

Advent 1 - Waiting in the dark

Notes on the Gospel reading

● Jesus warns his disciples that life will not always be easy. In fact, he makes it very clear that there are times when it will be scary and hard. The warning works on two levels. For those listening to Jesus, or hearing this story in the decades that followed, it is a very real and contemporary one as they lived through the destruction of the Temple in AD 66–70. But it is also a warning for all Christians, that there will be times of devastation in life. Jesus makes it very clear that no matter how bad things get, how many things change and disappear, his words and his promise will always remain.

● The story that Jesus tells of servants waiting for their master to return is a reminder that his followers need to be ready. The use of the word 'ready' is significant. It is an active word. We aren't just waiting around for Jesus to come back: we have to be on the lookout, engaged with our faith. This passage poses the question of whether we will be faithful when God seems distant, and hopeful when situations seem hopeless.

Watch and wait

On a sheet of paper, draw a timeline showing the weeks and months of the year ahead. Think of some things you are waiting for during the coming year (as trivial or as important as they like) and mark them on the timeline. Use the timeline as a prompt to prayer for the occasions and any people who might be involved, and that God will help you 'watch and wait' through difficult times in the coming year, confident in the promises of Jesus.

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Questions for reflection

- ▶ How would you describe this image?
- ▶ What moments of 'light in the darkness' have you experienced?
- ▶ When times are dark, what keeps you watching and waiting?



A prayer of adoration

God, your name is Love, and in your great love you have called us into community with each other. With you and in you and because of you, we are nurtured in love. Yours is the name that lasts for ever. Your love reaches into all corners, confirming those who wait for you – that they wait in the name of Great Love. Amen.

A prayer for others

*We pray for
those who have waited for years for the dawn...
those for whom hope seems dim...
those whose morning brought the unexpected...
those struggling to adjust to new realities...
those whose fires have grown dim...
those who are ignoring the signs of the times...
those who are struggling to keep awake...*

A personal prayer

God of light and night, you are to be found, whether at dusk or dawn. Sometimes the light seems far, and the night seems long. May I find comfort, whether in the soft night, or the kind dawn, knowing that you created both, and you wait for me, as I wait for you. Amen.

Live your faith

Keep a birthday cake candle close to hand. If, at any time, the darkness gets too much for you, light the candle. Then, before blowing it out, say the personal prayer above.

Advent 2 - What happens in the wilderness...

Notes on the Gospel reading

- Mark starts his Gospel with the line: 'the beginning of the good news of Jesus', but we don't meet Jesus straight away. We meet John the Baptist who is a messenger, just like Isaiah. Both are offering messages of hope.
- John is in the wilderness – a word that suggests somewhere hard, barren and empty, a tough place to live. But it is also free from the distractions of everyday life – a space to get ready to meet Jesus. This is the kind of space we should aim to create through our Advent preparations.
- Movement is also important in this passage. John appears in the wilderness and people from the Judean countryside and Jerusalem go to meet him. At Advent, there is call for us to move as well, from the people we once were towards being followers of Jesus.
- The movement away from the Temple in Jerusalem to the wilderness relates to John saying that real repentance will happen out in the wilderness – a reminder that if we really want to be changed, we can't settle for safe rituals. Rather, we must take a risk and be vulnerable.

Preconstruction survey

Reflecting on the journey from 'here and now' to the fullness of the 'kingdom of God', and noting things that need to be knocked down or built up for the kingdom to be built up, make a planning chart – or add to last week's timeline, if you made one – of some achievable practical steps that you might take over the coming year. A household could do this as a group activity.

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Questions for reflection

- ▶ Why do you think Mark began his Gospel with John the Baptist?
- ▶ If you want to tell someone about Jesus, where would you begin?
- ▶ How would you summarise the gospel in one sentence?



A prayer for others

We pray...
For those lost in valleys:
may they be lifted up.
For those stuck in the heights:
may they be helped down.
For those in barren places:
may they find shelter.
For those in rough places:
may they hear eternal words.
For those seeking forgiveness:
may they find it.
For those seeking apology:
may they hear it.
For those waiting for a long time:
may they find patience in your patience.
For those waiting for renewal:
may there be springs of growth.
Amen.

A personal prayer

God of timelessness, you speak of eternity and the things that do not fade. In all the busyness of my week, the importance of small things, may I find time for the things that will last for ever, especially loving-kindness. Call me deeper into small moments where I can find the light of love in unexpected places. Because you are always to be found in unexpected places. Amen.

Live your faith

Recalling Jesus' time in the wilderness, find/make time this week (ideally, about an hour) to disconnect from the world (e.g. turn off your phone; sit quietly or go for a walk alone). Try not to think too much; just listen for God.

Advent 3 - Mystery of the Messiah

Notes on the Gospel reading

● John the Baptist is repeatedly asked to explain who he is. Only after the fourth question does he offer an answer, and even here his response is cryptic. This reluctance to answer suggests that John is aware that he is the signpost to someone greater. He knows that the excitement his presence has caused is nothing compared to the man who will follow him, and he seeks to point towards Jesus rather than focus on himself. This in turn creates a sense of searching and expectation. He looks forward with hope.

● In this third week of Advent, we come close to discovering the nature of the coming Messiah, yet we still don't know exactly who he is. The final answer that John gives the priests and the Levites is to reveal that the one coming after him is in fact already among them. For John it would have been literally true, but for us, on the other side of the resurrection, we must ask whether we live as if the Messiah is always among us. How does this shape the way we live?

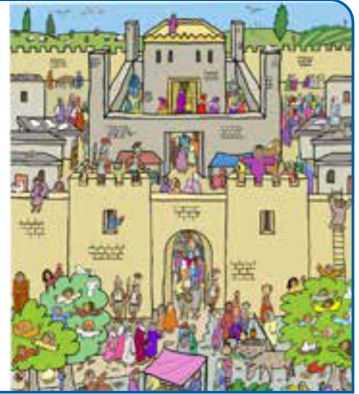
The invitation

Make an invitation acceptance using a postcard/A5 piece of blank card. Write on it: 'Lord, I receive your invitation to...' then pause. Read 1 Thessalonians 5.16-24 and then Isaiah 61.1. Think about whatever stood out for you from these readings – i.e. what might God be inviting you to do? Write this down to complete the sentence on the card – and use it as a reminder of this and a prompt for prayer.

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Questions for reflection

- ▶ Where would you look to find the Messiah?
- ▶ What would you ask the Messiah if you did find him?
- ▶ If the Messiah could be anyone among us, how should we respond?



A prayer of approach

*Some of us are weary or downhearted.
Still we say: let our hearts be glad, God is always here.
Let us approach God with confidence, because
God has always been with us; let our hearts be glad!
Amen.*

A prayer for others

Lord, we pray today for all who are downtrodden, all who are oppressed, all who know the heavy hand of marginalisation on them. God, we turn to you, remembering the words of Mary, praying that you will lift up the lowly, you will raise the voice of justice, and you will scatter oppression. May all who are oppressed be set free. We ask this in joy and gratitude – and in your name.

Lord, we pray that we might find rhythms of life that sustain us here. Rhythms for cultivating and renewing the earth; human community; justice; and creativity. We ask this, in joy and gratitude – and in your name. Amen.

A personal prayer

*In my moments of weariness, or meekness, or pressure,
I know God is here.*

In my moments of pride, I know God is here.

In my moments of demand, I know God is here.

God is here, always, already, at once.

*Holding, sustaining and creating a new creation,
in me, in us, in all. Amen.*

Live your faith

Every day, make a conscious effort to consider: Where do you see Jesus among us today (especially, in places or people where you might not expect to see him)? Recall the words of Isaiah 61.1 (have them written on a small card) – what is God calling you to do today?

Advent 4 - God's ridiculous plan

Notes on the Bible readings

- The emphasis on God's choice of the lowliest in society is one of the most striking aspects of Luke's Gospel. A teenage girl, with no wealth or status, from an out-of-the-way part of the world, stands at the heart of God's plan to transform the world. This transformation is not found in a great show of strength, but rather through the birth of a baby – an everyday and common occurrence.
- Mary's relative Elizabeth is also part of the plan. Elizabeth is vulnerable through being an older, childless woman. But here too is a miracle of birth. God entrusts this whole plan to the bodies of two women, and in this, both God and the women take on a considerable risk.
- Thus, we read of the radical overturning of power, the confident sharing of power and then the chosen risk in God's plan to entrust the Messiah to the vulnerable body of a young woman. How often do we consider God's plan for our own lives to be 'ridiculous'? And how often are we prepared to take a risk, to be part of God's plan?

God of the impossible

Music and images for reflection and prayer. Listen to the song 'Breath of Heaven (Mary's Song)' (by Amy Grant, available on iTunes, Spotify, etc.). At the same time, search the internet for and look at images of the Nativity. Think about how Mary responded to God – an ordinary girl called to do something extraordinary – and consider whether God is calling them to do something that might seem impossible.

Questions for reflection

- ▶ What does this image say to you?
- ▶ A young couple, a pregnant teenager – how might you have reacted?
- ▶ If God was to turn your life upside down, how might that help you think and do things differently?



A prayer of approach

God, you approached the world in the words of an angel asking consent, and bringing life unexpected. Now we approach you, in the joy of welcome knowing that you will never turn us away. We celebrate you as we turn to you, glad that we are gathered for the feast of kindness and courage. Amen.

A prayer for others

We pray that this Advent season might, in the midst of demand, provide soft nights and ease, so that people can return to themselves, knowing you, too, are always in the heart, and always wait for us with kindness.

We remember today all who have not given their consent, but whose lives and bodies and integrity are taken for granted. For them, we pray for justice, reparation and truth.

We remember, O God, that you surprised us by coming among us through the 'Yes' of Mary. Let us always be open to the surprise of finding God in unexpected places.

We ask this, in the name of all that is good. Amen.

A personal prayer

Sometimes I say yes, and sometimes I say maybe, and sometimes I say no, and sometimes I am too distracted to know what I'm being asked. Help me, O God of time, to find and make time for all the demands that come my way, so that I might say yes with joy, when I can. Amen.

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Live your faith

Look for opportunities to be strong, to express strength, or to convey a strong message, through a gentle action/response.