

The Message ...



A Whole New World



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Acknowledgement:

There's A New World Coming: An Advent Journey, John van der Laar, Sacredise.

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT



Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11

Reflection:

This wonderful prophecy of restoration was claimed by Jesus as the mandate for his ministry. It is a rich picture of liberation, upliftment, care for the earth and justice for all. It may be tempting to over-spiritualise this prophecy, and Jesus' use of it, but that would be to misread both Isaiah and Jesus. The Reign of God which Jesus preached and lived, is not only about getting our internal worlds right with God. It is also about getting our world right according to God's dream for justice and love. And, when we begin to live according to God's dream, we experience a joy and vibrancy like that of a couple on their wedding day!

In what ways do you see Jesus living up to this dream in his own life and

ministry? How does this view of Jesus' mission change your understanding of who Jesus was and what he came to do? As we draw closer to the celebration of Christmas, how does this vision change your view of this important day?

- In your own life, how can you follow Jesus in this work of bringing freedom, restoration and joy to others?
- How have you experienced God's liberating work in your own life?
- What one small liberating thing can you do for someone else today?



Prayer:

O God, when I think about the struggles and injustices in the world it all feels so overwhelming.

It's exciting to think that Jesus came to bring love and justice to our world, but when I recognised that you call me to follow Jesus, and that this means I must share in this liberating work it gets very scary. But I can share in your work.

I may not be able to change the world, but I can change my heart.

I can make a difference in the lives of my loved ones, my neighbours, my friends.

Help me, Jesus, to take every opportunity I get to be a channel of love and justice today. AMEN.

THIRD MONDAY OF ADVENT



1 Kings 18:1-18

Reflection:

Elijah was called to be a prophet at a dark time in Israel when it looked like the forces of evil had the upper hand. But, as this story shows, even among the evil king's servants were good people, committed to God's ways, who continued to serve and save others. The challenge for the faithful Obadiah, though, was to trust God and Elijah enough to risk his life for the sake of God's purposes. He did this, firstly, through secretly protecting and caring for the prophets who were being threatened, and secondly, by bravely carrying Elijah's message to a very angry king. He may seem like an insignificant player in this great drama, but Obadiah, through his simple faithfulness, made a significant difference.

We live in a time of great turmoil in our world, and, while most of us will not have our lives threatened for following Christ, we will find that if we seek to live out our faith, we will be called to make some tough sacrifices and do some really difficult jobs. It is

here that our faith is really shown for what it is. It is natural for us to question and doubt, to wrestle with God and to be afraid. But, if our faith is genuine, we will, in the end, step up and live out what we believe. This may mean speaking out when it would be easier to stay silent or staying silent when it would be easier to speak. It may mean standing up to those in authority over us when they act like bullies in order to defend others, and it may mean giving up some of our privilege or comfort so that others may be more comfortable. Whatever the call, if we can trust in God's presence and purposes in our lives, we will find the courage to respond faithfully.

- What tough choices is God calling you to make today?
- How can your faith help you to do the right thing?
- How can you commit now to living courageously and faithfully each day?



Prayer:

God, the world is a tough place to live.

There are struggles, disasters, and conflicts everywhere, and it can be hard to know what you are calling me to do.

But, in the small daily decisions I make to live faithfully, or to hide my faith, I either allow you to work through me or not.

Teach me the courage to put my faith into action

and to co-operate with your grace and love and justice each day in whatever small ways I can. AMEN.

THIRD TUESDAY OF ADVENT



Psalm 125

Reflection:

This Psalm, taken at face value, is both comforting and difficult. The comfort comes from the reassurances that it offers of God's protection and care. The difficulty lies in the fact that we don't always experience those assurances in our own lives. Many people of deep faith do not find themselves to be secure, and we all find ourselves, at least at times, ruled over by those we could consider wicked.

But the truth of this Psalm becomes clear when we place it in the context of the Advent season, and of the reality of God's reign. In this setting, our security is not about outward circumstance, but about our sense of being part of God's life and God's purposes, which ensures that, no matter what our circumstances may be, we know the sustenance and care of God. In this setting, we are never ruled over by those who are wicked, because we are really only ruled over by God and by the

principles of God's reign - no matter who our national, corporate or religious leaders may be. Advent is all about recognising the truth of this Psalm's message - that God surrounds us, and cares for us, and is the final authority and frame of reference for our lives. When we say Jesus is Lord we are making the revolutionary claim that no one else is Lord, regardless of their status, position or capacity to impact our lives. When we submit to God's reign, we know true security and liberty!

- In what ways are you feeling insecure in your life?
- How does the message of Christ's lordship offer you greater security and comfort?
- In what ways can you share this security with others in your family, your church and your neighbourhood?



Prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ, it's easy to say the words that acknowledge your authority, but it is when I allow the truth of it to sink into my heart that the power of your reign really makes the difference in my life. When I realise that nothing can separate me from your love, and that it is only your reign that really rules over me, I find a deep security and a comforting reassurance that gives me the strength to face whatever this world may throw at me. So, today I pray that your reign may take hold of me even more, and that I may learn even more to recognise your presence that always surrounds me. AMEN.

THIRD WEDNESDAY OF ADVENT



Mark 9: 9-13

Reflection:

John the Baptist was - and is - a mysterious figure. When he was challenged about who he was, he refused to say anything other than that he was the voice in the wilderness. He denied that he was Elijah returned (John 1: 21), and yet Jesus here is clearly referring to John when he says that Elijah has come. Perhaps Luke's Gospel helps us when, announcing John's birth, the angel tells Zechariah that he will have the spirit and power of Elijah (Luke 1: 17).

This is not a reincarnation of the prophet, but rather a manifestation of a ministry that is akin to the Old Testament messengers of God. But, in spite of this, the people failed to recognise God's calling and anointing on John, and he was persecuted and executed like many prophets before him.

In spite of all this, John was the first to acknowledge that he was

unimportant in himself. It was his message that counted, and the One who would come after him. And he was willing to give his life to get people ready for the Coming One, and to ensure that when Jesus came, the people would be able to receive the life he offered them. For John it was all about the message, and all about Jesus. Who John himself was, was completely beside the point. What a challenging example he sets for those of us who now seek to follow Jesus and participate in God's reign.

- In what ways does John challenge and inspire you?
- In what ways does his willingness to sacrifice himself frighten and/or encourage you?
- What can you do today to make Jesus and his message more visible and important in your life?



Prayer:

God, I like things to be about me. I am very aware of my needs and desires, my longings and dreams. I like to think that things are working out for my benefit and that my faith in you is a guarantee of a full, comfortable life. But then I am faced with people like John, and I realise that it's not about me. Yes, you love me and seek what is best for me. Yes, you promise me abundant life. But that life is found not by indulging my wants, but by laying my life down for the sake of your reign. Help me to learn, O God, that my greatest joy, my most meaningful life, is found when I stop making it about me, and start making it all about you. AMEN.

THIRD THURSDAY OF ADVENT



Hebrews 1: 1-4

Reflection:

The writer to the Hebrews is bold to proclaim Jesus as God's ultimate communication, and the ultimate manifestation of God's grace and glory. It is this Jesus that is proclaimed during the Advent season, and for whom we are to prepare. John the Baptist, who prepared the people of his time for Jesus' coming, must have had some sense of what the writer to the Hebrews knew. He may not have been able to communicate it in the same way, but he would have agreed that all the prophets had simply been the opening act in preparation for the coming of Christ.

In the same way, God continues to give us preparatory people, seasons and objects that set the scene for the coming of Christ into our lives. Theologians speak of the

grace of God that works to prepare us for God's coming into our lives as prevenient grace - the grace that goes before us. There is always prevenient grace at work in our lives and in our world, and the season of Advent is one of the tools that prevenient grace uses. Other tools are the Bible, other people, circumstances and experiences that point us to God's presence and activity in our lives and in our world.

- Where do you see God's prevenient grace at work in you and in your world?
- As we draw closer to Christmas, how is God preparing you for a new encounter with Christ?
- In what ways can you allow God's prevenient grace to work in you even more, and to work through you to prepare others?



Prayer:

God of Grace, thank you that you are always speaking, always coming to me, always reaching out to me. Thank you for your grace that works in my life even when I don't see it or know it.

And thank you that even when I don't think you can, you use me to show your grace to others.

Please lead me deeper into your grace this Advent,

and prepare me for the coming of Christ into my world again. AMEN.

THIRD FRIDAY OF ADVENT



2 Samuel 6: 12-19

Reflection:

As a result of some strange and disturbing events the Ark of the Covenant - the box that represented God's Presence with the Israelites - had been stored at the home of a man called Obed-edom for a time. And in that time, Obed-edom had experienced great blessing. As a result, King David becomes determined to take the Ark to Jerusalem - perhaps so that the entire nation could enjoy the blessing of God's presence again. As the Ark was brought into the city the joy that David felt overflowed him and he could not stop himself from dancing. He stripped down in order to remove all the trappings of his royal authority and show that, before God, his kingship was unimportant - he was just a human being like all others. Possibility this is why his wife Michal, who was a daughter of the previous king, Saul, and who had been raised as part of a royal family, was so offended. Perhaps, unlike David, she was unwilling to give up her privilege and authority even for God. Perhaps, as is often the case when people are

faced with a humility they don't understand or can't embrace, all that was left to her was to mock the devotion of her husband.

The Advent season is rather like this for us. We celebrate the presence of God who, like the Ark, comes into our world and our lives. For those who have known the power of God's presence, the only appropriate response is humble celebration and thanksgiving. Some may view our joy as foolish, naive or even delusional. Some may be offended by our willingness to strip ourselves of our pride in devotion to God. But whatever others may say about us, when we have known the presence of God, we can do no other.

In what ways have you experienced the joy of God's presence in your life?

- How has this joy moved you to humble celebration?
- Have you felt the pressure of others to downplay your devotion to God?
- In what ways does this Advent season challenge you to be more devoted and passionate in your worship?

Prayer:



God, your presence is a mysterious, wonderful, joy-inspiring thing. I am constantly awed by the unexpected joys, the breath-taking beauty and the humbling power of your presence in my life. Thank you for all of these blessings, and for this Advent season that reminds me of them. Forgive me when I allow others to embarrass me into hiding my love for you, O God. And help me to be gracious to those who may choose to mock because they have not yet understood the incredible joy of your coming into their lives. AMEN.

THIRD SATURDAY OF ADVENT



John 7: 40-52

Reflection:

As the old saying goes, —there's none so blind as those who will not see. The religious leaders in this passage are a clear example of the truth of this statement. They had become so convinced that they knew the only correct way to interpret the Scriptures, and that they knew exactly how God operated that they were completely blind to what God was doing through Jesus. In spite of the power of his teaching, and the amazing things he was doing, their closed hearts and minds made it impossible for them to recognise God's coming. They were so sure that the Bible said that the Messiah could not come from Galilee that they looked no further. They didn't check out Jesus' story, nor did they question their own assumptions, and as a result they missed the boat completely.

It's an easy trap to fall into - and we all do at some point in our lives. Whenever we are tempted to follow the example of another well-known cliché - I've made up my mind; don't confuse me with the facts - we run

the risk of missing God's surprising presence. God will not be domesticated to our agendas, and God will not fit into our assumptions or interpretations. The Scriptures are given to point us to Jesus, but when they blind us to God's activity or God's coming, they have become an idol. We do well to follow the example of Nicodemus who, unlike the other religious leaders, was willing to investigate, to meet with Jesus and to open his heart and mind to the possibility that he had something new to learn.

- In what ways might you be allowing your certainty and assumptions to blind you to God's surprising presence and activity in your life?
- In what ways might you be allowing the Bible, or your interpretations of it, or the influence of some leader, to close your heart and mind to God's unexpected coming?
- How can you let go of your assumptions and open yourself to the new thing that God is doing in your world?



Prayer: Although I sometimes forget it, God, you cannot be controlled by my agendas or expectations. Although I may be disturbed or surprised by it, God, you don't avoid doing unexpected things, or coming in unexpected ways, or working in and through unexpected people, for my sake. Rather, you call me to let go of what I think I know, and to be open to your new work, your new coming. Please teach me this Advent to learn to recognise you even when you come to me in ways that I would never have imagined. AMEN.