in Jewish law, the priests, strangers, widows and orphans, see Deut. 14:29). Israel has failed in this vocation, and Elijah is needed to bring God's word of judgement upon the people and through that word to effect repentance (note the discussion of those who 'revere God's name' in 3:16–4:3) and reconciliation (see the final image of 4:6). The point is of course that those who are called by God to prophetic obedience are very often those who need to hear the word of prophetic judgement most clearly.

We dare not speak truth to power until we have heard the truth spoken to us. This is why worship and action always belong together.

Reflection:

What would it mean for you and for your church to learn to 'revere the name of the Lord' in a new way?

Prayer:

For our failure to live by the truth we proclaim, Lord have mercy.

For the strength to return to our God, Lord grant us grace.

Malachi 3:6–4:6

"I the Lord do not change. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. Ever since the time of your ancestors you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you," says the Lord Almighty.

"But you ask, 'How are we to return?'"

"Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me.

"But you ask, 'How are we robbing you?'"

"In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse—your whole nation—because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the Lord Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it. I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not drop their fruit before it is ripe," says the Lord Almighty. "Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land," says the Lord Almighty.

"You have spoken arrogantly against me," says the Lord.

"Yet you ask, 'What have we said against you?'"

"You have said, 'It is futile to serve God. What do we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the Lord Almighty? But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly evildoers prosper, and even when they put God to the test, they get away with it.'"

Then those who feared the Lord talked with each other, and the Lord listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the Lord and honored his name.

"On the day when I act," says the Lord Almighty, "they will be my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as a father has compassion and spares his son who serves him. You will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not.

"Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and the day that is coming will set them on fire," says the Lord Almighty. "Not a root or a branch will be left to them. But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays. And you will go out and frolic like well-fed calves. Then you will trample on the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I act," says the Lord Almighty.

"Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel.

"See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the hearts of children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction."





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Thursday December 18

As we make our way towards the 4th Sunday in Advent, we focus on New Testament texts that speak of the way that Jesus inherits and fulfils the prophetic trajectory of the Old Testament. This elegant and rich opening to Hebrews makes the point with ample clarity.

Where once God spoke to us in the prophets (Moses, Elijah, Elisha and all who came afterwards) God now speaks through the Son. The point here, and throughout Hebrews, is not that God's word has changed, but that Christ is the definitive expression of God's word. In some dense theological argumentation, the author spells out why this should be so. God's Son bears the very reflection of the character and presence of God and can therefore be described as God's Wisdom. While it is important to hear the call to live prophetically, for the Christian community that call only makes sense on this Christological basis. Our ability to speak is built on the conviction that God has already spoken in Christ. Our words and our lives are echoes of that great, saving truth.

Reflection:

Bring to mind two or three episodes in the life of Jesus. What do those stories tell us about the character of God? How does that make a difference to our own lives?

Prayer:

For God's definitive word to us in Jesus Christ, we give thanks.

For a deeper understanding of the mystery of our faith, we humbly pray.

Hebrews 1:1-4

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.





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Friday December 19

More heavy theology: this time with angels thrown in for good measure. In an ancient form of argument, which would be familiar to the early readers of Hebrews, we are offered a comparison between the God's Son and God's servants (see 1:14). The passage asserts the superiority of Jesus over the angels, but also marks out the distinctive features of the reign of Jesus (much of the language relates to kingship), using a large number of Old Testament quotations. The notion of 'righteousness' dominates this portrayal (see 1:8–9) and will inform the writer's later portrayal of Jesus as a 'priest in the order of Melchizedek' (see Hebrews 7). The name 'Melchizedek' means 'King of righteousness/justice'. Although it is difficult to know exactly what this term means in Hebrews (it is much clearer in, say, Paul or Matthew) we can be sure that it refers at least to God's intention to deliver, save and restore his people and the whole of creation. That is both the goal and the nature of Jesus' reign as the 'firstborn of God' and even if we struggle to know where the angels fit into the picture, our own role as followers of Jesus is well described in the final verse: we are 'in the divine service, sent to serve'.

Reflection:

What do you make of angels? What possible significance could biblical passages such as this have for us in the modern world?

Prayer:

For the richness and complexity of the biblical witness to Jesus Christ, we give thanks.

For the gifts of wisdom and understanding, we humbly pray.

Hebrews 1:5–14

For to which of the angels did God ever say,

"You are my Son;
today I have become your Father"?

Or again,

"I will be his Father,
and he will be my Son"?

And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says,

"Let all God's angels worship him."

In speaking of the angels he says,

"He makes his angels spirits,
and his servants flames of fire."

But about the Son he says,

"Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever;
a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom.
You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness;
therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions
by anointing you with the oil of joy."

He also says,

"In the beginning, Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands.
They will perish, but you remain;
they will all wear out like a garment.
You will roll them up like a robe;
like a garment they will be changed.
But you remain the same,
and your years will never end."

To which of the angels did God ever say,

"Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies
a footstool for your feet"?

Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?





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Saturday December 20

So you thought Jesus was born in Bethlehem? One of the striking things about this passage is that the questions of the crowd in 7:41–42 only really make sense on the assumption that Jesus wasn't born in Bethlehem at all! For this reason Jesus seems to lack a crucial qualification for Messiahship. And yet something about his words leads others in the crowd, the police, perhaps some of the Pharisees, and certainly Nicodemus, to come to the conclusion that Jesus must be heard. John's gospel is full of such enigmas. Jesus evades all attempts at categorization. One scholar has referred to the Jesus of this gospel as the 'Johannine Pimpernel': no attempt to capture him, physically or spiritually, will do him justice. It is perhaps worth bearing in mind as we approach Christmas that there is a mystery about the incarnation: "Infinity dwindled to Infancy" as Gerard Manley Hopkins once put it. The Christmas story may well strike us as strange, confusing and unsettling. But for some it will always be the story that reshapes our imagination and reorders our lives.

Reflection:

'Never has anyone spoken like this' (John 7:46). Bring to mind two or three of the sayings of Jesus. What would it mean to take them seriously in your life today?

Prayer:

For the mystery of God's coming to us in Jesus Christ, we give thanks.

For ears to hear and eyes to see God among us in surprising ways, we humbly pray.

John 7:40–52

On hearing his words, some of the people said, "Surely this man is the Prophet."

Others said, "He is the Messiah."

Still others asked, "How can the Messiah come from Galilee? Does not Scripture say that the Messiah will come from David's descendants and from Bethlehem, the town where David lived?" Thus the people were divided because of Jesus. Some wanted to seize him, but no one laid a hand on him.

Finally the temple guards went back to the chief priests and the Pharisees, who asked them, "Why didn't you bring him in?"

"No one ever spoke the way this man does," the guards replied.

"You mean he has deceived you also?" the Pharisees retorted. "Have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed in him? No! But this mob that knows nothing of the law—there is a curse on them."

Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of their own number, asked, "Does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he has been doing?"

They replied, "Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee."





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Household Activities Advent Week 4

Advent and Justice 4 - No place like home

This week our image is of God who provides a home for us.

Invite each person to share some things about their home. What do they like about it? How did they come to live there? How is it different/the same as other homes they might have lived in? What would their ideal home be like?

Jesus was born in a very temporary home. What must it be like to have to leave your home?

Around the world people are having to leave their homes for fear of being killed or hurt. Brainstorm together some of the things you could do that might make it easier for such people to find a safer place of "home". For practical ways to help, contact the Justice and International Mission Unit – jim@victas.uca.org.au or (03) 9251 5271 – for more ideas.

Activity 1 – Welcome Mat Story 1

Guess where God was? (Matthew 2:1-11)

Activity 2 - Sing out loud

Luke 1:47-55 or Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26

The two readings for today are both Psalms - songs which dramatise and express recognition of God's presence and action around us, with us and upon us.

These psalms are examples of the healthy practice of going 'over the top' in passion, emotion and demonstrative action when talking about God.

Have a hilarious and serious attempt at turning these texts back into spontaneous songs - or at least "song-like" phrases.

Each take turns at 'singing' a line - ham it up, use gestures, repeat words for emphasis, extend your range, vary your rhythm, vary your musical styles (operatic, country and western, rhythm & blues, gregorian chant.) Don't try to 'compose', just give expression to your chosen line. Wild applause at such glorious musical offerings is entirely appropriate!





Advent Resource 2014



Activity 3 – Tangible reading

Luke 1:26-38

This is a deliberately 'mess-making' reading, blowing feathers and sparkles and paper around, to highlight the impact of the news in this reading being like being blown up.

Gather the items required from the list below. Open a bible or two if you have more than one in your household, to Luke 1. Mark the starting spot for who ever is going to read. Explain that in this story are some unexpected appearances.

With each line that is read from the bible, first of all place the 'tangible' items on to the open pages of the bible. Either the person who is reading, or another member of your household will need to blow away the items before the verse can be read.

This should create a little liturgical cycle of

- > open bible > surprise appearance > blowing breath
- > mess > reading

Items: feathers, gold sequins, small pieces of paper with words (torn from newspaper); streamer roll, torch, party popper

Luke 1:26-38

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth,

feathers blown from the pages of an open bible

27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.'*

gold sequins blown from the pages of an open bible

29 But she was much perplexed by his words

words on tissue paper blown from the pages of an open bible

and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30 The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God.

31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. 33 He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.'

Throw a long streamer as far as you can

34 Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?'

35 The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born* will be holy; he will be called Son of God.

One person shines a torch, while others use their hands to make shadows on the bible.

36 And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God.'

Fire party poppers 8 Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her





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Sunday December 21

Mary's Song, often known as the 'Magnificat' should need no introduction. It is often used as a rallying cry for justice, and rightly so. It holds out for Christian disciples and for the world, a vision of God's 'upside-down kingdom' where those with wealth and power are overthrown and the lowly and hungry lifted up. But as well as the important 'justice' words in the passage, pay attention to the pronouns. Mary's song is first and foremost an act of worship, directed not to what we may or may not have done, but to what God has done. The first two verses refer to Mary: 'my soul...my spirit'. Thereafter the references are consistently to God: 'he has looked...he has shown...he has scattered...he has filled...he has helped'. The notion that God has already done this is striking. Mary seems to be saying that the gift of her son is the very means by which God has set about re-ordering the world. Of course, what God has already done is then worked out in the life and ministry of Jesus, and (as Luke's other book, the Acts of the Apostles, shows) through the faithful obedience of the church. But it begins with God. Which means that for us, everything begins with worship.

Reflection:

How will you keep a focus on God over the Christmas season? In your songs, services and celebrations will your attention be on your own joy, or on the saving deeds of the one who in Christ makes us joyful?

Prayer:

For the coming week of celebration, we give thanks.

For moments to remember and celebrate the one who saves us, we humbly pray.

Luke 1:46b-55

And Mary said:

"My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior;
for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for
me—
holy is his name.
His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their
inmost thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
to Abraham and his descendants forever;
just as he promised our ancestors."





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Monday December 22

When Christ comes he reconciles us to God, uniting us to God and God's goodness.

This act of reconciliation means we have been brought home to God. We are brought home not through our own capacity for goodness or faithfulness, not through our own striving but through God coming to us in Jesus.

In this act of reconciliation human divisions are ended, those who were once divided are brought together and those things which once kept us separate are overcome.

In this act of reconciliation the world is saved. That is Christ's work and his alone. Our task as Christians is not to save the world but to live authentically by faith. Our task is to have this word of salvation near, on our lips and in our hearts. We are to witness with our lives and our speech to what it means to us to have been united to God and each other by Christ

Reflection:

How do you witness to what Jesus means to you?

Prayer:

God of grace we give you thanks for bringing us home to you. Help us to witness faithfully to your love and goodness. Amen

Romans 10:5-15

Moses writes this about the righteousness that is by the law: "The person who does these things will live by them." But the righteousness that is by faith says: "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down) "or 'Who will descend into the deep?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the message concerning faith that we proclaim: If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. As Scripture says, "Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame." For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"





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Romans 13: 11-14

And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber; because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.

Tuesday December 23

God's reconciling salvation draws us into the light of God's love and brings with it a sense of urgency because it draws us into God's reign. The way of Christ is the way of love, justice and hope. The way of Christ is cosmic in scope. It is for the farthest corner of the globe and our nearest neighbor. It is for each of us, and the whole creation. It is urgent because we are aware of brokenness and suffering in the world and of the hope embodied in Christ's coming. This urgency is lived in our daily lives, our regular commitments and the way we live in the world.

The Christmas Bowl is one example of how the churches have sought to live with the urgency of God's reign. It seeks to encourage us to be generous to help alleviate the suffering of the poorest and to shine the light of the justice of God in those places where war and violence dominate. In this way we put on Christ Jesus.

Reflection:

How might you seek to live with the urgency of God's reign over the next few days?

Prayer:

God of light, sustain us in hope and strengthen us in love that we might live for your reign. Amen.





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Wednesday December 24

Amongst my favourite children's Christmas picture books are those that have animals in them. I have a lovely story where the animals of the sea go to greet the baby Jesus with the gift of a pearl and another where dogs sing and elephants play drums in praise of Jesus' birth. Lions dance with lambs and snakes dance with mongooses. I love them because they are charming. More than that I love them because they remind me that Jesus' birth is a cause for rejoicing by all creation. I love them because they remind me of the playfulness of rejoicing with dogs singing and animals dancing. Jesus coming amongst should provoke in us joyful, playful praise.

Reflection:

Take a moment to offer God a playful word of praise.

Prayer:

God of creation we offer you our joyful praise for the gift of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Psalm 96

Sing to the Lord a new song;
sing to the Lord, all the earth.
Sing to the Lord, praise his name;
proclaim his salvation day after day.
Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvelous deeds among all peoples.

For great is the Lord and most worthy of praise;
he is to be feared above all gods.
For all the gods of the nations are idols,
but the Lord made the heavens.
Splendor and majesty are before him;
strength and glory are in his sanctuary.

Ascribe to the Lord, all you families of nations,
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name;
bring an offering and come into his courts.
Worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness;
tremble before him, all the earth.
Say among the nations, "The Lord reigns."
The world is firmly established, it cannot be moved;
he will judge the peoples with equity.

Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad;
let the sea resound, and all that is in it.
Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them;
let all the trees of the forest sing for joy.
Let all creation rejoice before the Lord, for he comes,
he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness
and the peoples in his faithfulness.





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Thursday December 25

Many of us travel around Christmas time. For some of us this involves long trips to family who live far from us. For others it's a short trip across town to spend Christmas day with friends or family.

Luke's Christmas story also involves travel. Mary and Joseph travel far from home on a journey to be registered. The Son travels from the Father's home into the 'far country' to tent amongst us and make a home as Emmanuel, God-with-us. The shepherds travel from their home in the fields to see the baby and back again to tell the good news.

In all this travel what is surprising is how settled each person is. Mary and Joseph make a home where there wasn't one in the stable and welcome their baby. The shepherds gather with new friends in the stable telling of all the angels told them. Jesus makes his home in the family of Mary and Joseph, in our lives, in the earth. Jesus is at home with us in order that we might be at home with God.

Reflection:

How will you welcome Jesus into your life this Christmas?

Prayer:

Make your home in us Jesus, that we might know ourselves welcomed into the home of God. Amen.

Luke 2: 1-14

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger; because there was no guest room available for them.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

