



## 2015 CTM Advent Resource

# Individual, Household and Small Groups



This Advent Resource has been prepared by the Centre for Theology and Ministry (CTM) for use by individuals, households and small groups throughout Advent. Whether you use it as an individual or in a communal context, we trust that you will find it engaging, stimulating and helpful as you journey through Advent in 2015.

The 2015 CTM Advent Resource combines three distinct elements...

- an introduction followed by **weekly reflections** based on Oscar Romero's Violence of Love.
- **Creative ideas** that can be used in the household, small group or multi-age contexts (including in gathered worship). Whilst focused on the readings for the specific Sunday, these multi-age suggestions can be used at any time across the week (including in gathered worship).
- individual **daily reflections** comprising a suggested Scripture reading, some words of reflection and a short prayer.

The production of the 2015 CTM Advent Resource has been a team effort, with the contributions of the following especially valued...

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UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA

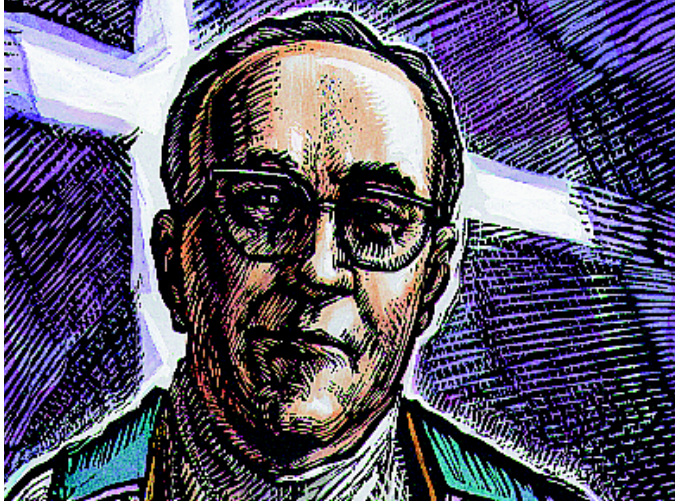


SYNOD OF VICTORIA AND TASMANIA



Advent 2015

## Oscar Romero - The Violence of Love



During Advent this year we hear the passion of John the Baptist and the Prophets for ensuring a strong interconnection between a relationship with God, integrity of spirituality, justice and a practical commitment to the poor and oppressed.

Oscar Romero, the Archbishop of San Salvador, was born 15 August, 1917, and was assassinated while offering Mass on 24 March, 1980. Archbishop Romero preached the gospel boldly, speaking out fearlessly against poverty, people's suffering, social injustice, assassinations and torture in his country. His voice spoke directly to the people for three years via a regular radio broadcast in which he preached, prayed and pleaded for his people to seek peace, to show forgiveness and to build a more just society.

His life and words are worth reflection this Advent, both to honour those who have lived this path and to challenge ourselves as to where we are in the story.

They are found in a collection called *The Violence of Love*.

*The violence we preach is not the violence of the sword, the violence of hatred.  
It is the violence of love, of brotherhood, the violence that wills to beat weapons into sickles for work.*

Oscar Romero, 27 November, 1977

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## Week 1 (beginning Sunday, 29 November)

Advent is not just four weeks  
in which to prepare for Christmas.

*Advent is the church's life.  
Advent is Christ's presence...  
and will bring about God's true reign,  
telling us, humanity, that Isaiah's prophecy  
is now fulfilled:  
Emmanuel – God with us.*

3 December, 1978

*Dear brothers and sisters who are economically  
powerful,  
it is probable that at this moment,  
faced with the threat of land reform,  
you feel discouragement, fear, and perhaps hatred,  
and have even decided to oppose by every means  
possible  
the reforms being carried out.  
Probably there are some  
who even would rather destroy everything  
and radically harm the country's economy  
than share with those  
whose labor you have used for many years.  
The church that has served you so much says to you  
today:  
This is the moment to show yourselves generous  
Christians  
and to love as Jesus has loved us,  
who, being rich, made himself poor for our sake.*

16 December, 1979

Image: <http://servicioskoinonia.org/biblioteca/pastoral/RomeroBrockmanViolenceOfLove.pdf>





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### Week 2 (beginning Sunday, 6 December)

*Advent should admonish us to discover  
in each brother or sister that we greet,  
in each friend whose hand we shake,  
in each beggar who asks for bread,  
in each worker who wants to use the right to join a  
union,  
in each peasant who looks for work in the coffee  
groves,  
the face of Christ.  
Then it would not be possible to rob them,  
to cheat them,  
to deny them their rights.  
They are Christ,  
and whatever is done to them  
Christ will take as done to himself.  
This is what Advent is:  
Christ living among us.*

3 December, 1978

*Some want to keep a gospel so disembodied  
that it doesn't get involved at all  
in the world it must save.  
Christ is now in history.  
Christ is in the womb of the people.  
Christ is now bringing about  
the new heavens and the new earth.*

3 December, 1978

### Week 3 (beginning Sunday, 13 December)

*Christ says his reign is not of this world...but that does  
not mean that Christ is isolated from the power and  
wealth of earth. It means that he will use a different  
basis, a religious basis, to judge the consciences of  
political leaders and of the rich (and of the poor also),  
judging them from the eschatological and transcendent  
perspective of God's reign.*

14 January, 1979

*No one can celebrate a genuine Christmas  
without being truly poor:  
The self-sufficient,  
the proud,  
those who, because they have everything,  
look down on others,  
those who have no need even of God –  
for them there will be no Christmas.  
Only the poor,  
the hungry,  
those who need someone to come on their behalf,  
will have that someone.  
That someone is God,  
Emmanuel,  
God-with-us.  
Without poverty of spirit  
there can be no abundance of God.*

24 December, 1978

*The person who feels the emptiness of hunger for God  
is the opposite of the self-sufficient person.  
In this sense, rich means the proud,  
rich means even the poor who have no property  
but who think they need nothing, not even God.  
This is the wealth that is abominable in God's eyes,  
what the humble but forceful Virgin speaks of:  
"He sent away empty-handed the rich"  
those who think they have everything  
"and filled with good things the hungry"  
those who have need of God. (Luke 1:53.)*

3 December, 1978





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### Week 4 (beginning Sunday, 20 December)

*"We must not seek the child Jesus in the pretty figures of our Christmas cribs. We must seek him among the undernourished children who have gone to bed at night with nothing to eat, among the poor newsboys who will sleep covered with newspapers in doorways."*

24 December, 1979

*There are families where the faith is not developed, because what is given is traditions poisoned by economic and political interests and wrapped up with things of faith.*

*They want a religion that will merely support those interests.*

*And when the church protests against such selfishness, sins, and abuses, then it is thought to be departing from the truth, and these Christians, with their children and all, go away and continue to live traditions that are not true Christian traditions.*

31 December, 1978

*God keeps on saving in history.  
And so, in turning once again  
to the episode of Christ's birth at Bethlehem,  
we come not to recall Christ's birth twenty centuries ago,*

*but to live that birth here,  
in the twentieth century, this year;  
in our own Christmas here in El Salvador.*

*By the light of these Bible readings  
we must continue all the history  
that God has in his eternal mind,  
even to the concrete events  
of our abductions,  
of our tortures,  
of our own sad history.*

*That is where we are to find our God.*

24 December, 1978

### Going forward...

*Those who have listened to me here in church on Sundays  
with sincerity, without prejudices, without hatred,  
without ill will,  
without intending to defend indefensible interests,  
those who have listened to me here cannot say  
I am giving political or subversive sermons.*

*All that is simply slander:*

*You are listening to me at this moment,  
and I am saying what I have always said.*

*What I want to say here in the cathedral pulpit  
is what the church is,*

*and in the name of the church*

*I want to support what is good,*

*applaud it,*

*encourage it,*

*console the victims of atrocities, of injustices,*

*and also with courage disclose the atrocities,*

*the tortures,*

*the disappearances of prisoners, the social injustice.*

*This is not engaging in politics; this is building up the church*

*and carrying out the church's duty*

*as imposed by the church's identity. My conscience is undisturbed,*

*and I call on all of you:*

*Let us build up the true church!*

10 September, 1978





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### Multi-Age Activities for Households, Small Groups and Larger Gatherings

#### Week 1 (beginning Sunday, 29 November)

##### 1.1 Justice Edge (Jeremiah 33:10-16)

###### For discussion

How many things can you fit in your address? For example you probably live at a number, in a street, in a town, in a state, in a country. What about continents, galaxy, planet? What other things can you think of?

While most of us have a place we call home, we also share our common home with people, animals and other living things. We are all part of God's world. What parts of your address do you share and with whom?

###### Gratitude prayer

Share sounds of 'joy and gladness' regarding something you are grateful for in your home or where you live.

###### Faith in the world

This weekend will see people all around the world out on the streets as part of the People's Climate March. The Uniting Church is a partner organisation of the march and is encouraging families to join with a march in their area to express our care for God's world.

See: <http://www.peoplesclimate.org.au>

##### 1.2 Destruction and Restoration (Jeremiah 33:10-16)

You will need:

- Blocks, small leafy cuttings, small rocks, farm animals
- Large piece of sturdy cardboard.
- Ahead of time draw a network of streets and roads in black marker on the cardboard. Along the roads, write the following verses:

I 1 "there shall once more be heard the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voices of those who sing, as they bring thank offerings to the house of the LORD"

I 2 "in all its towns there shall again be pasture for shepherds resting their flocks"

I 3 "flocks shall again pass under the hands of the one who counts them"

I 4 "when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah."

I 5 "he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land."

I 6a "Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety"

I 6b "The LORD is our righteousness."

Use the a large piece of sturdy cardboard as the base for this activity. Make streets and houses from blocks. Add farm animals and trees, some small plants as gardens, a few small rocks and fences.

If you have time, provide these resources and invite participants to help build the city as you begin the intro. If your time is limited, set up the city yourself ahead of time.

*Intro: 'Today we are reading from the book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah is a prophet – he speaks about what is going on in the world for people and for God. At the time that he speaks, things are going badly....for people and for God. The people don't love God, they have lived heartlessly and they have "wheeled and dealt" themselves into trouble with the countries and kings around them. Now their*

Image: Centre for Theology & Ministry





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*country has been overrun by soldiers and beaten up in a war. Everything is looking hopeless and Jeremiah describes a picture of the deserted city in ruins. Everything broken."*

As your group is gathered around the city, invite participants from each side of the cardboard to destroy a bit of the city as you say:

*"Countries from the north had invaded,  
countries from the south had attacked,  
countries from the west had threatened  
and countries from the east had conquered.  
The city was in ruins."*

Reflect for a few moments on the destruction of the city. If it's appropriate to your gathering, remind one another of places in the world today where cities and villages are in ruins from violence.

Explain that the passage doesn't leave the city destroyed without hope.

Invite participants to begin reconstructing and restoring the city, so it's a healthy and fair place to live, as you read the whole passage. Point out that as the rubble is cleared and the streets and roads become visible again, some of the words of hope from the passage can be read along the roads.

Ask for volunteers who are willing to read the verses on the roads as you come to these points in the passage.

### Extensions

*Reflect on the creative work of rebuilding, set to the sound track of God's prophetic voice. Make this a prayer for your community/household.*

*'Loving God, Thank you for your words to us in times of trouble, for hope and second chances. Give us courage and strength for rebuilding where injustice and violence have broken communities in all places in the world. Help us to hear your voice as we work for justice and peace. Amen.'*

### 1.3 Activity: Righteous Branch (Jeremiah 33:10-16)

You will need:

- Large tree stump or log that has been cut so the rings of the tree are exposed
- Off-cuts/shoots with leaves approximately 30 cm long
- Small slips of paper and pens (optional)

Invite participants to gather around the large stump or log.

*Intro: "Here I have a tree. What has happened to my tree? (take answers, affirming all responses with 'that could be what happened...')*

*It has been cut down. Is it going to grow anymore? (take answers, affirming all responses)*

*We're not sure exactly how or when this tree came to be cut down, but we can tell a few things about the tree from looking at it carefully. What else can we tell about this tree? (take responses)*

*One thing we can see is how many rings there are in the tree stump – and this tells how many years the tree survived.*

*Today we are reading from the book of Jeremiah in the bible. Jeremiah speaks God's words to God's people.*

*And they are like this tree. They have been cut down.*

*Their cities and villages are being attacked by other stronger countries and destroyed.*

*But Jeremiah assures us that it's not all over for God's people. He gives us a picture of something new sprouting up out of the old cut down tree trunk. The rings in the old stump remind us of the past generations of God's faithfulness, and the new sprout invites us to pray for God's new ways in the future."*

Invite participants to take a leafy shoot and place it into one of the cracks in the stump as you offer prayers as a community.







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This can happen several ways:

- People may volunteer to pray a brief prayer as they place their shoot in the stump
- Some may wish to offer silent prayers as they place their shoot in the stump
- If you are in a more structured context, some prepared prayers may be read as participants signify their 'Amen' to the prayers by adding a shoot to the stump

\*Some theological traditions make a direct correlation between the 'sprout' (here in Jeremiah and also in Isaiah) and the life of Christ as an individual. In this activity, with multiple spouts, we witness, not to multiple 'Christs', but to the life of Christ shared and expressed in all of us.

## Week 2 (Beginning Sunday, 6 December)

### 2.1 Justice Edge (Luke 3:1-6)

#### For discussion

Have you ever had an experience where it felt like you were alone in what you thought and yet you felt it was still right? What did you do? Were you afraid to speak up? If you did, what happened? Share your experiences.

Watch 'The Lone Nut' - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fW8amMCVAJQ>

Discuss together what you see in this clip. Who do you think you usually are? Who would you like to be? In what ways are you a leader?

#### Faith in the world

Have a look at the JustAct website: <http://www.justact.org.au/>

Choose an issue that you care about and would like to see change.

Send a Christmas card to your local member of Parliament wishing them a Happy Christmas and thanking them for being your representative in Parliament. Ask them to take action for the issue you have chosen.

If you don't know who your local Federal MP is you can find out at: <http://apps.aec.gov.au/esearch/>

### 2.2 Guess Who? (Luke 3:1-6)

You will need

- Print out of card template (x2)
- scissors
- markers
- paper clips
- cardboard box

Play a game of **Guess Who?** using the characters from the reading and members of your own household and neighbourhood.





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Make up two sets of cards from the template, cutting out the cards, adding some colour, and adding some features (hair colour, length, glasses, hats, earrings, facial hair etc.) to the blank heads to identify them as people in your household or neighbourhood.

Play with two players\*

Each player places their set of cards in front of them on a table. Place a cardboard box between the players so that the opponents can't see each other's cards. Each player chooses one character, and marks this card with a paperclip.

Players take turns asking questions to 'eliminate' possible characters, until they guess their opponent's marked card. Ask questions like 'does your character have a hat?' – depending on the answer the asker turns face down all the cards bearing the relevant characteristics. First person to guess their opponent's character wins.

If playing with a more biblically and historically literate group you might use questions like 'Is the character a person of authority?' or 'Is the character related to any of the other characters?'

\*It is also possible to play in teams, taking it in turn to guess.

\*It is also possible to play in a large group with images on a screen. As a group, try to work out the identity of just one mystery person. If the process goes quickly the group can play a few rounds. If you are using this idea as an Early Word or intergenerational experience, choose 'John' as the last round:

- Emperor Tiberius
- Pontius Pilate
- Herod King of Galilee
- Philip (King of Iturea & Trachonitis)
- Lysanius, King of Abilene
- Priest Annas
- Priest Caiaphas
- John

### Extensions

- Google each of the characters and see what you can find out about them together
- Talk about the dramatic antithesis between the elite power, privilege, titles and affluence of Tiberius, Pilate, Herod, Philip and Lysanius and the 'raw' simplicity of John's power
- Consider how Luke contrasts the political context with the prophetic voice of John

### 2.3 Timeline (Luke 3:1-6)

You will need:

- 1m length of thick wool or rope
- cardboard cutout arrows from template
- cardboard cloud from template

This passage locates the coming of Jesus in historical time by reference to the contemporary rulers, as well as in relation to God's purposes and plans by reference to the prophetic words of Isaiah.

Invite volunteers to:

- Place a piece of string on the floor/table as a timeline
- Read out each verse on an arrow and place it on the floor/table pointing to a single point (team up strong readers and agile bodies to work in pairs on this)
- Place the cloud in the middle
- Add verse from Isaiah, pointing from behind towards cloud

Talk about:

- The importance of this point in time
- Why did Luke want us to remember it?
- What was the message?
- What was about to happen?





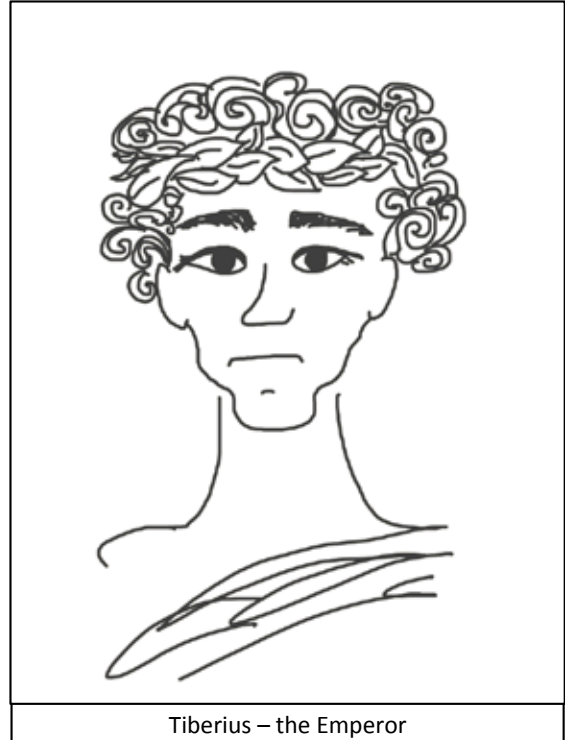


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Templates for 2.2 Guess Who (Luke 3:1-6)



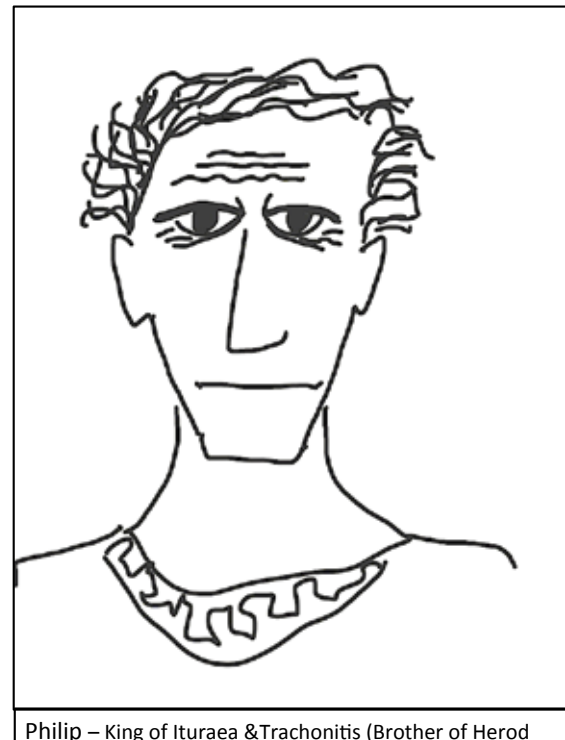
John



Tiberius – the Emperor



Lysanius - King of Abilene

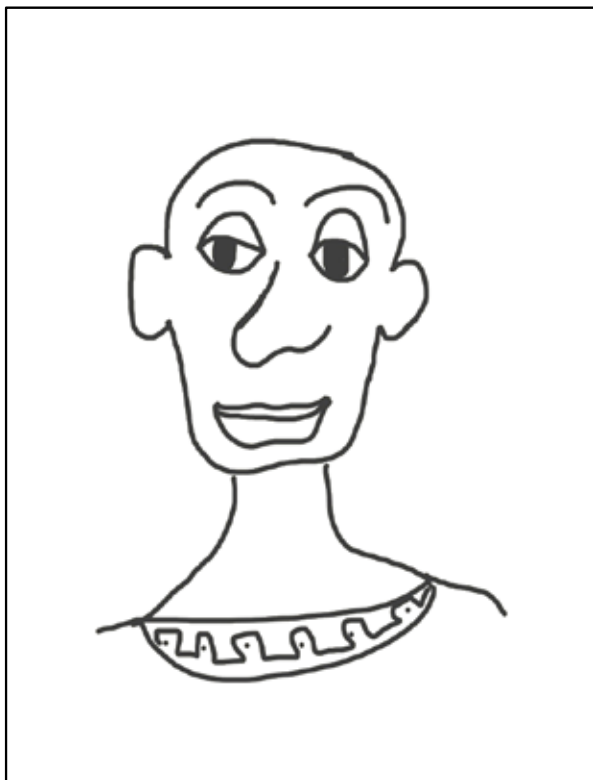


Philip – King of Iturea & Trachonitis (Brother of Herod)





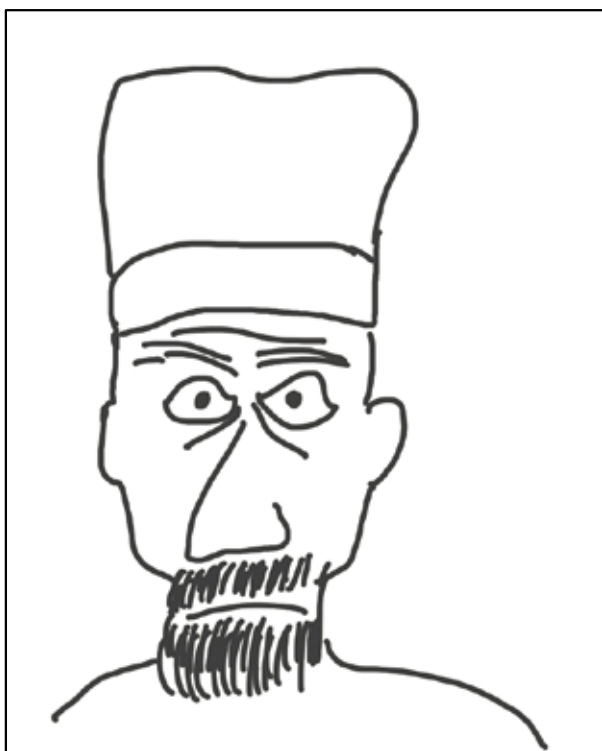
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Herod – King of Galilee



Pontius Pilate – Governor of Judea



Caiaphas –the priest

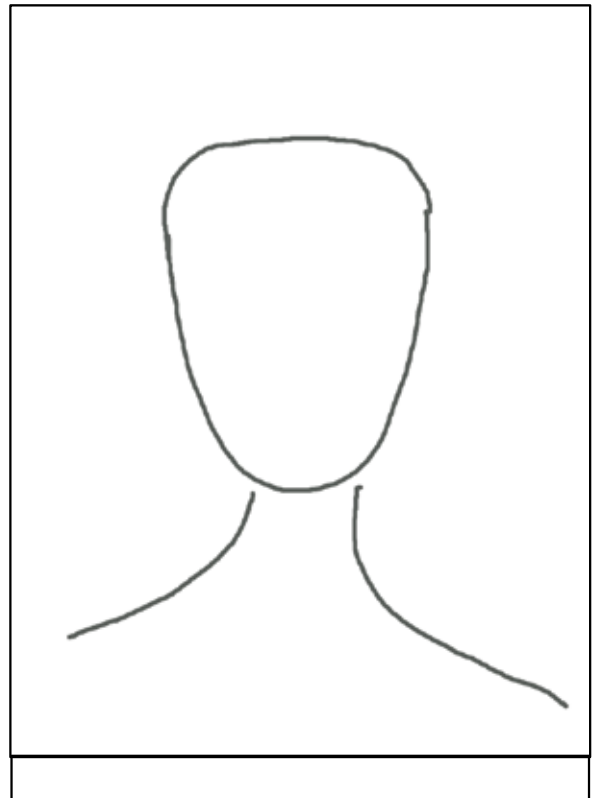
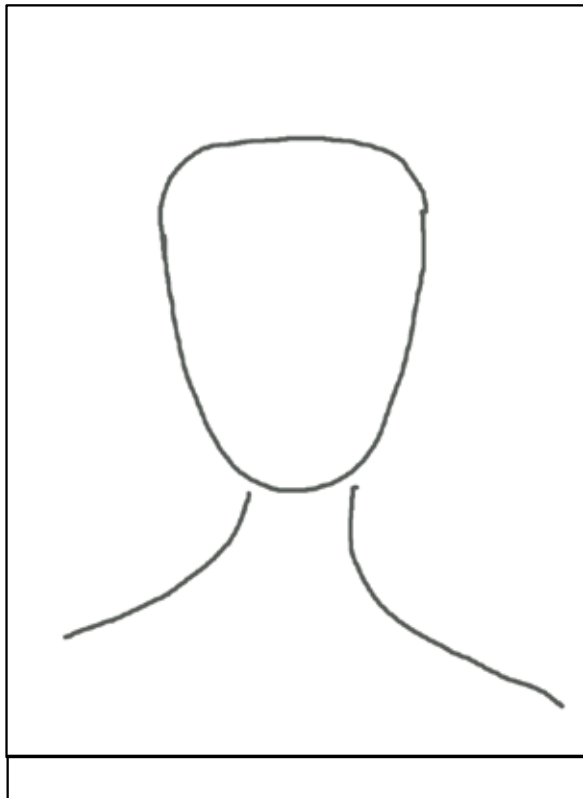
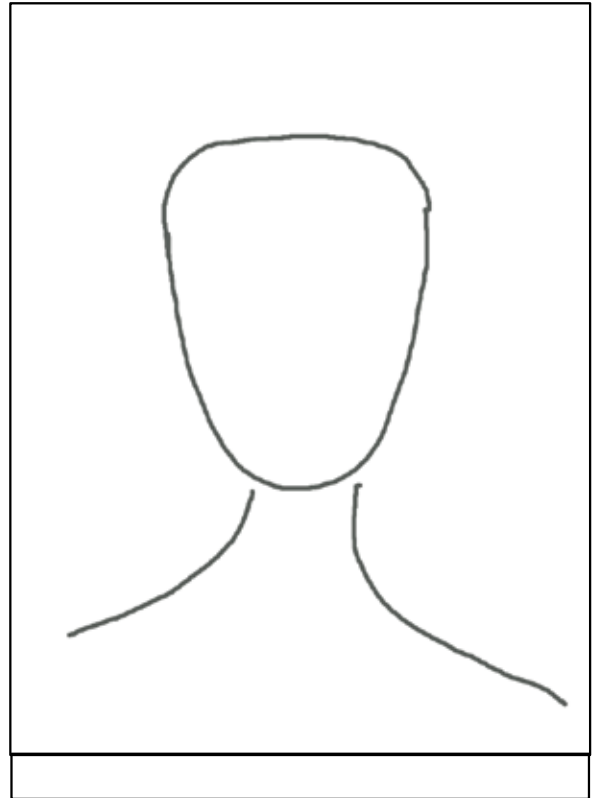
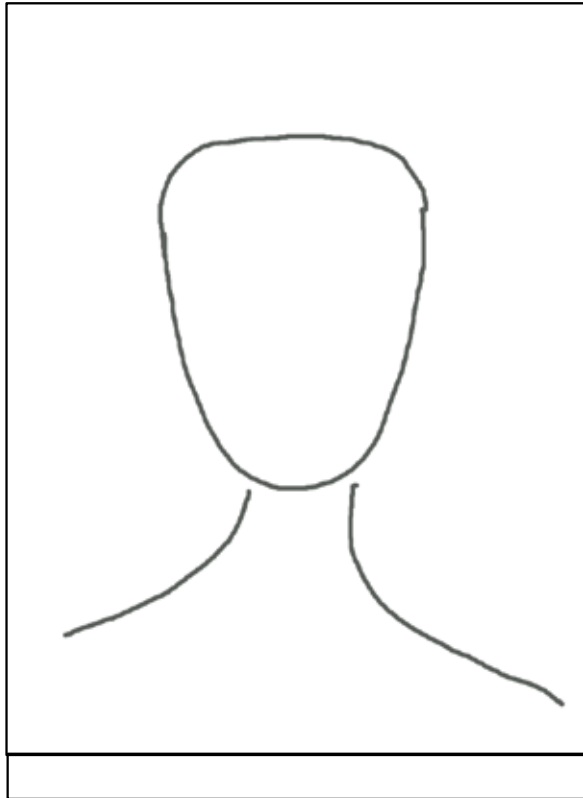


Annas the Priest





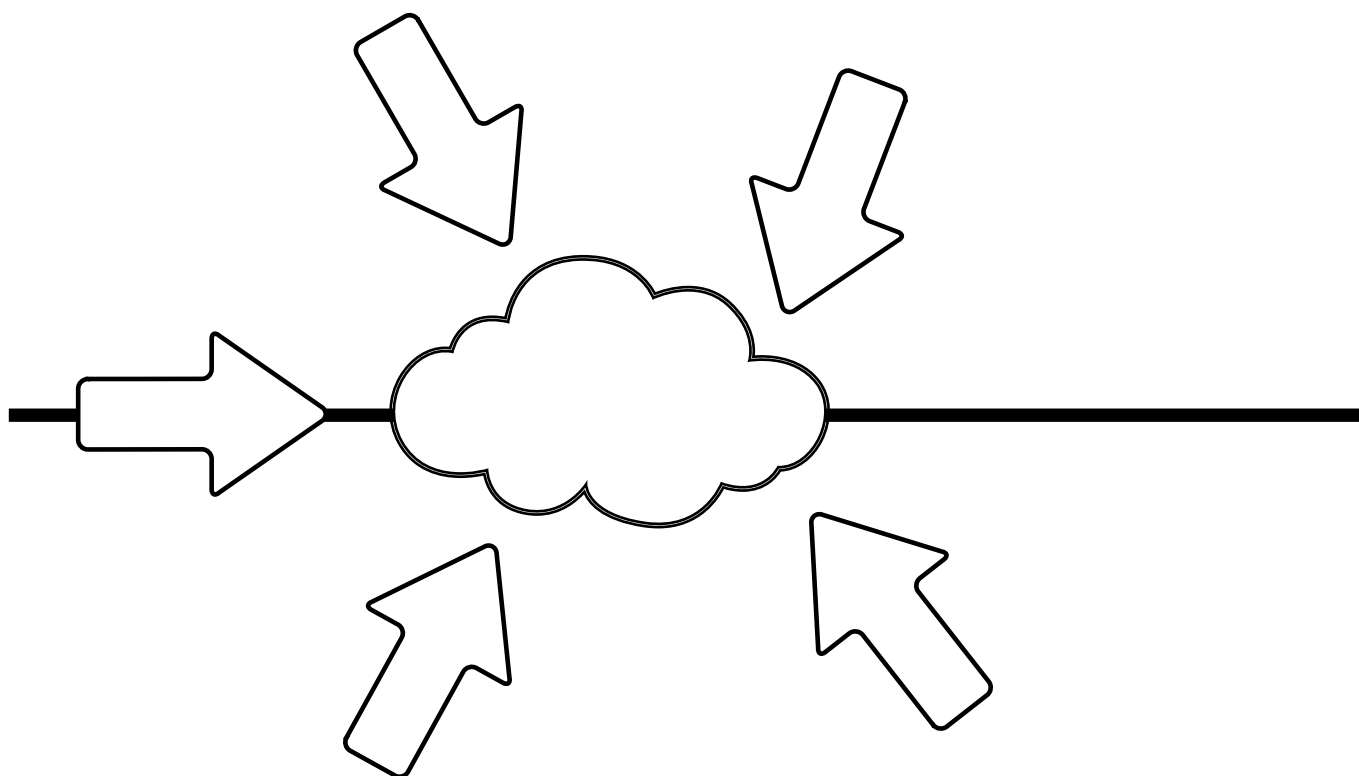
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Templates for 2.3 Timeline (Luke 3:1-6)



*the word of God came to John son of  
Zechariah in the wilderness.  
He went into all the region around  
the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of  
repentance for the forgiveness of sins,*





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*In the  
fifteenth  
year  
of the  
reign of  
Emperor*

*Annas  
and  
Caiaphas  
were the  
Jewish  
high  
priests*

*When  
Pontius  
Pilate  
was  
governor  
of Judea*

*Herod  
was the ruler  
of Galilee. Herod's  
brother, Philip, was  
the ruler  
in Iturea  
and  
Trachonitis,  
and  
Lysanias  
was the ruler  
of Abilene.*

*"In the desert someone is shouting, 'Get the road  
ready for the Lord! Make a straight path for him. Fill up  
every valley and level every mountain and hill. Straighten  
the crooked paths and smooth out the rough roads.  
Then everyone will see the saving power of God.'"*





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### 2.4 Sand play (Luke 3:1-6)

- Use a large tray of sand with sand that is damp enough to build sand castles
- Explain that in today's reading there are mountains and valleys and roads and rugged bushland
- Invite the group to sculpt the sand into those features, as you read the text, and remind them of: "Every Valley... Every mountain and hill... crooked roads... rough country..."
- When this is complete read the entire passage again
- Invite imagining travelling along these windy crooked roads and climbing these steep slopes
- Ask what happens to the mountains and valleys and roads in the reading (they change, they are evened out, the land is made flat)
- Highlight that the reading is talking about everything that could get in the way between us and God. John yells out, reminding people of the ancient words from the prophet Isaiah that promise that anything that could get in the way between us and God is about to be made smooth and straight and even
- Invite participants to level the mountains and make the ground smooth and even

#### Extension

- Prompt prayers for places where things aren't smooth, and where the way things are get in the way of people knowing God's love and justice
- Decide together on some prayer words to write in the sand

### Week 3 (beginning Sunday, 13 December)

#### 3.1 Justice edge (Zephaniah 3:14-20)

##### For discussion

In sharing a household, often we have to wait. We wait for the bathroom, for people to finish with the sauce over dinner, we wait for people to get ready to go somewhere.

Some people, who have to leave their home because they are afraid of being there, have to wait a long time before they can settle somewhere else.

Waiting can be irritating or it can be a way of living with hope.

In Advent we wait for the birth of Jesus and all the promise and hope that comes with his arrival. We have hope that things will be put right.

##### Faith in the world

The President of the Uniting Church Assembly has established an appeal for people who have had to leave Syria because of the conflict and who are resettling here as refugees. SHARE is collecting donations for Uniting Church agencies working with the Syrian refugees in local communities. More information is at: <http://www.bit.ly/syrianappeal>

As a household, you may like to choose to go without something this week and donate the money instead. Or you may like to institute a 'waiting' cup where you donate money every time you have to wait for someone. Alternatively you can raise the money another way. Choose how you will organise this as a household.







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### 3.2 Cheering Reading (Zephaniah 3:14-20)

Sometimes the presence of God invokes awe and silence. Sometimes tears. But this passage calls on the people of God to shout and cheer because of God's presence with them.

Invite your gathering to participate heartily in a responsive reading of this passage, cheering and shouting in response to each phrase.

Read the passage a phrase at a time, pausing at the marked places for cheering. If you are doing this in your worship gathering, an enthusiastic and prepared leader for the cheering will help keep the flow strong between the reading and the response.

- You might need to support this with some practice before you start. A Mexican wave or two drawing on cricket or concert culture can help warm up a more reserved group
- For some enhanced cheering, use some sound effects (for example <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XzAluei6qpM>)

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; [cheers and jubilation!]  
shout, O Israel! [cheers and jubilation!]  
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,  
O daughter Jerusalem! [cheers and jubilation!]  
The LORD has taken away the judgments against you,  
[cheers and jubilation!]  
he has turned away your enemies.  
The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; [cheers and jubilation!]  
you shall fear disaster no more.  
On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:  
Do not fear, O Zion; [cheers and jubilation!]  
do not let your hands grow weak.  
The LORD, your God, is in your midst, [cheers and jubilation!]  
a warrior who gives victory;  
he will rejoice over you with gladness, [cheers and jubilation!]  
he will renew you in his love; [cheers and jubilation!]

he will exult over you with loud singing [cheers and jubilation!]  
as on a day of festival.  
I will remove disaster from you, [cheers and jubilation!]  
so that you will not bear reproach for it.  
I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. [cheers and jubilation!]  
And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, [cheers and jubilation!]  
and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. [cheers and jubilation!]  
At that time I will bring you home, [cheers and jubilation!]  
at the time when I gather you;  
for I will make you renowned and praised  
among all the peoples of the earth, [cheers and jubilation!]  
when I restore your fortunes  
before your eyes, says the LORD. [cheers and jubilation!]

### 3.3 Music Mashup (Zephaniah 3:14-20)

This text has inspired musicians in different ages to write songs sets to these words.

Listen to excerpts from some of the examples over the page, or find more of your own. Some of the settings you'll find on YouTube\* are not always easy to appreciate. Still, take a light-hearted and generous approach to listening to how various people have interpreted the text musically.

Discuss which parts of the text are repeated and emphasised and which parts are left out.

As a more structured activity, give participants a copy of the text, and a marker. Challenge participants to circle or highlight phrases in the text that they hear in the music.

If you are doing this in a larger gathering, display one copy of the text on screen and invite participants to call out (stop the music when they do) and identify phrases from the text they hear in the excerpts.





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### \* Music Mashup Samples

- Matt Maher, *Sing over your children* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNLScyQ7cqQ>
- Handel, 'Rejoice, greatly, O daughter of Zion' *Messiah*. (This is actually based more directly on a similar text in Zechariah – but worth including to expand awareness of resonances and differences across biblical texts)
- Compassion Art 'There is always a song' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bPQIDSDmTA>
- Topu Maola, *The Lord thy God in the midst of thee* (1972 Universal Music - Brentwood Benson Publishing) ccli 31384 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w2JK\\_rMjluQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w2JK_rMjluQ)
- Andrew Bishop, *The Lord thy God in the midst of thee* [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZUiYjHcAnFA&list=PLMZw3Hb624irktoTzNdPjhXkgioyknS\\_0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZUiYjHcAnFA&list=PLMZw3Hb624irktoTzNdPjhXkgioyknS_0)

### Week 4 (beginning Sunday, 20 December)

#### 4.1 Justice Edge (Luke 1:39-45)

##### For Discussion

Waiting for something special to take place – the birth of a baby, a big celebration, Christmas Day – can be filled with frantic activity, heightened emotions and an excited nervousness. Interestingly, many faith traditions encourage people to spend time “waiting” in silence. Why do you think that is? As a household spend some time in silence together. It may be as little as five minutes. Play some quiet music in the lead up to help you get into the right frame of mind. Or you can use a mantra: “Come, Lord Jesus, come” or “Maranatha” (sometimes translated as “Our Lord comes”). Share how the experience was for you.

##### Faith in the world

In silence again, or with music playing, cut up some strips of coloured paper. Take a strip of paper and write down something you hope for in the world. Join the strips together into a paper chain and hang this up in your home as a Christmas decoration.

#### 4.2 The inside story (Luke 1:39-45)

You will need:

- Video of an ultrasound eg: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LkE30X5thul>

Give a thumbnail sketch of the story so far:

*Eg. “So far in the Gospel of Luke, Mary has been told by God’s messenger that she will have the baby Jesus, that he will begin to grow inside her, just like all babies begin. She is pregnant. This is exciting but surprising news for Mary. In this reading, she goes to visit her older relative, who is also pregnant.”*





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If your gathering includes younger children, give a straight and simple explanation of the word 'womb', which will occur in the reading.

*Eg. "A baby grows in a part of the mother's body, just below her tummy, close to the food supply and where it can have lots of cuddles. This part of the body is sometimes called the 'womb'."*

Continue with the explanation

*Eg. "We are going to watch a video of a baby in a mother's womb, while we hear this story about two pregnant women and the babies growing in their wombs. Listen carefully for what the baby does in the story."*

Read text as images are displayed.

### Follow up

*"Did you hear what the baby in Elizabeth's womb did in the story? (take responses – re-read if necessary). The little baby, not even born yet, seemed to know that Jesus – not even born yet either – was nearby. Whoever we are, from the littlest to the largest, the oldest to the only just starting in life, whoever we are, we can know that Jesus now fully alive, risen and with us by his spirit, is close by."*

\*If you are doing this reading in your household and you have an ultrasound of one of your household members, watch that together. This is a lovely opportunity to affirm the life of your children from conception as part of God's story.

\*If your gathering includes children, give a simple direct explanation that they are looking at a baby growing inside the mother.

\*Be sensitive to the presence of those in your community who have grief or trauma around the loss of an infant or a terminated pregnancy. Be careful in your language about the child in the womb. This text does bear witness to the spiritual life of the foetus, participating in the purposes of God, but does not offer grounds for judgement over the stories of those whose little one's existence was short for any reason. If in doubt, this is not the idea to use in a public setting, but is more appropriate within the warmth and intimacy of a family.

### 4.3 Drama pairs (Luke 1:39-45)

This story only has two characters – Mary and Elizabeth. Divide your group in two, making pairs, designating one person 'Elizabeth' and the other 'Mary'.

Explain that you will go through the passage and rehearse each character's actions – and then put the story together. Start with Mary, reading the bits of text and practising the actions and exclamations listed below.

Then practise Elizabeth's role, again reading the bits of text and rehearsing the actions and exclamations for her part.

Finally, put the two parts together, reading the whole text (intact) as all the Marys and Elizabeths do the rehearsed actions and exclamations

\*If you are doing this in a large gathering, it may be more comfortable and workable to divide your group down the middle and have a collective of 'Marys' on one side and a collective of 'Elizabeths' on the other, rather than individual pairs.

#### Mary

1:39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste

***Footsteps - slapping hands on knees***

to a Judean town in the hill country,

***Cheesy grin – "yee-ha!"***

1:40 where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

***Wave – "hi there!"***

1:42 and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women

***Point to self – "that's me"***

1:43 And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord

***Point to self – "that's me"***

1:44 For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting

***Wave – "hi there!"***

1:45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

***Thumbs up – "amen"***





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### Elizabeth

l:40 where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

**Wave - "hi there!"**

l:41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb.

**Hands on tummy - 'Ouch'**

And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit

**Hands in the air - 'praise the Lord'**

l:42 and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.

**Thumbs up - point at Mary**

l:43 And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?

**Hands out-stretched - welcome Mary.**

l:44 For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.

**Hands on tummy - 'Ouch'**

l:45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

**Double thumbs up**

### Combined parts – Full text

l:39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste

**Mary: Footsteps - slapping hands on knees**

to a Judean town in the hill country,

**Mary: cheesy grin - "yee-ha!"**

l:40 where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

**Mary: Wave - "hi there!"**

**Elizabeth : Wave "hi there!"**

l:41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb.

**Elizabeth: Hands on tummy - "Ouch"**

And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit

**Elizabeth: hands in the air - "praise the Lord"**

l:42 and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.

**Mary: point to self - "that's me"**

**Elizabeth: Thumbs up point at Mary**

l:43 And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord

**Elizabeth: Hands out-stretched to welcome Mary.**

**Mary: point to self - "that's me"**

l:44 For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting,

**Mary: Wave - "hi there!"**

the child in my womb leaped for joy.

**Elizabeth: Hands on tummy - "Ouch"**

l:45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

**Mary : thumbs up - "amen"**

**Elizabeth: double thumbs up**





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## Daily Reflections



### Thursday, 26 November | Thessalonians 5:1-11

I Thessalonians is written to a church that is in danger of falling asleep. They are losing confidence, short on hope, and in danger of listening too closely to those who make false promises of 'peace and security' (5:3). Paul redirects their focus back to Christ, the one whose death and risen life can wake us up from sleep, and keep us awake when things feel difficult (5:10). The imagery and ideas of the passage remind us of important aspects of the season of Advent: the promise of Christ's coming (5:3); the reality of 'light' as an image of Christ's presence in the world (5:5); and the encouragement to keep awake, and stay sober (5:6) not least through mutual encouragement (5:11). The season of Advent, rightly celebrated, will always be something of a wake-up call.

#### Reflection

What are the places and points of complacency in your life, your church or your community?

#### Prayer

Surprising and stirring God, wake us up this Advent, so that we will be ready for your coming.

### I Thessalonians 5:1-11

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When they say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober; and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other; as indeed you are doing.

Image: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/thepositiveaboutnegatives/9473882601/>





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## Friday, 27 November | Thessalonians 5:12-22

The theme of encouragement and mutual support continues in this section of I Thessalonians. The responsibility of the Christian community is to care for those who offer particular forms of service (leaders and prophets, 5:12–13, 20) and towards those who are struggling. 5:14 talks about those who are ‘disorderly, discouraged, and weak’ and instructs us to be patient with such people. These practical means of support are then connected with more obviously spiritual ideas: praying, giving thanks, allowing the Spirit to work, etc. (5:17–19). It is a reminder to us that while Advent is a time for personal and spiritual reflection, it is also a time in which the worship, care for others and service to the world continues. Whether our hands are helping, praying, or ‘holding fast to what is good’ we can learn to give thanks in all circumstances.

### Reflection

Where are your hands and your prayers needed to give support to the weak?

### Prayer

Strong and caring God, give us strength to care for those in need, and your Spirit to pray for the world you came to save.

## I Thessalonians 5:12-22

But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labor among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.

Image: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/genista/698219213/>







Advent 2015



## Saturday, 28 November Luke 21:20-24

Luke writes his gospel in full knowledge of the tragic circumstances that led to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in the year 70CE. The language of invading armies, desolated cities, and people fleeing for their lives connects the gospel story to recent events in many parts of the world. In these verses there is little by way of hope or promise for a better future, although the signs of distress will give way to the coming of the Son of man, and are an indication that 'your redemption is drawing near' (see Luke 21:28). So perhaps in reading Luke's account of a war that is past, we should just commit ourselves to remembering those who suffer in the midst of wars in the present. And also to hope that the Son of man will come and bring peace (see Luke 19:42).

### Reflection

Syria, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and elsewhere: take time today to listen and see the reality of people's suffering.

### Prayer

Redeeming and reconciling God, bring peace to the desolated cities, the sprawling refugee camps, and the frightened peoples of our world.

## Luke 21:20-24

"When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. Then those in Judea must flee to the mountains, and those inside the city must leave it, and those out in the country must not enter it; for these are days of vengeance, as a fulfillment of all that is written. Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress on the earth and wrath against this people; they will fall by the edge of the sword and be taken away as captives among all nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

Image: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/80497449@N04/10012162166/>





## Sunday, 29 November Jeremiah 33:10-16

The overall context of the book of Jeremiah is a story of the threat and destruction of Judah and Jerusalem. The covenantal relationship between the people and God has been broken and the Babylonian exile serves as a punishment for the people's unfaithfulness to God.

Jeremiah speaks as a messenger, a prophet or *an orator* of God to and for the people.

In this passage, Jeremiah addresses the people in exile with God's promise to bring comfort and hope in the midst of their suffering and despair.

This promise of comfort and hope will come through a leader like King David. He will practice justice (well-being) and righteousness and therefore the people and land will be healed and saved. He will teach and show by his life the love and mercy of God for all people.

### Reflection

Orators or *tulafale* are talking chiefs/leaders chosen by Samoan extended families to mediate and speak on behalf of their family, community, church or government.

Who are the prophets/orators in our community and place?

What is the prophetic message for your community and our nation, this Advent season?

How can the church strengthen its prophetic and oratory voice?

## Jeremiah 33:10-16

Thus says the Lord: In this place of which you say, "It is a waste without human beings or animals," in the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem that are desolate, without inhabitants, human or animal, there shall once more be heard the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voices of those who sing, as they bring thank offerings to the house of the Lord:

...

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness."

### Prayer

Advent God, comfort your people in this ever-changing and challenging time. Equip your church to be a prophetic voice, as they seek justice and righteousness for all of your creation. Amen.

Image: Centre for Theology & Ministry





Advent 2015



## Monday, 30 November Psalm 90

Psalm 90 is often read at funerals where grief and memory, and perhaps guilt and regret, are common feelings. The psalm speaks of God's eternity and humanity as mortals whose years are numbered.

The flow of the psalm depicts a community or congregation's prayer for help that begins with praise and acknowledgment of who God is, continues in confession and concludes with supplication.

The community praises God for God's care and protection of the people from one generation to the next.

The community confesses its distress and laments the limitation of human life and how life is destroyed as a result human sin. 'Life is like grass that flourishes in the morning and withers during the heat of the day'. And even living to the age of 70 or 80, it is not without toil and troubles.

The community's supplication pleads for God to change God's mind, to turn God's wrath into compassion, to remember God's covenantal promise to God's people, God's servants.

### Reflection

Prayer continues to be a significant part of our daily life as a Samoan family now living in Australia. We are continually blessed by the power and the gift of prayer that we have learned at home in Samoa and abroad from our parents and church community. Prayer helps us to stay connected to God and with each other.

Advent offers an opportunity to reflect on God and our life in prayer.

If your life is your prayer and your prayer your life, what does that mean?

What might that look like?

### Psalm 90: 1-10

Lord, you have been our dwelling place  
in all generations.  
Before the mountains were brought forth,  
or ever you had formed the earth and  
the world,  
from everlasting to everlasting you are  
God.

You turn us back to dust,  
and say, "Turn back, you mortals."  
For a thousand years in your sight  
are like yesterday when it is past,  
or like a watch in the night.

You sweep them away; they are like a  
dream,  
like grass that is renewed in the  
morning;  
in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;  
in the evening it fades and withers.

For we are consumed by your anger;  
by your wrath we are overwhelmed.  
You have set our iniquities before you,  
our secret sins in the light of your  
countenance.

For all our days pass away under your  
wrath;  
our years come to an end like a sigh.  
The days of our life are seventy years,  
or perhaps eighty, if we are strong;  
even then their span is only toil and  
trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly  
away.

### Prayer

God of every generation, be present in  
our Advent pilgrimage. In and through  
Christ, help us to focus on you our  
dwelling place. Amen.

Image: Traralgon Fabric Art Group





Advent 2015



## Tuesday, 1 December 2 Samuel 7:18-29

David's solemn address and prayer is a response to God's blessings and grace to David and his people. In humility David speaks highly and honourably of God's favours to him for what he had seen and received from God and what was promised to him and his people.

David's prayer concludes with a petition:

- for the performance and fulfilment of God's promise
- for the glorifying of God's name
- that his house, his people, might be happy and remain so

### Reflection

Prayer acknowledges who God is and who we are in relation to God.

Prayer gives us an opportunity to confess our wrongs and seek forgiveness, to affirm and proclaim God's grace and mercy.

Prayer helps us name our hopes and need of God's faith and wisdom that Christ embodied and shared.

Prayer can move us into actively discerning God's response.

Prayer can be expressed in many forms and many ways.

Who prays for you?

Who and/or what is in your heart this Advent that needs your (or our) prayers?

### Prayer

How great and mighty is your name, Sovereign God! With Christ, teach us again in this Advent season what it means to be a covenantal people and the importance of prayer in our relationship with you and our neighbours. Amen.

## 2 Samuel 7:18-29

Then King David went in and sat before the Lord, and said, "Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far? And yet this was a small thing in your eyes, O Lord God; you have spoken also of your servant's house for a great while to come. May this be instruction for the people, O Lord God! And what more can David say to you? For you know your servant, O Lord God! Because of your promise, and according to your own heart, you have wrought all this greatness, so that your servant may know it. Therefore you are great, O Lord God; for there is no one like you, and there is no God besides you, according to all that we have heard with our ears. Who is like your people, like Israel? Is there another nation on earth whose God went to redeem it as a people, and to make a name for himself, doing great and awesome things for them, by driving out before his people nations and their gods? And you established your people Israel for yourself to be your people forever; and you, O Lord, became their God. And now, O Lord God, as for the word that you have spoken concerning your servant and concerning his house, confirm it forever; do as you have promised. Thus your name will be magnified forever in the saying, 'The Lord of hosts is God over Israel'; and the house of your servant David will be established before you. For you, O Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, have made this revelation to your servant, saying, 'I will build you a house'; therefore your servant has found courage to pray this prayer to you. And now, O Lord God, you are God, and your words are true, and you have promised this good thing to your servant; now therefore may it please you to bless the house of your servant, so that it may continue forever before you; for you, O Lord God, have spoken, and with your blessing shall the house of your servant be blessed forever."

Image: Traralgon Fabric Art Group





Advent 2015



### Wednesday, 2 December 2 Isaiah 1:24-31

The setting here is the Lord speaking as the judge who names the charges and accusations against Jerusalem and proclaims the redemption and restoration of Zion (Jerusalem) after years of exile, oppression and suffering under the Assyrians and Babylonians.

These events are understood by Isaiah as background in relation to the restoration of the people during the early period of the Persian rule.

Restoration of the nation is by purification; removing the impurities and that which has no life:

- like metal that is refined by removing dross or impurities
- like dead branches of a tree that are burned, from which new shoots emerge to be nurtured and cared for

#### Reflection

As a migrant, I can relate to some of the issues around the discussion and debate about the treatment of asylum seekers and refugees in Australia:

- The issue of being in a foreign land and learning to adapt to life with a different language and culture
- The sense of isolation and loneliness
- The hope to be accepted and respected for who one is
- Finding opportunities to contribute to the community and society

What do you see in this image?

Where is God in this?

### Isaiah 1:24-31

Therefore says the Sovereign, the Lord of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel:

Ah, I will pour out my wrath on my enemies,  
and avenge myself on my foes!

I will turn my hand against you;

I will smelt away your dross as with lye  
and remove all your alloy.

And I will restore your judges as at the first,  
and your counselors as at the beginning.

Afterward you shall be called the city of  
righteousness,

the faithful city,

Zion shall be redeemed by justice,  
and those in her who repent, by  
righteousness.

But rebels and sinners shall be destroyed  
together;

and those who forsake the Lord shall be  
consumed.

For you shall be ashamed of the oaks  
in which you delighted;  
and you shall blush for the gardens  
that you have chosen.

For you shall be like an oak  
whose leaf withers,  
and like a garden without water:

The strong shall become like tinder;  
and their work like a spark;

they and their work shall burn together;  
with no one to quench them.

### Prayer

Gracious God, through the shadows and confusion, the struggles to find our way; may we open our hearts and minds to those who are seeking refuge among us. whose dreams and hopes have been shattered by both our government policies, and our inhospitable attitudes. Amen.

Image: Traralgon Fabric Art Group







Advent 2015



## Thursday, 3 December Malachi 3:5-12

Malachi, meaning my messenger, is one of the twelve minor prophets of the Old Testament.

Malachi is speaking to a post-exilic community of Jews who had returned to Judah. He lamented the corruption of the priesthood and witnessed the discontent and questionable ritual practices of the leaders and community.

In this passage, the Lord is accusing the people of turning away from the Lord's commands and laws, and the Lord invites their return, saying, "Ever since the days of your ancestors you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you."

God calls for reconciliation!

### Reflection

Every year since 1962, Samoans have celebrated independence from New Zealand's colonial rule. During the first week of June, Samoans around the world celebrate Samoa's freedom through worship and festivities. During worship we recall the stories of our people's struggles and suffering and remember those who have lost their lives in the fight for freedom.

The struggles of the First Peoples of Australia continue to be a reality for all Australians, individuals and communities, to consider, to acknowledge and to address. With the guidance and support of the First Peoples, government, church and the wider community need to work toward outcomes that are just and fair

What do you see in this image?

Where is God in this?

The image has a zip that is partly closed symbolizing the ongoing reconciliation. What might you or your community offer in this process?

### Malachi 3:5-12

Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts.

For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, have not perished. Ever since the days of your ancestors you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts. But you say, "How shall we return?"

Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, "How are we robbing you?" In your tithes and offerings! You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me—the whole nation of you! Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing. I will rebuke the locust for you, so that it will not destroy the produce of your soil; and your vine in the field shall not be barren, says the Lord of hosts. Then all nations will count you happy, for you will be a land of delight, says the Lord of hosts.

### Prayer

When our inaction creates disharmony and we ask "How are we to return?", for the sake of Christ our Lord and Saviour, redeem us, merciful God, and direct our paths to discover the joys of being a reconciled people. Amen.

Image: Traralgon Fabric Art Group







Advent 2015



## Friday, 4 December Malachi 3:13-18

Some scholars suggest that much of Malachi is written as a series of disputations, and the prophet Malachi serves as an arbiter in the conflicts between the people and God.

In this passage the people are accused of speaking harsh words against the Lord: "It is vain to serve God. What do we profit by keeping God's command or by going about as mourners before the Lord of hosts? Now we count the arrogant happy: evildoers not only prosper, but when they put God to the test they escape."

But the people denied the charges, saying, "How have we spoken against you?"

What follows is the affirmation of those who revere the Lord.

They will serve as a witness and an example of the Lord's chosen ones and special possession who serve the Lord and live as a righteous people.

God calls for confession!

### Reflection

Samoans use, to this day, the ceremony of *ifoga* as an act of confession and a seeking reconciliation between an offending individual and his/her family and a victim and his/her family.

In the *ifoga*, the offender and his/her family go early in the morning and sit on the ground outside the front of the victim's home. They cover themselves (offender and/or a chief of the family) with a fine mat, namely '*pulou o le ola* or the crown of life'. They will sit there (this could take hours and days) until the victim's family decides to accept the *ifoga* (confession) and offer an opportunity to meet and talk. This is the beginning of reconciliation.

## Malachi 3:13-18

You have spoken harsh words against me, says the Lord. Yet you say, "How have we spoken against you?" You have said, "It is vain to serve God. What do we profit by keeping his command or by going about as mourners before the Lord of hosts? Now we count the arrogant happy; evildoers not only prosper, but when they put God to the test they escape."

Then those who revered the Lord spoke with one another. The Lord took note and listened, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who revered the Lord and thought on his name. They shall be mine, says the Lord of hosts, my special possession on the day when I act, and I will spare them as parents spare their children who serve them. Then once more you shall see the difference between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him.

The symbolic act of confession during the Assembly in Perth, July 2015. The President of the Assembly and Chair of the Multicultural Cross-cultural Unit were covered with a fine mat in front of the Assembly during the prayer of confession.

What do you think about confession?

Have you ever been involved in an act or process of reconciliation?

Where is God in all this?

### Prayer

Compassionate God, your steadfast love endures forever. In the name of Christ, forgive us and help us when we fail to acknowledge our stubbornness to confess our sins. Amen.

Image: (c) Uniting Church in Australia Assembly





**Advent 2015**



## **Saturday, 5 December Malachi 4:1-6**

The epilogue and concluding chapter of Malachi sums up the judgment and restoration of the people of Judah, when the evil-doers will be destroyed and those who revere the name of the Lord “will go out leaping like calves from the stall” and “the sun of righteousness shall rise upon them.”

There is a call to remember the teachings of the great prophet Moses and the promise to send Elijah.

God calls for celebration, where memory and hope and shared.

### **Reflection**

Reconciliation is celebrated among the Samoan community with a sharing of the Ava ceremony of hospitality and welcome, worship, singing and dancing, feasting, and the giving and receiving of gifts (fine mats, tapa, food and money). This is part of the healing and restoring of relationships and sharing the fullness of life.

How do you or your community celebrate endings and new beginnings or renewed life?

Who and what is involved?

### **Prayer**

Merciful God, you gifted Israel in the wilderness with the Torah to guide and regulate their lives as covenant people. Renew us in this Advent journey to rejoice in the wisdom of the covenantal laws that Christ fulfilled, wisdom that offers life in all its fullness. Amen.

## **Malachi 4**

See, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the Lord of hosts.

Remember the teaching of my servant Moses, the statutes and ordinances that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel.

Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.

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Advent 2015



## Sunday, 6 December Luke 3:1-6

One of the struggles writers often face is finding their 'voice' or the voice of their characters. This struggle is more than just about the craft of writing, it is about struggling to find that which is authentic and true to the person telling the story.

John the Baptist speaks out because he has found what is true and feels compelled to share it, despite being, 'the voice of one crying out in the wilderness'.

What is your story? What do you feel compelled to share? When we see injustice around us, we see broken relationships with God. Speaking out against injustice is part of us discovering what is also authentic to God's vision for the world. When we multiply our voices, we amplify this vision.

### Reflection

Write a short reflection / journal entry starting with the line, "When I spoke about ...." It may be fictional or a reflection on something that happened. Write for at least ten minutes.

### Prayer

Loving God, you give us mouths to speak, ears to listen, minds and hearts to know when something is not right. Give us the wisdom to know when to speak out for your justice in the world. Amen.

## Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled,

and every mountain and hill shall be made low,

and the crooked shall be made straight,

and the rough ways made smooth;

and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

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Advent 2015



## Monday, 7 December Romans 8:22-28

When we see situations of injustice, we long for things to be put right, much like the longing in this passage. If we are to truly 'work together for good' we need to know what our vision is for the world.

### Reflection

Consider this passage from the Assembly statement - *An Economy of Life: Re-imagining human progress for a flourishing world*.

"This vision of wholeness is not about perfection – physical or spiritual – or freedom from disaster or suffering. It is not confined to 'the world to come' but is offered as a reality for the life of this world. It is a vision of flourishing, abundant life, of peace and reconciliation, justice and transformation, love and inclusion for all creation. Its antitheses are also described in the biblical stories: the worship of idols, of which mammon (wealth, gain or possessions) is prominent; and separation and exclusion from community, often wrought by violent and oppressive social, political and religious systems. It is time to ask ourselves what we can do differently and the values and the principles we need to guide us to more equitable, peaceful and sustainable ways of living."

What is your vision for wholeness?

### Prayer

God of light, we yearn for justice in our longing for wholeness. Give us patience to keep striving and keep hoping so that your love will be made manifest in the world. Amen.

## Romans 8:22-28

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

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Advent 2015



## Tuesday, 8 December 2 Peter 1:2-15

Goodness, knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, mutual affection and love. How do these things manifest in your life at the moment? These attributes support our faith – our relationship with God. But they are also the values that we long for in the way we treat all people, and reflected in our laws and culture as our society. To have a 'right relationship' with God is to strive to extend those values to all our relationships.

### Reflection

What sort of Australia do you want to see? The Justice and International Mission Unit is inviting churches to consider this question.

Be part of the discussion and have your say at: <http://www.justact.org.au>

### Prayer

May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. Amen.

## 2 Peter 1:2-15

May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.

His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature. For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For anyone who lacks these things is short-sighted and blind, and is forgetful of the cleansing of past sins. Therefore, brothers and sisters, be all the more eager to confirm your call and election, for if you do this, you will never stumble. For in this way, entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be richly provided for you.

Therefore I intend to keep on reminding you of these things, though you know them already and are established in the truth that has come to you. I think it right, as long as I am in this body, to refresh your memory, since I know that my death will come soon, as indeed our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. And I will make every effort so that after my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things.

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Advent 2015



## Wednesday, December 9 Luke 7:18-30

What messages do we hear and what escapes our notice? Who might be our modern day prophets? Sometimes we don't want to hear things because it makes us uncomfortable. Issues of injustice are often like that, inconvenient truths that we wish would go away. We often feel this way because we feel powerless to make a difference even though they are issues we care about.

### Reflection

Consider this quote from Marianne Williamson:

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people will not feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It is not just in some of us; it is in everyone and as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give others permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

*A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of "A Course in Miracles", Ch. 7, Section 3 (1992), p. 190.*

### Prayer

Courageous God, give us strength to see ourselves for who we are and accept that we have an ability to make a difference. We pray for all our leaders, our members of parliament and all those who desire to achieve a better society for all of us. Amen.

## Luke 7:18-30

The disciples of John reported all these things to him. So John summoned two of his disciples and sent them to the Lord to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" When the men had come to him, they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to you to ask, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?'" Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind. And he answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

When John's messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who put on fine clothing and live in luxury are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written,

"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you."

I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." (And all the people who heard this, including the tax collectors, acknowledged the justice of God, because they had been baptized with John's baptism. But by refusing to be baptized by him, the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose for themselves.)

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## Thursday, 10 December 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

As it is written, "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little."

Advent is a time of preparing for Christmas and contending with the push and pull of consumerism. We are confronted by social norms of gift giving – the estranged aunt who we nevertheless have to buy a gift for. Our loved ones who do not seem to need anything and yet we still want to express our love somehow. The gifts we feel compelled to buy even though they may go unused. The awkwardness of generosity – have we given too much or too little? We are confronted by our own desires and the knowledge of poverty. How do we reconcile these things in ourselves and be faithful in our response?

### Reflection

Spend some time making a spiritual gift list. How can the fruits of the spirit - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control - be part of your gift giving this year?

### Prayer

Loving God, you know our brokenness as you know your love for your Son Jesus Christ. Help us to heal ourselves by pursuing contentment instead of great gain. Amen.

## 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints—and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you. Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.

I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor; so that by his poverty you might become rich. And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something—now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. As it is written, "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little."

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Advent 2015



## Friday, 11 December 2 Corinthians 9:1-12

"The one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."

In the lead up to Christmas, we are sometimes confronted by our wealth in Australia compared to people living in impoverished countries. Understandably this sits uncomfortably with us. However, do we yearn for charity or justice? Charity involves giving, but justice seeks to put right the wrongs that have caused the situation in the first place. Poverty is not a natural state. It is something which is created. Therefore we can create a different world. Whilst we need to care for people in the situations they are currently in, unless we seek to change the situation we accept that this is how it will always be.

### Reflection

Reflect on your own attitudes to giving. What do you get out of giving? Is that keeping you in a 'charity' mindset, rather than a 'justice' mindset.

### Prayer

Generous God, encourage us to seek justice and not just settle for charity. May we find ways to reflect your spirit of generosity by giving ourselves, our time, our money, our knowledge, our love and affection. Amen.

## 2 Corinthians 9: 1-12

Now it is not necessary for me to write you about the ministry to the saints, for I know your eagerness, which is the subject of my boasting about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that Achaia has been ready since last year; and your zeal has stirred up most of them. But I am sending the brothers in order that our boasting about you may not prove to have been empty in this case, so that you may be ready, as I said you would be; otherwise, if some Macedonians come with me and find that you are not ready, we would be humiliated—to say nothing of you—in this undertaking. So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you, and arrange in advance for this bountiful gift that you have promised, so that it may be ready as a voluntary gift and not as an extortion.

The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. As it is written,

"He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor;  
his righteousness endures forever."

He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God.

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**Advent 2015**



## **Saturday, 12 December Luke 1:57-66**

In the birth of a child, whether it be our own or a grandchild or niece or nephew, a brother or a sister, part of the delight is in wondering, "What then will this child become?" We ponder who the child looks like, who they are even in this delicate beginning. They are full of potential. As we grow older we make decisions about what interests we pursue, who we are and what we do with our time. As we live out our potential we also make decisions not to do things.

The birth of Jesus is an opportunity to reflect on this for the whole world. How is this child a Saviour? How do we as followers of Christ reflect this potential or not?

### **Reflection**

What new life do we hope for ourselves? What do we hope for our planet, our society, our families and friends? How can we live out that hope in the world?

### **Prayer**

Gracious God, our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, work with us to use our potential to do your work in the world. Amen.

### **Luke 1:57-66**

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her; and they rejoiced with her.

On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John." They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name." Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will this child become?" For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

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## Sunday, 13 December Zephaniah 3:14-20

A beautiful reading to begin the week. One cannot miss the joyful and expectant tone of the passage – appropriate for the season of Advent – the coming of the Messiah and the establishment of God's reign! It evokes the kind of feeling one experiences, for example, when one is eagerly awaiting the return of a loved one, the sense that one can walk on air. It is an invitation/call to rejoice followed by a list of reasons for celebration and promises by Yahweh concerning the future. The people are assured that Yahweh will end oppression, save the lame, gather the outcast, restore the name and the fortunes of Israel and return the people to their homeland.

### Reflection

Despite all that we see and experience, we are assured of a future. And the possibility of a future should stir joy, anticipation, celebration, energy and hope. Do you feel the joy and the excitement of Advent? If not, what is it that deters you?

### Prayer

O come, O come Emmanuel, cheer my spirit and disperse all that keeps me from rejoicing in your advent.

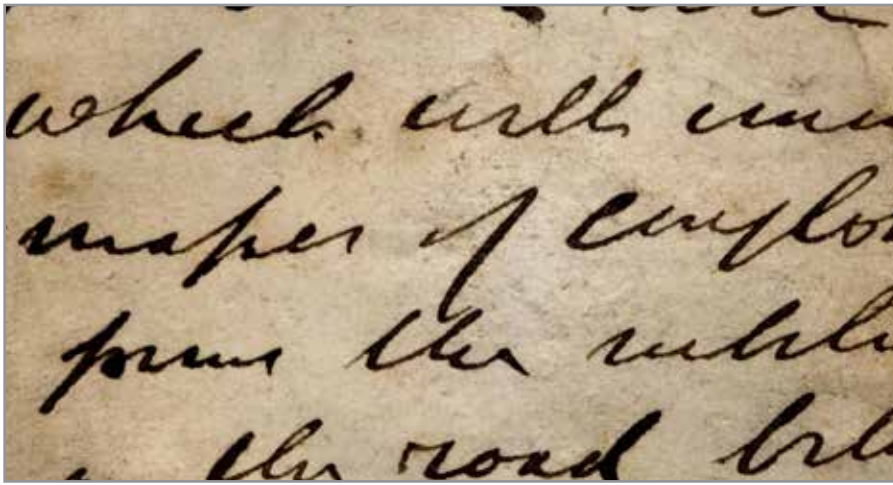
## Zephaniah 3:14-20

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;  
shout, O Israel!  
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,  
O daughter Jerusalem!  
The Lord has taken away the judgments  
against you,  
he has turned away your enemies.  
The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst;  
you shall fear disaster no more.  
On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:  
Do not fear, O Zion;  
do not let your hands grow weak.  
The Lord, your God, is in your midst,  
a warrior who gives victory;  
he will rejoice over you with gladness,  
he will renew you in his love;  
he will exult over you with loud singing  
as on a day of festival.  
I will remove disaster from you,  
so that you will not bear reproach for it.  
I will deal with all your oppressors  
at that time.  
And I will save the lame  
and gather the outcast,  
and I will change their shame into praise  
and renown in all the earth.  
At that time I will bring you home,  
at the time when I gather you;  
for I will make you renowned and praised  
among all the peoples of the earth,  
when I restore your fortunes  
before your eyes, says the Lord.





Advent 2015



## Monday, 14 December Isaiah 12:2-6

Have you ever ended a letter of request, with the words, "thank you in anticipation of"...? You are actually thanking someone for something that still needs to be done and in that phrase is embedded an expression of hope, hope that your request will be heard and responded to. The praise and the thanksgiving in these verses arise from having just heard about the many saving acts of Yahweh for Jerusalem and Judah, acts that focus upon the offspring of David. The hope expressed here concerns the coming of the messianic age. The phrase, "in that day," renders these songs of thanksgiving into promises. The stress is on the future, and hope for divine mediation in human events.

### Reflection

The day will come when the people of God will experience salvation and will sing. The coming of that day is assured and so the present becomes a time of rejoicing. What are you hoping for this Advent? What is your hope resting on?

### Prayer

O Come, O come Emmanuel, my help and my assistance! Let me always be thankful to you for the many ways you have guided me; help me continue to place my trust in you.

## Isaiah 12:2-6

Surely God is my salvation;

I will trust, and will not be afraid,  
for the Lord God is my strength and my  
might;

he has become my salvation.

With joy you will draw water from the  
wells of salvation. And you will say in that  
day:

Give thanks to the Lord,

call on his name;

make known his deeds among the nations;

proclaim that his name is exalted.

Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done  
gloriously;

let this be known in all the earth.

Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion,

for great in your midst is the Holy One  
of Israel.

Image: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/86624586@N00/10187684/>







## Tuesday, 15 December Isaiah 11:1-9

Isaiah presents a reconstructed vision and meaning of a future that will be ushered in by the Messiah. He will be guided by the spirit of wisdom and understanding; judge with equity and justice; strike the earth with the rod of his mouth rather than weapons and much more. What Isaiah sees is not just a reversal of fortune; in some ways he offers a blueprint for a startlingly new and magnificent future, a future in which broken and war torn relationships between humanity and nature, between nation and nation and between God and community will be healed and transformed. The transformation provides hope for disheartened people, enabling them not only to persevere against the suffocating sorrow in their midst but also to envision a higher and greater joy.

### Reflection

Hope emerges, it seems, from survival and relationship. What is your vision for the world? Where does your hope for this envisioned world come from? What are you going to do to realise it?

### Prayer

O come, O come Emmanuel, my God of hope! Help me to share in the vision for a transformed world and give me the strength which Christ brings to persevere against all that hinders its realisation.

## Isaiah 11:1-9

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,

and a branch shall grow out of his roots.  
The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,  
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
the spirit of counsel and might,  
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,  
or decide by what his ears hear;  
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,

and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;  
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,

and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,

and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

The wolf shall live with the lamb,  
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,  
the calf and the lion and the fatling together;

and a little child shall lead them.

The cow and the bear shall graze,  
their young shall lie down together;  
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,

and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

They will not hurt or destroy

on all my holy mountain;  
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord

as the waters cover the sea.

Image: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/h-k-d/4645149556/>







Advent 2015



### Wednesday, 16 December Micah 4:8-13

We live in a fast-paced world where time is money and impatience is high. We are conditioned to expect immediate responses, quick results and easy access. Micah's message is painful and difficult to hear. He assures us that God has a plan; all will be repaired and made well; but the path ahead isn't easy and we must wait. This waiting is filled with hurt, with doubt, with trials and tribulations. Waiting is a struggle! Waiting for change is frustrating and waiting requires courage and strength. "It shall come," but we must wait with patient grace. Not waiting alone, for God waits with us and God's grace equips us.

#### Reflection

What does the word 'wait' mean for you? What are you waiting for this Advent season? What helps you to cope with this waiting and all that it entails?

#### Prayer

O come, O come Emmanuel, patient and loving and help me 'wait' patiently and in grace for the coming of your reign.

### Micah 4:8-13

And you, O tower of the flock,  
hill of daughter Zion,  
to you it shall come,  
the former dominion shall come,  
the sovereignty of daughter Jerusalem.

Now why do you cry aloud?  
Is there no king in you?  
Has your counselor perished,  
that pangs have seized you like a woman  
in labor?

Writhe and groan, O daughter Zion,  
like a woman in labor;  
for now you shall go forth from the city  
and camp in the open country;  
you shall go to Babylon.  
There you shall be rescued,  
there the Lord will redeem you  
from the hands of your enemies.

Now many nations  
are assembled against you,  
saying, "Let her be profaned,  
and let our eyes gaze upon Zion."  
But they do not know  
the thoughts of the Lord;  
they do not understand his plan,  
that he has gathered them as sheaves to  
the threshing floor.  
Arise and thresh,  
O daughter Zion,  
for I will make your horn iron  
and your hoofs bronze;  
you shall beat in pieces many peoples,  
and shall devote their gain to the Lord,  
their wealth to the Lord of the whole  
earth.

Image: istockphoto.,com





Advent 2015



## Thursday, 17 December     Jeremiah 31:31-34

A beautiful passage assuring us that God's grace and mercy provides the community with all that is needed to overcome pain and build life anew. God offers the old in new ways to ensure that the message is received afresh and to make the knowledge of God possible. The Torah is now "within them", put into each person, ingrained in/on the hearts of people. The individual is now guaranteed of having been accepted by God. The passage teaches us that God has given us the gift of faith and we, the people of God, need to internalise this faith. Our words, our actions, are a reflection of our beliefs about the person and work of the God we say is ours, and thus also a reflection of God's instructions as they are inscribed in our hearts. These directives that we have been given should inform our actions, and our involvements, our stances and our responses to the many issues confronting us as individuals and the world today.

### Reflection

Who are the people that you will engage with over the next 24 hours? What are the issues that are at the forefront of your mind? How might this passage impact your interactions with these people and situations?

### Prayer

O Come, O Come Emmanuel! Guide me, strengthen me, give me the gift of faith and enable me to say, "I can do this!"

## Jeremiah 31:31-34

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Image: Centre for Theology & Ministry





## Advent 2015



### Friday, 18 December Isaiah 42:10-18

There is such an ache, a yearning, an eagerness for someone to make things right in this chaotic world of ours. Who will do this? Our politicians? The church? How about us? But where is God? Isaiah reminds us that our God is not one who is removed from the happenings of this world, indifferent and apathetic. This God is very much in control and is observant of all that is happening – the good and the bad - and will work towards changing it. Isaiah draws on the dramatic image of a woman in labour to describe how God will make this happen, assuring us that new life will emerge and that God will accomplish the work long conceived in God's mind.

#### Reflection

God calls us to listen, see and take note, to join God in the task of transforming the world. God has been, and will continue to be, engaged in individual, communal and cosmic transformation giving us reason to sing in praise and thanksgiving. What tasks of transformation might God be calling you and your faith community to? What transformations have taken place this week, this month or this year that have moved you to praise and thanksgiving?

#### Prayer

O Come, O Come Emmanuel, open my mind and my heart to see your world – its hurts and its triumphs. Lead me, guide me, heal me and use me to help restore your world.

Isaiah 42:10-18

Sing to the Lord a new song,  
his praise from the end of the earth!  
Let the sea roar and all that fills it,  
the coastlands and their inhabitants.  
Let the desert and its towns lift up their voice,  
the villages that Kedar inhabits;  
let the inhabitants of Sela sing for joy,  
let them shout from the tops of the mountains.  
Let them give glory to the Lord,  
and declare his praise in the coastlands.  
The Lord goes forth like a soldier;  
like a warrior he stirs up his fury;  
he cries out, he shouts aloud,  
he shows himself mighty against his foes.

For a long time I have held my peace,  
I have kept still and restrained myself;  
now I will cry out like a woman in labor;  
I will gasp and pant.  
I will lay waste mountains and hills,  
and dry up all their herbage;  
I will turn the rivers into islands,  
and dry up the pools.  
I will lead the blind  
by a road they do not know,  
by paths they have not known  
I will guide them.  
I will turn the darkness before them into light,  
the rough places into level ground.  
These are the things I will do,  
and I will not forsake them.  
They shall be turned back and utterly put to shame—  
those who trust in carved images,  
who say to cast images,  
“You are our gods.”  
Listen, you that are deaf;  
and you that are blind, look up and see!

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**Advent 2015**



## **Saturday, 19 December Psalm 80:1-7**

Hope and expectation are the hallmarks of Advent. But Psalm 80 is a pathos-filled lament of the community arising from the ruins and the rubble of some sort of public devastation such as the destruction of Jerusalem. The praying community implores God “let your face shine, that we may be saved” – a request seeking God’s saving presence. We too live in very troubling and turbulent times – death and violence surround us and their impact is felt deeply amongst many, giving rise to sadness, helplessness, hopelessness, fear and anger. Why Lord? Is God angry? What have we done to deserve this? These are common questions on the lips of many. In this season, even in the midst of such questions, we are called to remember and to acknowledge the guarding and protecting God, who seeks the good of humanity; to exhibit confidence and trust, to remain hopeful, for the God who judges is also the God who saves.

### **Reflection**

What are the current concerns – in your personal life, your community, the world – that give rise to sadness, helplessness, hopelessness, fear or anger in you? How might consciously remembering that God is in the midst of these situations, seeking the good of all, bring comfort, reassurance, hope or peace?

### **Prayer**

I long for your presence in my life and for the joy and peace that only you can give me. O Come O Come Emmanuel!

### **Psalm 80:1-7**

To the leader: on Lilies, a Covenant. Of Asaph. A Psalm.

Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,  
you who lead Joseph like a flock!

You who are enthroned upon the  
cherubim, shine forth

before Ephraim and Benjamin and  
Manasseh.

Stir up your might,  
and come to save us!

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

O Lord God of hosts,  
how long will you be angry with your  
people’s prayers?  
You have fed them with the bread of tears,  
and given them tears to drink in full  
measure.  
You make us the scorn of our neighbors;  
our enemies laugh among themselves.

Restore us, O God of hosts;  
let your face shine, that we may be  
saved.

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## Sunday, 20 December Luke 1:5-20

As we draw near to Christmas celebrations, we have the chance over the next four days to immerse ourselves in key moments in Luke's version of the story of Jesus' birth. Rather than focus on the familiar characters and events, we will focus in each case on a key verse from the relevant passage. Today we can look at Luke 1:16: 'He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.' This description of the ministry of John the Baptist is a reminder that God's will is for people to turn to and face the God who seeks a relationship with us. John's ministry is focused on calling Israel, but the same verb used here 'he will turn many' is used later on in Acts to describe people's response to the preaching of the gospel (see Acts 11:21 as an example). In the incarnation God turns to us in a decisive and compelling way. As the message is proclaimed we turn to God and in Christ we see God's face. Note also that the new relationship between God and humanity leads to restored relationship among people (Luke 1:17 uses the same verb): as the angels will later sing 'glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among people' (Luke 2:14).

### Reflection

At Christmas we celebrate God's turning to us. How can we turn to God, and what will we say to God?

### Prayer

Turn your face to us, O God, so that we can see, know and love you.

## Luke 1:5-20

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years. Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur."

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**Advent 2015**



**Monday, 21 December**

**Luke 1:26-38**

Our passage today comes to a climax with Mary's famous words 'Here am I, a servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word' (1:38). It's a passage that is sometimes understood as Mary's resignation to a presence and a promise that she doesn't really yet understand (see 1:29) But the wording suggests that Mary is saying much more than 'OK God, I trust you, have it your way'. The term translated 'here I am' actually means 'behold!' and it is also used in Isaiah 6:8 to talk about Isaiah's embrace of his prophetic calling. Mary's use of the term 'servant' also connects with Israel's prophetic tradition. In other words, where Isaiah and others offered their voices, Mary is offering her body to God as the medium through which God will speak God's word to God's people. God's promise to Mary leaves her less perplexed and more determined to play her part in the extraordinary story that is about to unfold.

### Reflection

What can we offer to God for God to use 'according to God's word'?

### Prayer

Send your Spirit upon us, O God, to lead us from confusion to determination.

### Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 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. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" 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. 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. For nothing will be impossible with God." 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.

Image: Centre for Theology & Ministry







**Advent 2015**



### **Luke 1:39-45**

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

## **Tuesday, 22 December      Luke 1:39-45**

The most striking detail of the encounter between Mary and Elizabeth is found in Luke 1:41: "When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb" (see also 1:44). The same word 'greeting' was used in Luke 1:29 to describe Gabriel's encounter with Mary. It seems that something of a 'chain reaction' is happening: from Gabriel to Mary to Elizabeth. The response of the embryonic John denotes joy. The word used for 'leaping' in Elizabeth's belly is the kind of word you might use for baby lambs skipping merrily in a field. Mary's greeting, her pregnancy, her presence as the one who now believes that God's will is to be fulfilled through her – all of these things evoke a response of joy. And the joy that Elizabeth feels within her will soon become the key theme of the Christmas story: Mary rejoices (1:47); Elizabeth's neighbours rejoice (1:58); and the shepherds receive the 'good news of great joy' (2:10) that the Saviour is born. Christmas is a time for many emotions, but the hallmark of the season is joy.

### **Reflection**

How can we convey to others our sense of joy at the good news of the Christmas message?

### **Prayer**

Send your blessing upon us, O God, so that we can truly rejoice in your gift: Jesus Christ our Saviour.

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Advent 2015



### Wednesday, 23 December Luke 1:46b-55

It's pretty tough to do justice to Mary's song in 150 words. So let's just focus on the first word which (in the original Greek) is actually 'magnifies', from which we get the title 'Magnificat'. What does that word mean? In general terms it refers to anything that one person does or says that enhances the reputation or honour of another person. On Mary's lips it reminds us that the salvation which God promised to her through the birth of her Son leads to the offer of praise back to God. God's saving acts enhance God's glory, and 'magnifies' God's name. What is striking is that Mary doesn't say that her words 'magnify' God, not even the words of her famous hymn. Instead she magnifies God through her 'soul' or, even better, through her 'life'. Whatever words we might sing and say over the coming days, praising God for God's gift of a Son, it is ultimately our lives that do the work of magnification. The apostle Paul knew this, and so spoke to the Philippians of the way that 'Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death' (Philippians 1:20). We should aspire to nothing less.

#### Reflection

An old catechism of the church reminds us that the 'chief end' of a human life is to 'glorify God and enjoy God forever' (Shorter Westminster Catechism, question 1, alt.). What does that mean for you?

#### Prayer

May our lives magnify you, O God, for you have done great things.

### Luke 1:46-55

And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior;  
for he has looked with favor on the  
lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will  
call me blessed;

for the Mighty One has done great things  
for me,

and holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who fear him

from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the  
thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from  
their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;

he has filled the hungry with good things,

and sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,

in remembrance of his mercy,

according to the promise he made to our  
ancestors,

to Abraham and to his descendants  
forever."

Image: Centre for Theology & Ministry





## Thursday, 24 December Luke 2:1-14

'And she gave birth to her firstborn son' (Luke 2:7). As is the case with the last moment of Jesus' life (see Luke 23:46b), the first moment is described with utter simplicity, as if it were the most normal thing in the world. And, of course, that is the point. Yes, it is true that 'a Saviour who is the Messiah and Lord' is born (see 2:11). Without that truth, the moment of Jesus' birth would have passed unnoticed by all except his parents. But if truth be told, given the fuss that we make over the stories of Jesus' birth today, the layers of interpretation and significance, and the necessary but heavy language of our theological reflection, we probably need to be reminded that at the heart of the Christmas story is the birth of a child: bawling, bloody, and barely able to breath. God steps into our humanity, our frailty, and our mortality completely, as if it were the most normal thing in the world.

### Reflection

How will you spend Christmas Day? When and where will you stop and wonder again at the good news: that God in Jesus has stepped into human life 'for us and for our salvation'.

### Prayer

May we share our life with you, O God, knowing that in Jesus Christ your Son, you have shared your life with us.

## Luke 2:1-14

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace among those whom  
he favors!"

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