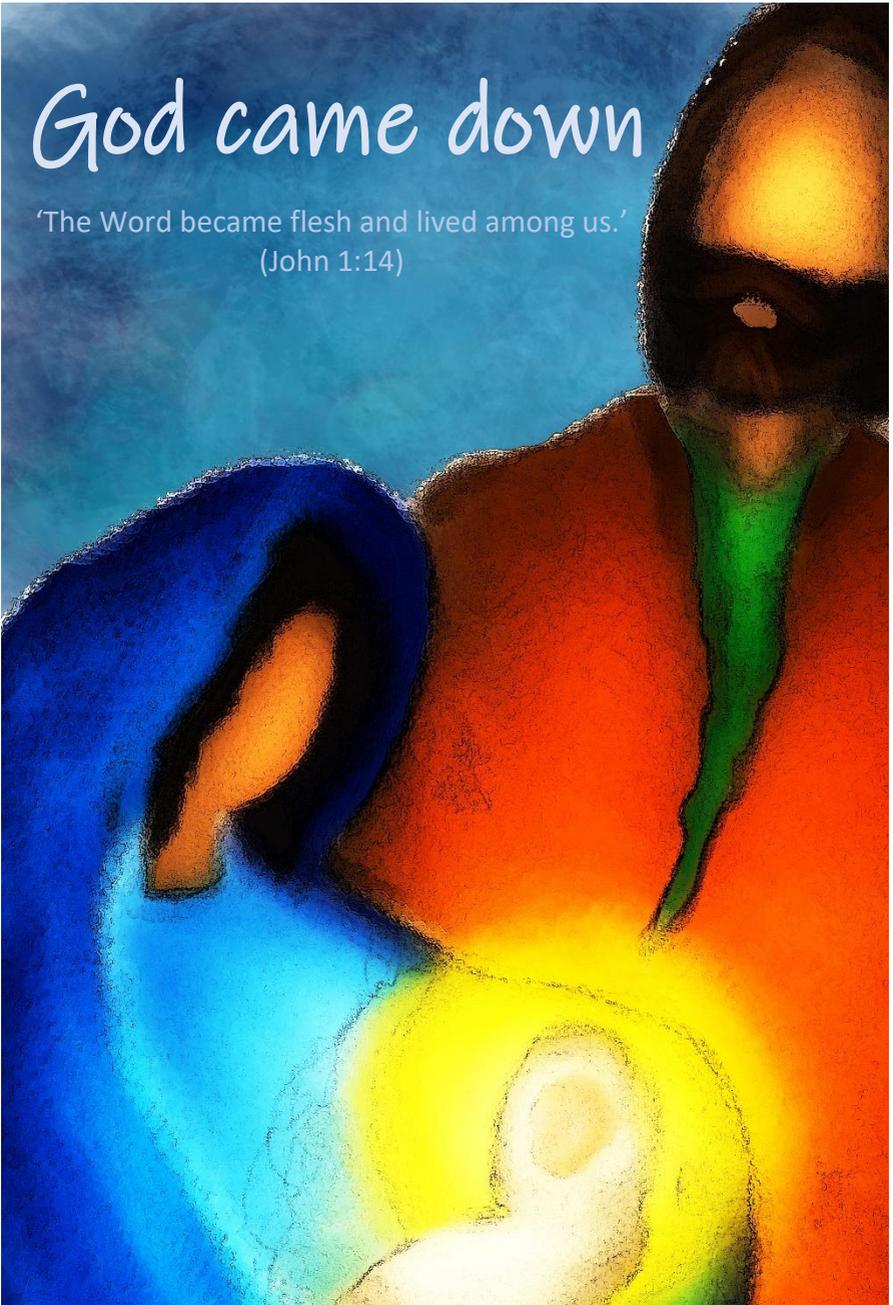


God came down

'The Word became flesh and lived among us.'
(John 1:14)



Advent Readings 2021

God came down

'The word became flesh and lived among us.' (John 1:14)

The advent season is upon us once again, and once again, we are invited into the birth stories of Jesus. It is an invitation that beckons us to come aside from the busyness of the season and to be reminded of the real reason for celebration. In our ever-changing world, this familiar story remains our hope and our salvation.

We invite you this advent to make time each day to sit and read a small part of the story of the birth of Jesus. Looking back to some prophecy, then journeying with two ordinary parents entrusted with an extraordinary child. Although this story will be so familiar, we invite you to read it carefully, taking note of all that is happening, and putting aside any assumptions that you bring having heard the story so frequently. In doing so, we pray that God, by his Spirit, would reawaken hope, peace, love and joy within you. We pray that you might be captivated afresh by the beauty, risk, and power that this story reveals to us, as it tells us of the God who came to live among us. As you read, think, and pray, notice how God has weaved his plan together, and allow it to give you a confidence and assurance as you trust your life into his loving hands.

For the Scripture passages, we have printed the New Living Translation, but perhaps you would find it helpful to also read the passage in a different translation that you have at home. Often, we can pick up new insights through reading a variety of translations.

We look forward to worshipping with you throughout this season. May God bless you abundantly this Advent and Christmas!

*Rev Ken Connor
Rev Louise McKee
Rev Cheryl Patterson*

SUNDAY 28 NOVEMBER 2021

The first Sunday of Advent

As we begin this advent journey we start with prayer.

Each Sunday, we simply invite you to find some time to be still and quiet, to light your own advent candle, and to offer up an advent prayer.

May the stillness of this moment draw you in to this wonderful season of Hope. Let us pray:



A candle burns,
the sign of our hope.
God of hope, come to us
again this Advent.
May your hope live within us,
burning as a light in our lives.
Amen.

David Hamflett

(‘A Candle Burns’, *Candles & Conifers*, Wild Goose Publications ©2005)

As you continue in prayer, pray specifically for those who are in need of knowing the hope of Christ this Christmas.

Ask God to reawaken in many the real reason for this season.

Finish your time of prayer by offering to God the things for which your heart is thankful.

Matthew 1:1-17

This is a record of the ancestors of Jesus the Messiah, a descendant of David and of Abraham^[a].² Abraham was the father of Isaac. Isaac was the father of Jacob. Jacob was the father of Judah and his brothers.³ Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah (whose mother was Tamar). Perez was the father of Hezron. Hezron was the father of Ram.^[b] ⁴Ram was the father of Amminadab. Amminadab was the father of Nahshon. Nahshon was the father of Salmon.⁵ Salmon was the father of Boaz (whose mother was Rahab). Boaz was the father of Obed (whose mother was Ruth). Obed was the father of Jesse.⁶ Jesse was the father of King David. David was the father of Solomon (whose mother was Bathsheba, the widow of Uriah).⁷ Solomon was the father of Rehoboam. Rehoboam was the father of Abijah. Abijah was the father of Asa.^[c] ⁸Asa was the father of Jehoshaphat. Jehoshaphat was the father of Jehoram.^[d] Jehoram was the father^[e] of Uzziah. ⁹Uzziah was the father of Jotham. Jotham was the father of Ahaz. Ahaz was the father of Hezekiah. ¹⁰Hezekiah was the father of Manasseh. Manasseh was the father of Amon.^[f] Amon was the father of Josiah. ¹¹Josiah was the father of Jehoiachin^[g] and his brothers (born at the time of the exile to Babylon). ¹²After the Babylonian exile: Jehoiachin was the father of Shealtiel. Shealtiel was the father of Zerubbabel. ¹³Zerubbabel was the father of Abiud. Abiud was the father of Eliakim. Eliakim was the father of Azor. ¹⁴Azor was the father of Zadok. Zadok was the father of Akim. Akim was the father of Eliud. ¹⁵Eliud was the father of Eleazar. Eleazar was the father of Matthan. Matthan was the father of Jacob. ¹⁶Jacob was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary. Mary gave birth to Jesus, who is called the Messiah. ¹⁷All those listed above include fourteen generations from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the Babylonian exile, and fourteen from the Babylonian exile to the Messiah.

When I was growing up, I used to love watching ‘The A-Team’ on TV. One of the main characters, Hannibal, had the saying in pretty much every episode, ‘I love it when a plan comes together.’ When I read the genealogy of Jesus at the beginning of Matthew’s gospel, this saying pops into my head! Matthew begins by spelling out the lineage of Jesus, laying the foundations to support that Jesus is the fulfilment of prophecy. He is the

climax of this story of God's people. To those first readers, this family tree marked an impressive reality, and the names mentioned served as a reminder of the stories of God passed on from generation to generation. As we come to look at this gospel, we might be tempted to skip past all these names that we struggle to pronounce and miss out on what Matthew is trying to tell us. He is telling us, that Jesus is a crucial part of the revelation of God in Scripture. He is telling us, that all the passages that have gone before in the Old Testament are leading us to this point. He is telling us, to take note for Jesus is God's promise fulfilled. So today, as you read through all of those names, give thanks for a God who is, and has been, always at work. A God who keeps his promises. This God is your God, so trust in Him.

CP

Let us pray,

Sovereign God, we thank you for the reminder of Scripture that you are a God who is always at work. As we look to our own circumstances today, the certain and the uncertain, fill us with a confidence as we put our trust in you. Be at work in our lives, we pray. Amen.

TUESDAY 30 NOVEMBER 2021

Isaiah 7:14

¹⁴All right then, the Lord himself will give you the sign. Look! The virgin^[a] will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel (which means 'God is with us').

The situation in which this prophecy is given in Isaiah is that the Northern Kingdom of Israel (Ephraim) has joined forces with Syria (Aram) and their two kings have waged war against Judah. So far, they haven't been victorious, however, the threat remains, and King Ahaz is afraid. Isaiah tries to tell him to trust in God, because the alliance between Israel and Syria is simply going to fall apart. Ahaz instead turns to their common enemy, Assyria, for help against the alliance. He refuses to ask for a sign from God because he has already made up his mind what he will do. As Israel had abandoned their belief in God, they had to be punished and the prophets gave stern warnings of impending judgement, with a call to national

repentance, but God in His grace promised to save a small remnant – although the nation would have to pass through an extended period of trial and be dispersed among the nations. God sent a message of hope to Israel despite their persistent unbelief and blasphemous idolatry. That the Lord Himself would give them a sign, which would authenticate the arrival of His anointed Saviour – the Seed of the woman, the Messiah of Israel and royal descendent of the great king David – and He would save His people from their sins. What a glorious pronouncement was made on that day. What wonderful hope we find in God. A God of judgement, yet a God of great mercy, a God who is always with us.

KC

Let us pray,

Immanuel, God, be with us. Be in each part of our lives. In our work and in our fun. In our busy times and our quiet times. In our thoughts and in our choices. As Christmas comes: Immanuel, God be with us. Amen.

WEDNESDAY 1 DECEMBER 2021

Isaiah 9:6-7

For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. The government will rest on his shoulders. And he will be called: Wonderful Counsellor,^[a] Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷His government and its peace will never end. He will rule with fairness and justice from the throne of his ancestor David for all eternity. The passionate commitment of the LORD of Heaven's Armies will make this happen!

Isaiah was speaking during a time of great darkness in his life. Isaiah was a God-fearing Israelite living amongst a people who were living a pagan lifestyle, with the King of Judah even going as far as installing a kind of pagan shrine in the Temple. He had been dazzled by the glitz of the pagan shrines in Assyria. The purity of God's house had been compromised. It was into this darkness that Isaiah spoke his very powerful prophecy, poignant for Isaiah's generation, reaching towards God's ultimate purpose in sending Jesus as the light of the world, alongside all of the other titles used in this passage. We all love to receive a compliment, but the names used in this passage are more than just a compliment. They speak of

Majesty and Justice and Peace that will ever end. Ideas that speak of something beyond. But they also speak of a Wonderful Counsellor, which brings to mind something a little more intimate. A friend who is ready to be present and listen with patience and love to whatever darkness we may be experiencing at that time. Only his understanding of us and of our situation is already perfect and complete. Life can be very overwhelming at times, with God feeling very far away. This period of waiting during advent allows us to take some time to regain focus and perhaps get a different perspective as we celebrate with those who saw the coming of the Messiah from ancient times, and we prepare to celebrate His coming once more. Even when we struggle and feel surrounded by darkness may we always remember 'His government and its peace will never end'.

LM

Let us pray,

Dear Lord Jesus, you are my wonderful counsellor, always ready to listen, you are my mighty God, supreme and majestic, powerful and all-knowing. Jesus, you are my Prince of Peace, may your grace fill my life and your love enfold me each day. Amen.

THURSDAY 2 DECEMBER 2021

Isaiah 11:1-5

Out of the stump of David's family^[a] will grow a shoot—yes, a new Branch bearing fruit from the old root. ²And the Spirit of the LORD will 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. ³He will delight in obeying the LORD. He will not judge by appearance nor make a decision based on hearsay. ⁴He will give justice to the poor and make fair decisions for the exploited. The earth will shake at the force of his word, and one breath from his mouth will destroy the wicked. ⁵He will wear righteousness like a belt and truth like an undergarment.

Amid destruction, Isaiah's prophecy was filled with hope. Amid disappointment, it spoke out expectancy that a new beginning was coming. This new beginning would still be rooted in the Kingdom of David, the Kingdom that was Israel's pride and joy. This new beginning was what the

people of God clung too through the many generations of trial and struggle. When we then turn to the gospels, we see that they paint a picture for their readers of how Jesus is the truth of this new beginning. Matthew's genealogy traces the branch of Jesus to the root of David, and as he goes on to share story after story, we see that Jesus fulfils all the expectations that the people have been waiting for. These words of prophecy show us once again, this God who is at work bringing all things together. A God of hope and expectation. Perhaps you feel like you are in a time of waiting at the moment; hear Isaiah's words of expectation as your invitation to trust God in the waiting, knowing that he is still faithful and good.

CP

Let us pray,

Lord, in times of waiting and in times of disappointment, may we be reminded of your faithfulness. And as we are reminded, may we find strength and hope to face each day. Amen.

FRIDAY 3 DECEMBER 2021

Isaiah 40:3-5

Listen! It's the voice of someone shouting, "Clear the way through the wilderness for the LORD! Make a straight highway through the wasteland for our God!"⁴ Fill in the valleys, and level the mountains and hills. Straighten the curves, and smooth out the rough places.⁵ Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together. The LORD has spoken!"^[a]

What did that "voice" say? What did he call on his audience to do? "Prepare the way of the LORD." The instruction becomes more specific: ". . . make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, the crooked places shall be made straight and the rough places smooth." The idea is taken from the practice of Eastern monarchs, who, whenever they entered on a journey or an expedition, especially through a barren and unfrequented or inhospitable country, sent forerunners or heralds before them to prepare the way. To do this, it was necessary for them to provide supplies, and make bridges, or find fording places over the streams; to level hills, and

construct causeways over valleys, or fill them up; and to make a way through the forest which might lie in their intended line of march. Filling up valleys and removing the tops of mountains seems like a lot of work for one man. Why are we to do this? So that "the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together."

So here is a message of comfort and hope (40.1). The people have served their sentence and a new future beckons in which 'the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all nations shall see it'. John the Baptist was one man "crying in the wilderness," yet he prepared the way for the Son of God. Each of us, in our daily lives, interact with family, co-workers, neighbours, and others who may know little or nothing of God and His Word. Our words and deeds could well pave the way for any of them to answer God's call. Each of us has opportunities to set an example that will affect their lives, hopefully in a positive way. In this way, each of us is a forerunner, marking and improving the trail through the way we live our lives. To whom are you proclaiming the glory of God too?

KC

Let us pray,

Heavenly Father, who is there like you in heaven or earth? You are a God of mercy and justice, who levels the mountains and fills the valleys. We thank you that in Christ there is now a level playing field, free from all the obstacles that may keep us from knowing you. By the power of your Holy Spirit, empower us to walk the straight path of truth, justice, and equality. In Jesus' name. Amen.

SATURDAY 4 DECEMBER 2021

Micah 5:2

^aBut you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, are only a small village among all the people of Judah. Yet a ruler of Israel, whose origins are in the distant past, will come from you on my behalf.

This verse is well known because of the prediction that the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem. The amazing thing about Micah is that he reasserts the certainty of this promise not at a time when Israel is rising to power but at a time when Israel is sinking toward oblivion, however, God will find a way

to deliver his people. Why Bethlehem? Why would the Messiah be born in Bethlehem a minor town and not Jerusalem? Because Bethlehem was the City of David, the birthplace of King David and a small humble place. Only our God could choose such a place for the birth of a tiny baby, the birth of his son, who would change the course of history, indeed changing eternity. Bethlehem had always been a small, out-of-the-way place. It was not the magnificent city of commerce, politics and religion that Jerusalem was. When thinking of a place for the Saviour to be born, Bethlehem was one of the last places anyone would think of – anyone except God. God never overlooks the possibilities that lie within a person, situation or place. When God is in it, he can make amazing things happen from the humblest of circumstances. We are speaking of a ruler whose origins are in the distant past. The Messiah would perhaps be born in Bethlehem, however, there has never been a time when he has not existed for, he exists in eternity. The coming ruler was to be no ordinary individual with Micah reiterating that he would be both God and human. May that both astound and comfort you in equal measure today.

LM

Let us pray,

Dear Lord, King of the Universe you were born in the humblest of places, help me to be humble. Lord, King of the Universe may I worship your Majesty. Amen.

SUNDAY 5 DECEMBER 2021
The second Sunday of Advent

As we enter in to the second Sunday of Advent, we pause for prayer. Take a few moments to be still and quiet, to light your own advent candle, and to offer up this advent prayer. May the stillness of this moment draw you in to this wonderful season of Peace. Let us pray:



A candle burns,
the sign of your Word.
God of the prophets,
come to us again this Advent.
May your Word be a lamp to
our feet and a light on our path.
Amen.

David Hamflett
(‘A Candle Burns’, *Candles & Conifers*, Wild Goose Publications ©2005)

As you remain in the stillness, pray specifically about those who need to know God’s direction at this time. Pray for clarity and wisdom in decisions, and for strength and courage to walk boldly in the path of God. Finish your time of prayer by offering thanks to God for the people who journey alongside you in life.

Luke 1:5-25

⁵ When Herod was king of Judea, there was a Jewish priest named Zechariah. He was a member of the priestly order of Abijah, and his wife, Elizabeth, was also from the priestly line of Aaron. ⁶ Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous in God's eyes, careful to obey all of the Lord's commandments and regulations. ⁷ They had no children because Elizabeth was unable to conceive, and they were both very old. ⁸ One day Zechariah was serving God in the Temple, for his order was on duty that week. ⁹ As was the custom of the priests, he was chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰ While the incense was being burned, a great crowd stood outside, praying. ¹¹ While Zechariah was in the sanctuary, an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the incense altar. ¹² Zechariah was shaken and overwhelmed with fear when he saw him. ¹³ But the angel said, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah! God has heard your prayer. Your wife, Elizabeth, will give you a son, and you are to name him John. ¹⁴ You will have great joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the eyes of the Lord. He must never touch wine or other alcoholic drinks. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even before his birth.^[G] ¹⁶ And he will turn many Israelites to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ He will be a man with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children,^[G] and he will cause those who are rebellious to accept the wisdom of the godly." ¹⁸ Zechariah said to the angel, "How can I be sure this will happen? I'm an old man now, and my wife is also well along in years." ¹⁹ Then the angel said, "I am Gabriel! I stand in the very presence of God. It was he who sent me to bring you this good news! ²⁰ But now, since you didn't believe what I said, you will be silent and unable to speak until the child is born. For my words will certainly be fulfilled at the proper time." ²¹ Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah to come out of the sanctuary, wondering why he was taking so long. ²² When he finally did come out, he couldn't speak to them. Then they realized from his gestures and his silence that he must have seen a vision in the sanctuary. ²³ When Zechariah's week of service in the Temple was over, he returned home. ²⁴ Soon afterward his wife, Elizabeth, became pregnant and went

into seclusion for five months. ²⁵ “How kind the Lord is!” she exclaimed. “He has taken away my disgrace of having no children.”

Luke begins in his birth narratives with the miraculous and surprising conception of John the Baptist. The one who would prepare the way for the Lord. Once again, we see the fulfilment of prophecy spoken long ago, but we also hear of an excitement for what is about to come as God’s plan is being put into place. The angel declares that there will be much joy and gladness, and many will rejoice in John’s birth. Gabriel speaks such grandeur over John’s life saying he will have the spirit and power of Elijah. Such a prophecy would have stirred up hope, not just in Zechariah and Elizabeth, but also in all those who watched John grow and who saw the favour of God upon him. Can you imagine how it must have felt for Zechariah and Elizabeth? This unexpected pregnancy, a spectacular gift from God. Take a few moments and read the passage again, can you sense the excitement and gratitude weaved among the verses? As you think about how God might be at work in your life, can you too sense excitement and gratitude within yourself for God’s presence and blessings towards you?

CP

Let us pray,

Gracious and good God, we are so thankful for how you bless us each and every day. Open our eyes to see your presence more evidently in our lives and fill us with excitement and praise. Stir up hope among us, we pray. Amen.

TUESDAY 7 DECEMBER 2021

Luke 1:26-38

²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. ²⁸ Gabriel appeared to her and said, “Greetings, ^[d] favoured woman! The Lord is with you!^[e]” ²⁹ Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. ³⁰ “Don’t be afraid, Mary,” the angel told her, “For you have found favour with God! ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son,

and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ And he will reign over Israel^[1] forever; his Kingdom will never end!" ³⁴ Mary asked the angel, "But how can this happen? I am a virgin." ³⁵ The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So, the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God. ³⁶ What's more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she has conceived a son and is now in her sixth month. ³⁷ For the word of God will never fail.^[2]" ³⁸ Mary responded, "I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true." And then the angel left her.

Mary receives Gabriel's words in wonderment: "Greetings, favoured woman! The Lord is with you.' But despite this she was still perplexed and pondered what sort of greeting this might be." What Mary was about to hear has changed the aeons of time forever. To a young woman engaged to Joseph come the words of comfort and promise: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus." The name "Jesus" would have special meaning for her and all Israelites, because it is derived from a Hebrew word that means "Saviour" and signifies the promise of one who saves God's people. Not only will Mary conceive a child, but the child will play a special role in the salvation of all God's people. The proclamation of who Jesus is has to be one of the most exalted in all scripture: "He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High, The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!" In Jesus, the fulfilment of the ages has come. The Messiah, so longed for in the history of God's people, brings together the reign of David and the promise of life to the family of Jacob/Israel. Thus, it is no wonder that Mary responds: "How can this be? The wonderful exchange between Mary and the angel Gabriel continues to express God's pure and simple gift to Mary, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So, the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God." Within this single verse, we have the basis of why the Christian faith is centred in the triune God. All three persons are present in the God we

confess as “the Most High,” in Jesus Christ “the Son of God,” and the overshadowing presence of “the Holy Spirit.”

KC

Let us pray,

Dear Lord, Give us a heart like Mary’s. An expectant heart that believes your promises and awaits their fulfilment. A humble heart that realizes nothing can be done to earn your favour. Help us follow her example and place ourselves in your hands. Enable us, gracious God, to listen as Mary listened and to give ourselves fully and humbly and joyously to that which you call us to do. And whether it be dramatic or mundane, may we reflect your wonderful love for each of us and serve the world your Son came to redeem. We ask this in his name. Amen.

WEDNESDAY 8 DECEMBER 2021

Matthew 1:18-25

¹⁸This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Joseph, to whom she was engaged, was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement^[h] quietly. ²⁰As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. “Joseph, son of David,” the angel said, “do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. ²¹And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus,^[i] for he will save his people from their sins.” ²All of this occurred to fulfil the Lord’s message through his prophet: ²³“Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel,^[i] which means ‘God is with us.’” ²⁴When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife. ²⁵But he did not have sexual relations with her until her son was born. And Joseph named him Jesus.

As we continue our journey through advent we see Mary, who we know has received and agreed to a shocking request from God. A request which made life a little difficult, putting her in the spotlight and causing Joseph,

to whom she was betrothed, question their relationship. However, Joseph also goes on to accept that this was a very special job that he and Mary have been chosen for. We learn today that Advent is about knowing that ‘God is with us’ all the time and wants to be a part of every aspect of our everyday lives. Immanuel is a title that we hear a lot at this time of the year but what does it actually mean for us today? The coming of Jesus into the world in Bethlehem is all about God stepping into our human condition. He comes to be with us in whatever circumstance we find ourselves, but often we only hunger for his presence when we are facing a big or a difficult issue. It’s as if ‘Immanuel’ only applies when we have a tricky situation and desperately need help. This, however, is not what it means, if we know Jesus as, Immanuel – God with us, it should apply to the whole of our lives not just when we need some extra help. This advent may we celebrate that God is always with us, journeying with us in every part of our life, from the big to the small, the important to the unimportant. May we try to be mindful of his presence in our everyday.

LM

Let us pray

Christ is with me, Christ is in me, Christ walks beside me. Dear Lord, we thank you that you journey with us through the highs and lows of life, help me to be aware of your presence with me this day and every day. Amen.

THURSDAY 9 DECEMBER 2021

Luke 1:39-45

³⁹A few days later Mary hurried to the hill country of Judea, to the town ⁴⁰where Zechariah lived. She entered the house and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹At the sound of Mary’s greeting, Elizabeth’s child leaped within her, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴²Elizabeth gave a glad cry and exclaimed to Mary, “God has blessed you above all women, and your child is blessed. ⁴³Why am I so honoured, that the mother of my Lord should visit me? ⁴⁴When I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. ⁴⁵You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said.”

This scene is filled with a sense of celebration and joy. Both these women are in receipt of some spectacular gifts from God as they carry their precious and miraculous babies. Also within this scene is a great expression of faith. Both Mary and Elizabeth have grown up holding on to the expectation of a Messiah. This hope and expectation are built in to the story of their ancestors and they will have heard the prophecies of old of a Messiah. Now, here they both are living out those prophecies, and trusting in them. When Elizabeth expresses to Mary, 'Who am I that the mother of my Lord should visit me?' It shows the believe and faith that Elizabeth had. These women are united in faith, hope, expectation, and celebration. Verse 45 in the NIV Bible is translated: 'Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfil his promises to her!' I find this verse both beautiful and challenging. It is beautiful in how it acknowledges the faith of Mary, trusting and living out God's plan. It is challenging, for it beckons me to ask would I/do I have the same such faith? Ready to trust and believe and walk boldly in the plans of God regardless of where that may lead. May we all have faith like these women, and may such faith cause us to have great celebration.

CP

Let us pray,

Giving God, give us a faith like Mary and Elizabeth. A faith that trusts in your miraculous power. A faith that summons courage, and that is fuelled by celebration. Amen.

FRIDAY 10 DECEMBER 2021

Luke 1:46-56

⁴⁶ Mary responded, "Oh, how my soul praises the Lord. ⁴⁷How my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour! ⁴⁸For he took notice of his lowly servant girl, and from now on all generations will call me blessed. ⁴⁹For the Mighty One is holy, and he has done great things for me. ⁵⁰He shows mercy from generation to generation to all who fear him. ⁵¹His mighty arm has done tremendous things! He has scattered the proud and haughty ones. ⁵²He has brought down princes from their thrones and exalted the humble. ⁵³He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away with empty hands. ⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel and remembered to be merciful. ⁵⁵For he

made this to Abraham and his children forever.”⁵⁶ Mary stayed with Elizabeth about three months and then went back to her own home.

Mary’s beautiful song of praise is commonly called the Magnificat, from the Latin for “magnify.” Mary magnifies the Lord, proclaiming God’s greatness and rejoicing in God as Saviour. She begins with God’s actions in her own life, for in choosing her to be the mother of the Messiah, the Mighty One has indeed “done great things for” her. Elizabeth has just welcomed and honoured her, saying, “blessed is she who believed.” Now she recognises with awe that not only Elizabeth, but all generations will call her blessed. In our culture #blessed has become a meme, and “feeling blessed” makes regular appearances in Facebook posts. People tweet images or post pictures of themselves enjoying a delicious meal or an exotic holiday or a shopping spree at their favourite store. “Blessed” has come to mean living a life of privilege and comfort. Using the term has become a way of celebrating those moments when everything is going well, and all seems right with the world — or at least one’s own little corner of it. The blessedness that Mary celebrates stands in stark contrast to our culture’s view. By our standards she does not look at all blessed. God has chosen her to be the mother of the Messiah, but in practical terms what does that mean for her? She is not from a family that can afford expensive food or clothing. She is a nobody, a peasant girl from a small village. Her friends and neighbours see her as a disgrace because she is unmarried and pregnant. The God she celebrates is not content merely to point people toward heaven; God’s redemptive work begins here on earth. God fills the hungry not only with hope, but with food. Rather than being satisfied with comforting the lowly, Mary’s Lord lifts them up, granting them dignity and honour, a seat at the table and a voice in the conversation. Both in Mary’s song and in Jesus’ ministry we see the God who *loves* us as we are but does not *leave* us as we are. Mary’s song magnifies the Saviour who loves the whole world with a love that makes creation whole. The mother of the Messiah has experienced God’s blessing. She is not #blessed. Her blessing, like ours, is a cross-shaped blessing, “a condition of complete simplicity (costing not less than everything)” as T. S. Eliot so memorably said, yet bringing true freedom, the priceless gift of God’s salvation.

KC

Let us pray,

Oh Lord, thank you that your Word is as good as done. Your methods are astonishing and brilliant and accomplish so much more than our minds can conceive. May we, like Mary, be willing vessels of your work and an instrument to sing your praise. Amen.

SATURDAY 11 DECEMBER 2021

Luke 1:57-66

⁵⁷ When it was time for Elizabeth's baby to be born, she gave birth to a son. ⁵⁸ And when her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had been very merciful to her, everyone rejoiced with her. ⁵⁹ When the baby was eight days old, they all came for the circumcision ceremony. They wanted to name him Zechariah, after his father. ⁶⁰ But Elizabeth said, "No! His name is John!" ⁶¹ "What?" they exclaimed. "There is no one in all your family by that name." ⁶² So they used gestures to ask the baby's father what he wanted to name him. ⁶³ He motioned for a writing tablet, and to everyone's surprise he wrote, "His name is John." ⁶⁴ Instantly Zechariah could speak again, and he began praising God. ⁶⁵ Awe fell upon the whole neighbourhood, and the news of what had happened spread throughout the Judean hills. ⁶⁶ Everyone who heard about it reflected on these events and asked, "What will this child turn out to be?" For the hand of the Lord was surely upon him in a special way.

In the majority of circumstances, the arrival of a baby is a celebrated and joyful time for the family. This case was no exception, as John was a much longed-for and desired addition to the family. The people around Elizabeth and Zechariah couldn't understand why they chose the name, but it was of course in obedience to God whose hand was upon John. Even on the day of his birth God had great plans for John! As the great and historic promises, we have already looked at were about to be fulfilled, God needed someone to get things ready. The fact that the Lord's hand was with him from birth shows us that God would constantly be guiding and directing him. Are we aware of and responsive to God's touch in our lives? In a very real way, the Lord's hand is with each of us. He is constantly reaching out to support us, guide us and to bless us and others through us. If we are

responsive to the hand of God upon us, he will use us as his hands and feet in our community and across the world.

LM

Let us pray,

Dear Lord, stretch out your hand to guide us, stretch out your hand to support us, stretch out your hand to bless us, guide us in your ways along the narrow path. Amen.

SUNDAY 12 DECEMBER 2021

The third Sunday of Advent

As we begin this third week of Advent, we start with prayer.

Take a few moments to be still and quiet, to light your own advent candle, and to offer up this advent prayer.

May the stillness of this moment draw you in to this wonderful season of Joy. Let us pray:



A candle burns,
the sign of our faith.
God of the Baptising One,
come to us again this Advent.
May we have a faith that
renews our lives. May we live
in the light of your promises.
Amen.

David Hamflett

(‘A Candle Burns’, *Candles & Conifers*, Wild Goose Publications ©2005)

As you stay in an attitude of prayer, particularly think upon those known to you who may be struggling at this time. Name them before God.

Pray that the light of his presence might shine brightly in their lives.

Finish your time of prayer by offering thanks to God for his continued provision of strength and comfort.

Luke 1:67-80

⁶⁷ Then his father, Zechariah, was filled with the Holy Spirit and gave this prophecy: ⁶⁸ "Praise the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has visited and redeemed his people. ⁶⁹ He has sent us a mighty Saviour^[1] from the royal line of his servant David, ⁷⁰ just as he promised through his holy prophets long ago. ⁷¹ Now we will be saved from our enemies and from all who hate us. ⁷² He has been merciful to our ancestors by remembering his sacred covenant— ⁷³ the covenant he swore with an oath to our ancestor Abraham. ⁷⁴ We have been rescued from our enemies so we can serve God without fear, ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness for as long as we live. ⁷⁶ "And you, my little son, will be called the prophet of the Most High, because you will prepare the way for the Lord. ⁷⁷ You will tell his people how to find salvation through forgiveness of their sins. ⁷⁸ Because of God's tender mercy, the morning light from heaven is about to break upon us,^[1] ⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide us to the path of peace." ⁸⁰ John grew up and became strong in spirit. And he lived in the wilderness until he began his public ministry to Israel.

I will admit that I don't often see dawn breaking in the morning time, however, I do recall one Easter Sunday morning in the South of Ireland watching the sun rise above the sea as we gathered to worship. Something about the light breaking through that cold grey morning made a lump form in my throat. Suddenly everything that had been in shadows, began to be made clear and visible as the light of the sun filled the skies. That morning, the power of light struck me afresh. The shadows could not linger, the cold of the darkness could not hold its ground, for light was more powerful. As Zechariah proclaims this prophecy over John, he points to the Morning Light that is still to come, the One who would give light to those in darkness. Such light came to the world in Jesus. In his presence, the darkness has no power, and the shadows cannot forever linger. This is the truth of Christ... for you... because of God's tender mercy. Sometimes our days can feel like they are encased in shadows; sometimes they may even feel a little too dark, and our souls are cast down. If today feels like that to you, be reminded... the Morning Light has come, and his light in your life is to lift your face to hope, and to renew your strength. So, lean into him today.

Let us pray,

Gracious God, shine your light into the dark places of our lives. Expel the shadows of darkness. Reawaken our hope and restore our strength as we stand in the promise and the light of Christ. Amen.

TUESDAY 14 DECEMBER 2021

Luke 2:1-7

At that time the Roman emperor, Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire. ²(This was the first census taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³All returned to their own ancestral towns to register for this census. ⁴And because Joseph was a descendant of King David, he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, David's ancient home. He travelled there from the village of Nazareth in Galilee. ⁵He took with him Mary, to whom he was engaged, who was now expecting a child. ⁶And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. ⁷She gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them.

If there ever was a time for God to show His majesty and glory around an event it was the birth of His only Son, Jesus. John the Baptist was born with a grand announcement at the temple in Jerusalem. He was born to a righteous priest. Jesus was different. His birth was more secluded and quiet at least from an earthly perspective. What seems to everyone around Joseph and Mary is that this is just another ordinary couple expecting an ordinary baby who live in an ordinary little town in Judah. However, what seems ordinary from a human perspective, is actually very extraordinary. What seemed mundane from an earthly perspective, caused all of heaven to turn out and sing. The birth of Jesus is a lesson in God's faithfulness, but it also reveals God's heart and character, as God identifies with the human race. The humblest birth for the most exalted figure ever born shows that the key values of life are found in the life itself, not in the trappings that come with life.

Let us pray,

Lord, we thank you that the waiting is over. We thank you for the sense of new life and new beginning which, if we allow it, will envelop us all. We remember that Jesus was dependant on his earthly parents, and we thank you for the people around us who depend on us, and on whom we can depend. Thank you that Christmas is a time when we can catch up with people and relax and rejoice in their company. Bless us Lord, as we come together. Amen.

WEDNESDAY 15 DECEMBER 2021

Luke 2:8-20

⁸That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. ⁹Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, ¹⁰but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. ¹¹The Saviour—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! ¹²And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger." ¹³Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying, ¹⁴"Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased." ¹⁵When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go to Bethlehem! Let's see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." ¹⁶They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger. ¹⁷After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. ¹⁸All who heard the shepherds' story were astonished, ¹⁹but Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often. ²⁰The shepherds went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. It was just as the angel had told them.

There is something particularly special that some of the first people to be told of Christ's birth were shepherds. They were not wealthy or influential, in fact they were probably considered to be the lowest of low. But

shepherds held a special place in God's heart. For generations, the Jews had regarded God as the true Shepherd of the people of Israel. The writer of Psalm 23 compared him to a 'good shepherd' and the prophets also saw the Messiah as someone who would have the same qualities of care and compassion as a good shepherd. Isaiah wrote, 'See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm...He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms, and carries them close to his heart...' (Is 40:10-11) Jesus fulfilled this prophecy when he proclaimed himself as the Good shepherd who knows his sheep in John 10. Jesus is like a good shepherd to us because he will never leave us. The good shepherd had many important roles, but most importantly he always stayed with his flock. No matter what dangers lay ahead, nor what wild animals approached, he always stayed with the flock. When sheep are troubled, they look up to see if the shepherd is near and if they can't see him, they become uneasy and panicked. The shepherd's presence to them means security and peace. Today, welcome Jesus into your life as your Shepherd, who will always stay with you, to guide you, bringing security and peace.

LM

Let me pray,

Dear Lord, help me to recognise you as my Good Shepherd always looking to you and knowing that you bring security and peace into my life. Amen.

THURSDAY 16 DECEMBER 2021

Luke 2:21

²¹ Eight days later, when the baby was circumcised, he was named Jesus, the name given him by the angel even before he was conceived.

When expectant parents are preparing for their new arrival, they give a lot of thought and discussion to what name to give to their child. It's a big responsibility, after all, that name will be spoken over them their entire lives. Sometimes names are chosen to honour other relatives, sometimes chosen because they hold a significant meaning, sometimes simply chosen because the name is liked. Do you know the story behind your own name? Well, Mary and Joseph didn't need to spend a long time considering what

name to give their child, as the name had already been given to them. The angel said to Joseph, 'you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' Although the name Jesus was more common in that era than we might expect, this child was to embody what the name stood for. In this child, salvation would be found for all people. As the gospels continue to reveal to us the story of Christ, they also illustrate for us the power that lies in this name of Jesus. For example, in John 14:13 Jesus says, 'You can ask for anything in my name, and I will do it, so that the Son can bring glory to the Father.' The name of Jesus was not about simply identifying Jesus from others around him. His name was power, it was prophecy; it was, and is, salvation and freedom for all who believe. There is a worship song written by Will Reagan and its lyrics proclaim, 'There is power in the name of Jesus, to break every chain.' What chains do we need broken in our lives by the power of the name of Jesus? As this child is named, the salvation plan of God is in action. The chains of the sin and evil are going to be broken by the power of his name. For here is the Son of God, the Messiah, the Chosen One, come for you and for I. May you be captivated and therefore released because of the power of Jesus today.

CP

Let us pray,

Mighty God, Saviour, Redeemer, Lord and Friend, may we know the power of your name this day. Set us free to love and to worship. Fill us with a boldness to proclaim the power of your precious name. Amen.

FRIDAY 17 DECEMBER 2021

Matthew 2:1-12

Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. About that time some wise men^[a] from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, ² "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose,^[b] and we have come to worship him." ³ King Herod was deeply disturbed when he heard this, as was everyone in Jerusalem. ⁴ He called a meeting of the leading priests and teachers of religious law and asked, "Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?" ⁵ "In Bethlehem in Judea," they said, "for this is what the prophet wrote: ⁶ 'And you, O Bethlehem in the land of Judah, are not least among the ruling cities^[c] of Judah, for a ruler

will come from you who will be the shepherd for my people Israel.^{4[d]}”⁷ Then Herod called for a private meeting with the wise men, and he learned from them the time when the star first appeared.⁸ Then he told them, “Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child. And when you find him, come back and tell me so that I can go and worship him, too!”⁹ After this interview the wise men went their way. And the star they had seen in the east guided them to Bethlehem. It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was.¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were filled with joy!¹¹ They entered the house and saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.¹² When it was time to leave, they returned to their own country by another route, for God had warned them in a dream not to return to Herod.

Epiphany marks the first manifestation of Jesus to the Gentiles. It signals that God loves Gentiles as well as Jews—that God’s plan of salvation includes Gentiles too. The story in Matthew can be divided into five scenes: the arrival of the magi (1-2); Herod’s alarm and consultation of the priests and scribes (3-6); Herod’s request of the magi (7-8); the magi’s visit and adoration of the Christ child (9-11); and the departure of the magi (2:12). Today we celebrate the ‘Feast of the Epiphany’. An ‘epiphany’ is a manifestation or revelation. There are several in the gospels. We use the word in everyday language to describe a moment of sudden realisation. This epiphany is the moment in the Gospel of Matthew where the Christ-child is introduced, both as the fulfilment of the Old Testament Scriptures, and as the answer to the search of the wise men. It is an exotic and dramatic account. Philosophers, or perhaps astrologers, from a foreign country come to the centre of the Jewish faith to find out about a new king. In the process, they accidentally arouse Herod’s fear, which leads to the horrific murder of innocent children. Their joyful discovery of Jesus with their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh contrasts with Luke’s account of the visit of the humble shepherds. Jesus, in this account, is presented as the fulfilment of wisdom. Journeys themselves are massively important in the Scriptures. Jesus himself, in the gospels, seems to be on one long journey from Bethlehem to Jerusalem. Journey is really a symbol of the search for faith and wisdom through our lives. The wise men go on their

own amazing journey in search of wisdom and kingship. They come to one king asking for the 'King of the Jews', a phrase not used again until Pilate asks such a question in Matthew 27.11. Both the star they followed, and the gifts presented, are signs of kingship. Their journey is beautifully described in the famous TS Eliot poem 'The Journey of the Magi'. (www.allpoetry.com/the-journey-of-the-magi). They find it in a very unlikely place, a poor little 'backwater' of no importance, called Bethlehem. And they find it in an unlikely form, a baby born to a peasant woman and a simple carpenter.

We sometimes confuse wisdom with knowledge. We presume the clever and the powerful are also wise. Jesus, in his ministry, will go on to show that the greatest wisdom is about human relationships.

KC

Let us pray,

Amazing God, this is the day when visitors arrived to give gifts to your son. They knew of his greatness through what they had been told and yet they saw the vulnerability of the helpless baby. The child Jesus became the refugee, the student, the workman, the teacher, the one who died so that we may live. Dear Jesus, you used your greatness to give us the ultimate gift of hope. We offer our thanks and praise for all that you have done. Amen.

SATURDAY 18 DECEMBER 2021

Matthew 2:13-15

¹³After the wise men were gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up! Flee to Egypt with the child and his mother," the angel said. "Stay there until I tell you to return, because Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." ¹⁴That night Joseph left for Egypt with the child and Mary, his mother, ¹⁵and they stayed there until Herod's death. This fulfilled what the Lord had spoken through the prophet: "I called my Son out of Egypt."^[e]

The birth of a baby would seem harmless to most ordinary people. But the baby we have been talking about, Jesus, is a baby who poses such a threat to the most powerful man around. Herod the Great thought nothing of killing members of his own family and so it would cause him no sleepless

nights to kill a whole village full of other babies in order to try and get rid of the one that many regarded to be a royal pretender. But Joseph receives a warning from an angel that they must return home through Egypt to keep his new family safe, to keep the newly born Messiah safe. This made Jesus, Mary and Joseph and the wee donkey refugees in Egypt. Before the Prince of Peace had learned to walk and talk, he was a homeless refugee with a price on his head. Something that we don't often consider as part of the Christmas story and yet the bible is full of men and women who knew what it meant to be refugees, Abraham, Moses and Jacob as well as the whole nation of Israel in Egypt and Babylonia. But this was to be how scripture was fulfilled, this was how Israel's redeemer was to appear; this is how God would set about liberating his people – again and bring justice to the whole world. If he is to be Immanuel, God-with-us, he must be with us where the pain is. He understands better than we ever could, what 84 million people (*UNHCR.org*) who are currently displaced in the world are going through because as a child he experienced the same thing. Do we feel uncomfortable when we hear statistics like that, do we feel uncomfortable when we walk past someone who isn't clean because they don't have a home? Maybe that's ok, because God didn't have his son, who was born to be the saviour of a broken humanity, born into comfort and luxury. God defends the fatherless, the widow and the alien because he understands. Where are the people of God who demonstrate his compassion?

LM

Let us pray,

Dear Lord, teach me compassion, help me to see through your eyes those who are homeless and displaced remembering Christ's words, 'when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me'. Amen.

SUNDAY 19 DECEMBER 2021

The fourth Sunday of Advent

As we enter this final week of Advent, we pause to pray.
Take a few moments to be still and quiet, to light your own advent candle,
and to offer up this advent prayer.
May the stillness of this moment draw you in to this wonderful season of
Love. Let us pray:



A candle burns,
the sign of your love.
God of Mary, come to us
again this Advent.
May the light of your love be
born anew in us.
Amen.

David Hamflett

(‘A Candle Burns’, *Candles & Conifers*, Wild Goose Publications ©2005)

As you remain in prayer, pray specifically about those who need to know
how loved they are.
Pray for an assurance that each are loved as a precious child of God.
Finish your time of prayer by offering thanks to God for the love which he
has shown to you.

Matthew 2:19-23

¹⁹ When Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt. ²⁰ "Get up!" the angel said. "Take the child and his mother back to the land of Israel, because those who were trying to kill the child are dead." ²¹ So Joseph got up and returned to the land of Israel with Jesus and his mother. ²² But when he learned that the new ruler of Judea was Herod's son Archelaus, he was afraid to go there. Then, after being warned in a dream, he left for the region of Galilee. ²³ So the family went and lived in a town called Nazareth. This fulfilled what the prophets had said: "He will be called a Nazarene."

Within these few short verses, we read of a family living in fear. Doing what they could to protect their son, for his life was at risk. I wonder how that must have felt for this newly wed couple. Yet the priority for these parents was the safety of their child. As I read this passage and thought about the risk they initially lived under, I couldn't shake the image from the news several months ago, of a tiny infant being passed across a razor wire fence to the arms of a US soldier in Afghanistan. It was an image that captured the attention of many for it seemed to sum up the fear of what was to come, and the risk that many faced under the rule of the Taliban. The parents of this child wanted safety and opportunity for their baby, so they were prepared to do what was necessary, even at great personal cost. That's the sense we get of Mary and Joseph as we read of this time of threat and danger. We also get a sense of their discerning trust in God. They choose their direction, and place their steps always guided by visions or messages from God. What incredible faithfulness and obedience we find in them as they guard the life of a vulnerable child, who would be Saviour of the world. I'm struck by these two ordinary parents, unknown and unnoticed in terms of grandeur or status, yet living out faithfulness and courage in their devotion to God... and just look at what God entrusted them with! Could it be that God might want to entrust our ordinary selves with such wonderful work of his kingdom? Can we show the same devotion, courage and discernment as these two ordinary parents?

CP

Let us pray,

Lord you use what is ordinary and you create something extraordinary. May we be inspired by the faithfulness of Mary and Joseph and be courageous enough to believe that you may want to use us ordinary people in extraordinary ways. Give us a discerning ear to walk in the direction which you lead. May we be ready to sacrifice our comfort for the sake of your Kingdom, for you Lord, must be our first focus, for you, are our only reward. Amen.

TUESDAY 21 DECEMBER 2021

Luke 2:22-38

²² Then it was time for their purification offering, as required by the law of Moses after the birth of a child; so, his parents took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. ²³ The law of the Lord says, “If a woman’s first child is a boy, he must be dedicated to the LORD.”^[a] ²⁴ So they offered the sacrifice required in the law of the Lord—“either a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”^[b] ²⁵ At that time there was a man in Jerusalem named Simeon. He was righteous and devout and was eagerly waiting for the Messiah to come and rescue Israel. The Holy Spirit was upon him ²⁶ and had revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. ²⁷ That day the Spirit led him to the Temple. So, when Mary and Joseph came to present the baby Jesus to the Lord as the law required, ²⁸ Simeon was there. He took the child in his arms and praised God, saying, ²⁹ “Sovereign Lord, now let your servant die in peace, as you have promised. ³⁰ I have seen your salvation, ³¹ which you have prepared for all people. ³² He is a light to reveal God to the nations, and he is the glory of your people Israel!” ³³ Jesus’ parents were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them, and he said to Mary, the baby’s mother, “This child is destined to cause many in Israel to fall, and many others to rise. He has been sent as a sign from God, but many will oppose him. ³⁵ As a result, the deepest thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your very soul.” ³⁶ Anna, a prophet, was also there in the Temple. She was the daughter of Phanuel from the tribe of Asher, and she was very old. Her husband died when they had been married only seven years. ³⁷ Then she lived as a widow to the age of eighty-four.^[c] She never left the Temple but stayed there day

and night, worshipping God with fasting and prayer. ³⁸ *She came along just as Simeon was talking with Mary and Joseph, and she began praising God. She talked about the child to everyone who had been waiting expectantly for God to rescue Jerusalem.*

In this passage we read how Mary and Joseph take Jesus to be presented in the Temple, where Simeon and Anna recognise the promised Saviour and confirm the words of the angels from before he was born: ‘they shall name him Emmanuel, God with us’ (Matthew 1.23); ‘you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High’ (Luke 1.31-32); ‘the Saviour, the Messiah’ (Luke 2.11). Named Jesus when he was just eight days old, Mary and Joseph’s first son is presented to God in the Temple (which was at the centre of Jewish life) a month after his birth. This family ceremony, which would have included an ancient Jewish custom, the presentation of an offering to redeem (buy back) a firstborn son. Mary and Joseph take Jesus to the Temple in accordance with Jewish tradition to present their son to God and there Simeon and Anna identify Jesus as the saviour, the Messiah. The individuals in this story are named, unlike many others in the gospels, helping us to identify them and feel we know them better. Anna and Simeon represent strong links with both past and future. We may assume that Simeon was a priest at the Temple and that Anna’s family tree (the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher) reaches back to the origins of Israel’s twelve tribes. Simeon recognised Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah. His poem represents a vision of salvation for all people, Gentiles and Jews (Isaiah 49.6: He says, “You will do more than restore the people of Israel to me. I will make you a light to the Gentiles, and you will bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.”): he sees Jesus as Saviour. Anna recognises him as the Redeemer of Jerusalem (v. 38). Names are significant in Scripture and today. In Isaiah 43.1 the Lord says, ‘I have called you by your name, you are mine’. We are identified by name and called as individuals to be God’s people.

KC

*Let us pray,
Lord, we come before you now with awe and thanksgiving in our hearts.
The God who spoke to Simeon and Anna, you speak to us today. We’re listening, Lord. Amen.*

Luke 2:39-40

³⁹ When Jesus' parents had fulfilled all the requirements of the law of the Lord, they returned home to Nazareth in Galilee. ⁴⁰ There the child grew up healthy and strong. He was filled with wisdom, and God's favour was on him.

These two short verses are the last we hear of the small child Jesus, until we hear of his Passover journey to the temple in Jerusalem when he is 12. There are many years that are not accounted for from returning to Nazareth to the beginning of Christ's ministry with only a short description of time spent in the Father's house. It can be very tempting to add our own details, wondering what the child Jesus was like. Was he a typical young boy who loved to climb trees and get dirty but avoided a bath at all costs? Did he ever question why his mum was asking him to do something? Was he a grumpy teenager? Did his local Rabbi know who he was teaching? It must have been an overwhelming job at times for Mary and Joseph knowing that they were raising the son of God. Did they ever worry that they were doing things wrong, did they ever doubt their suitability for the job? What we do know is that he grew up physically, healthy and strong, he literally had to grow as a part of the creation he had helped to put in place, learning to walk and talk and all that comes with being human. He grew up mentally, filled with wisdom learning from his mother, carpentry skills and more from Joseph and learning the Torah at synagogue, and he grew up spiritually as God's favour was upon him. Learning more about his heavenly Father and the role that he was to play in the redemption of humanity. Do we take time to grow and develop looking after ourselves physically, mentally and spiritually? May this advent season be an opportunity to grow in our relationship with God as we prepare to welcome the Christ child.

LM

Let us pray,

Dear Lord, reveal yourself to me as I seek you this advent, may I come to know and understand you a little more each day. Amen.

Luke 2:41-52

⁴¹Every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. ⁴²When Jesus was twelve years old, they attended the festival as usual. ⁴³After the celebration was over, they started home to Nazareth, but Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents didn't miss him at first, ⁴⁴because they assumed he was among the other travellers. But when he didn't show up that evening, they started looking for him among their relatives and friends. ⁴⁵When they couldn't find him, they went back to Jerusalem to search for him there. ⁴⁶Three days later they finally discovered him in the Temple, sitting among the religious teachers, listening to them and asking questions. ⁴⁷All who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸His parents didn't know what to think. "Son," his mother said to him, "why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been frantic, searching for you everywhere." ⁴⁹"But why did you need to search?" he asked. "Didn't you know that I must be in my Father's house?"^[d] ⁵⁰But they didn't understand what he meant. ⁵¹Then he returned to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. And his mother stored all these things in her heart. ⁵²Jesus grew in wisdom and in stature and in favour with God and all the people.

It's amazing to think through this story and realise that for three days Mary and Joseph were searching for Jesus. Can you imagine the panic in those parents? If the same story happened today, we would see the face of the missing child on social media and news screens, and everyone would be worried about the worst-case scenario. When they find Jesus, however, he is not frantic, or disturbed, rather, he is calm and contented in discussion in the temple. Mary's reaction seems fairly justified! Jesus' reply seems somewhat surprising. It is unapologetic, yet not in a rebellious way. It assumes that these earthly parents would know that he is found at home with his Father. This is Luke's first narrative that allows us to hear from Jesus himself. No longer a tiny infant being spoken over or spoken about, but now an independent young man, filled with wisdom, stature, and favour, who is already amazing those around him. It hints to us of what is about to come, whilst also affirming that this child is no ordinary child, for

he is the Son of God. Do we find ourselves at times being like Mary and Joseph, feeling like Jesus is absent from us, or feeling like we are searching for his presence? Perhaps life has become a challenge and we yearn for that wisdom and favour that comes from hearing from Christ. Perhaps, this story might remind us today that we need not search, for we can find him in his Father's house, and we can find him among the pages of Scripture. Meeting him in worship, prayer, and study, this is where he is found. This is where he awaits for us. Will you find him today?

CP

Let us pray,

Lord Jesus, may we find your presence today in worship, prayer and study. May we be filled with your wisdom and blessed by your favour as you bring a stillness and contentment to our hurried lives. As we search for you, may we be found in you. Amen.

FRIDAY 24 DECEMBER 2021

Mark 1:1-11

This is the Good News about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.^[a] It began² just as the prophet Isaiah had written: "Look, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, and he will prepare your way."^[b] ³ He is a voice shouting in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the LORD's coming! Clear the road for him!'^[c] ⁴ This messenger was John the Baptist. He was in the wilderness and preached that people should be baptized to show that they had repented of their sins and turned to God to be forgiven. ⁵ All of Judea, including all the people of Jerusalem, went out to see and hear John. And when they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River. ⁶ His clothes were woven from coarse camel hair, and he wore a leather belt around his waist. For food he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ John announced: "Someone is coming soon who is greater than I am—so much greater that I'm not even worthy to stoop down like a slave and untie the straps of his sandals. ⁸ I baptize you with^[d] water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit! ⁹ One day Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, and John baptized him in the Jordan River. ¹⁰ As Jesus came up out of the water, he saw the heavens splitting apart and the Holy Spirit descending on him^[e] like a

dove. ¹¹ And a voice from heaven said, “You are my dearly loved Son, and you bring me great joy.”

Mark’s Gospel begins with a declaration: ‘This is the Good News about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. It began.’ To explain who Jesus is, Mark needs to explain how he relates to those who came before him. A figure called John the Baptist had appeared in the wilderness. The people were drawn to John, but he said that someone greater than he would follow after him. To explain John’s role in the story, Mark turns to the Scriptures, the writings loved and respected by the people. Mark quotes from the prophets Isaiah and Malachi: they speak of one who will cry out, preparing the way of the one who is to come. John appears from the wilderness, a place that would have been understood by those listening as a place of intimate relationship with God. John is someone who has taken time to listen to God. But John isn’t someone who sits on the side-lines thinking and praying. He speaks out, and this gets him into trouble, ultimately leading to his death. When we pray and read the Bible and hear the news, are there things that make us want to cry out? What stops us from doing so sometimes?

KC

Let us pray,

Advent God, we are your messengers sent – like John – to prepare the way for your coming. As we go about, may we herald in words and actions your love, your healing and your forgiveness. Amen.

SATURDAY 25 DECEMBER 2021

John 1:1-18

In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He existed in the beginning with God. ³ God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him. ⁴ The Word gave life to everything that was created,^[a] and his life brought light to everyone. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it.^[b] ⁶ God sent a man, John the Baptist,^[c] ⁷ to tell about the light so that everyone might believe because of his testimony. ⁸ John himself was not the light; he was simply a witness to tell about the light. ⁹ The one who

is the true light, who gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He came into the very world he created, but the world didn't recognize him. ¹¹ He came to his own people, and even they rejected him. ¹² But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. ¹³ They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God. ¹⁴ So the Word became human^[d] and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness.^[e] And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son. ¹⁵ John testified about him when he shouted to the crowds, "This is the one I was talking about when I said, 'Someone is coming after me who is far greater than I am, for he existed long before me.'" ¹⁶ From his abundance we have all received one gracious blessing after another.^[f] ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses, but God's unfailing love and faithfulness came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God. But the unique One, who is himself God,^[g] is near to the Father's heart. He has revealed God to us.

HAPPY CHRISTMAS: WELCOME LORD JESUS

There is no better way to end our advent journey than with this beautiful passage from John's gospel. John's gospel is the only one that takes us right to the beginning of time with his opening line. And what, or who, was this Word that existed with God before all creation. Jesus of course, and he not only already existed but he existed as an intimate part of the Godhead. Matthew gives us Jesus' earthly genealogy proving his humanity in his family roots and Luke gives us historical references to place Jesus in real time. So, it is of great importance that John has now set Jesus in the context of eternity. He is part of the God who is I AM, the God who was and is and is to come. John Chrysostom explained John 1 in a beautiful way, 'A heavenly way of life has been implanted on the earth, angels communicate with men without fear, and we now hold speech with angels. Why is this? Because God is now on earth and man in heaven; on every side all things commingle. He has come on earth, while being fully in heaven; and while complete in heaven, he is without diminution on earth. Though he was God, he became man, not denying himself to be God. Though being the unchanging Word, he became flesh that he might dwell among us.' My prayer for you today is that you would know Christ in a very real way as you

celebrate his coming so many years ago and as we look forward to him coming once more to bring all of creation together.

*Veiled in flesh the Godhead see,
Hail, the incarnate deity
Pleased as Man with men to dwell,
Jesus, our Emmanuel. (C Wesley)*

LM

*Let us pray,
We welcome you Jesus, we welcome you in to our homes and in to our lives,
help us to live as your children, knowing that you came to earth to dwell
with and in us for evermore. Amen.*

A Prayer for Christmas Day

Whether today be a day filled with celebration, or a day filled with sorrow, carve out some time to be still and to pray.

Take a few moments in the quiet, to light your own Christ candle, and to offer up this prayer.

May you know God's presence with you.



A candle burns,
the sign of your presence.
God amongst us, born as one
of us, may we live in the light
of your presence, the Light
who gives life to all.
Amen.

David Hamflett
(‘A Candle Burns’, *Candles & Conifers*, Wild Goose Publications ©2005)



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