

The Moment...



A Whole New World



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Acknowledgement:

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

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT



Luke 1: 26-38

Reflection:

We have heard Mary's story so many times that it can be difficult to approach with a fresh mind, free from the years of sermons, assumptions and images that we have accumulated. It may be helpful for you to take a moment to go back and read the passage again slowly, watching for anything that you may be expecting that isn't there, or watching for anything you may have previously missed.

Some time ago there was a song that was popular in my church which affirmed that, — in the presence of the Lord there is peace, love and healing. I believe this is often the case, but not always. In Mary's case, as she was visited by this angelic messenger, we read that she was — disturbed and confused. In my experience, these two feelings are as common in God's presence as love, joy and peace. When we are faced with the presence and purpose of God, it is almost impossible for us not to be challenged, surprised,

confused, disturbed, uncomfortable and even upset. When God comes to us it is always with the intention to change us (which is why Jesus' first sermon was — repent) and to challenge us to become participants in God's work. When God sought to be incarnated in human flesh, God sought out human partners with whom God could collaborate, and Mary, this ordinary teenage girl, was God's primary co-worker.

Nothing has changed. God still seeks partners to share in God's saving work. God still seeks those through whom God can be incarnated into the world (albeit in a different way). God still disturbs, confuses, changes and challenges us when we are confronted with God's presence.

- In what ways have you experienced God's presence as disturbing and confusing?
- In what ways is God asking you to be a collaborator with God in God's saving work this Advent season?



Prayer: God, we like to think of you as gracious and loving — easy to be with, comforting in your presence and reassuring in your coming. But, that's not how Mary experienced you. It's not how many people through the ages experienced you, and it's often not how I experience you. Help me to embrace the disturbance and confusion of your presence, O God, and show me how I can participate in your saving work. AMEN.

FOURTH MONDAY OF ADVENT



1 Samuel 1: 1-18

Reflection:

There are strong resonances between the story of Samuel's birth and that of John the Baptist. Samuel's mother, Hannah, could have no children, but then, in answer to prayer he was born. Elizabeth, John's mother, was also called — barren, but in her old age gave birth to a son. Both John and Samuel were dedicated to God and both of them were marked by their dress and behaviour (Samuel was a Nazirite whose hair was not cut and who never drank wine, and John dressed in skins and ate locusts and honey). And both of these men became forerunners for chosen servants of God — Samuel anointed David as King over Israel and John prepared people for the coming of Christ.

In both cases it was the faithful and humble devotion of the parents in

humiliating circumstances that opened the door for God to work. We need to be careful not to make too strong connections between these stories and our own lives — what is descriptive of an ancient event is not always prescriptive for us. There is no question, though, that when we offer ourselves to God for God's purposes, God always takes us at our word, and the results can be amazingly dramatic, even though our contribution may be very small or common-place.

- What part of your life may God be asking you to offer to God's service?
- How can you make this offering? If you're not sure you're ready to do it yet, is there a way you can begin to prepare your heart so that at some time in the future you will be?



Prayer: God, it's amazing and humbling how you use simple human beings, who are willing to offer themselves to you, to accomplish your purposes. It's also challenging, because I recognise that there are parts of my life — abilities, talents, resources, time — that you ask me to offer to you. This Advent season, may I learn to give myself to you more and more, even as you continue to give yourself to me. And may I learn, in whatever small way I can, to share in your transforming, saving work. AMEN.

FOURTH TUESDAY OF ADVENT



Luke 1: 46b-55

Reflection:

Today's reading is Mary's famous song, known as the Magnificat. It is a strange passage in many ways. In Luke's narrative, it is as Mary arrives at the home of her relatives, and Elizabeth remarks at how the unborn John leapt in her womb at the presence of Mary, that Mary responds with this amazing prayer. The words are strange ones to be coming from an ordinary girl – they are filled with prophetic images of God's justice and mercy to God's people. In a country oppressed by a foreign empire, they were subversive words, but they pointed to the truth of what Christ's coming was all about – ringing the just and loving reality of God's reign into the world.

Read the passage again. What stands out for you? What surprises

or disturbs you? What does this song tell you about Mary, and about the way she was viewed in the new Christ-following community out of which Luke's narrative was written?

Now think about what this means for you. The moment when we celebrate Christ's birth is just days away now, and this passage gives us a glimpse into who this Jesus is and what he came to do. Justice, grace and love were at the heart of Jesus' message and ministry from the very beginning, and as followers of Christ we are called to embrace these values too.

- How can you live them out today in your own life and spheres of influence?



Prayer: O God, the way your Reign is described in the Scriptures – in prayers like Mary's – is beautiful. In what Jesus came to teach and do, I see what the world could be, and I long for it to be like that. But, I know that it starts with me – with my 'yes' to your Reign in my life. And when I give you my 'yes', I know that, like Mary, my ordinary life becomes an extraordinary contribution to the mission of your Reign in the world. AMEN.

FOURTH WEDNESDAY OF ADVENT



Mark 11: 1-11

Reflection:

It is a good exercise to compare Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem with Mary's Magnificat from yesterday. Both give a glimpse of the difference between God's Reign and the power structures of our world. Where human empires dominate by force, God's Reign wins over hearts. Where human empires boast of their power with grand displays, God's Reign is humbly seen in hidden villages, in the lives of young girls, and on the backs of young donkeys. Where human empires take themselves way too seriously, God's Reign is almost laughable in its strangeness and humility.

The truth that is revealed, though, in both of these stories is that God's Reign has a way of spreading through people and nations. It has a way of resisting human force and overcoming, and it has a way of bringing the small things, the least and most insignificant people and creatures, into the centre of things.

- Where do you see the humility and levity of God's Reign at work in your life?
- What small things might God be wanting to shift to the centre of your world?
- What empires might God be seeking to overcome with love and grace?



Prayer: They call you —King Jesus, but the way your — Kingdom appears is not like any other kingdom I've ever seen. There is no pomp, no domination, no force, no boasting. There is just humility, simplicity and love. Teach me to embody the values of your Reign in my life, Jesus, and please undermine any places where the spirit of empire is being seen in me. AMEN.

FOURTH THURSDAY OF ADVENT



Romans 10: 5-13

Reflection:

Sometimes it feels like God is hard to find, and that God's presence is as distant as the stars. Sometimes when we feel like this, we try to protect our relationship with God by reverting to law, by making decisions and drawing to determine who is in and who is out (Paul refers to this as saying who will go up to heaven or who will go down to the place of the dead?). The problem with this reaction, though, is that the legalism and control can never give us the life and liberty of God's Reign. Rather, we are called to faith – the kind of faith that chooses to believe that God's presence, God's word, is near to us even when we don't feel it.

This faith is at the heart of the Advent journey. Advent leads us through stories of people who had every reason to believe they had been abandoned by God, but who

continued to believe. The Old Testament Israelites, the people of Jesus' day, John the Baptist, Mary, Samuel, the New Testament Church – all of these people and groups that we have been reflecting on over the last few weeks had moments when God felt distant, but many of them trusted God anyway, and discovered that God is always available. This is why Paul can confidently assure his readers that anyone who calls on God's name will be saved.

- How can you make the choice for faith in those times when you're not sure if God is still around?
- In what ways can you continually choose to call on the name of the Lord? And help others to do so?
- How can you resist the temptation to legalism and control and embrace the freedom of God's Reign today?



Prayer: Forgive me, God, when I doubt your presence and your love. Forgive me when, in my doubts, I start trying to work out things like who is going to heaven – who is —in – and who isn't, hoping that this will make me feel more secure. Teach me the lesson of simple faith, of always trusting your presence, even when I'm not aware of it. Teach me to call on you at all times, and to be for others the answer when they call. AMEN.

FOURTH FRIDAY OF ADVENT



Zephaniah 3: 14-20

Reflection:

To a people who had been broken and conquered, these words of restoration must have sounded like a wonderful, but distant, dream. Two elements of this prophecy that stand out as I read these words are the promise that God will live with God's people – a promise fulfilled in Jesus – and that God delights in people. The words are celebratory and passionate, and they indicate that God's love is not some cold, vague, sense of wanting our good in the end. Rather, God's love is vibrant, involved and radically powerful. When we hold this against the truth that every judgement that is mentioned in Scripture is brought on to people by themselves, that there were always lots of warnings before the fact, and that the judgements were pretty much always simply the consequences of their short-sighted actions, we can begin to let go of any image of God as an angry

deity waiting to destroy us all when we mess up.

Jesus said that, if we want to know what God is like, we have only to look at Jesus. Jesus in his message and mission, his character and behaviour, shows us the truth about God and the picture is one of infinite, creative grace and love and welcome. In these last few days before Christmas, we have a wonderful opportunity to remember and celebrate this.

- What is your most powerful picture of God?
- Does it match the God that Jesus reveals in the Gospels?
- How does your view of God impact your worship, your faith and your life? How does it change things to realise that God delights in and celebrates you?
- Spend today reminding yourself of this amazing truth!



Prayer: Forgive me, God when I hold on to ideas about you that are unworthy of you – when I think of you as an angry old man on a cloud waiting to punish me when I make a mistake. Please show me how to let Jesus define the way I see you, and please keep reminding me that you delight in me. Of course, this also means that you delight in others, too. Please keep reminding me of that and help me to see what it is in other people that brings you such joy. AMEN.

CHRISTMAS EVE



Isaiah 9: 2-7

Reflection:

At the start of the Advent season the promise to David of an everlasting dynasty was remembered. Now, as the season draws to a close, and we move, finally, to Christmas, the promise is repeated again – this time with a sign of fulfilment in the Child who will be born. Now, as we read this, we cannot help but think of the baby at the centre of the Christmas celebrations. Isaiah, of course, knew nothing of Jesus, but through the ages, whatever these words meant for the people of Isaiah's time, followers of Christ have recognised Christ's birth in Isaiah's prophecy. It is not surprising that we believe that this prophecy was amazingly and universally fulfilled in Jesus.

What is amazing is that the prophecy speaks about a king ruling from David's throne. David was a warrior king, conquering his enemies with force and ruling with the same grand displays and

power-games that every human king has done. But, the way Jesus rules transforms the throne of a warrior king into a place of mercy and justice, peace and comfort. The names of this new ruler are not names that strike fear into the heart. They are names that welcome and inspire us, that reassure and encourage us. And the amazing thing about this new Reign is that nothing can ever destroy it. It can't be conquered by armies or removed by a vote. Once it has taken root in a heart, its influence will always be felt, and its impact on the world will always continue.

- In what ways has this new Ruler taken up residence on the throne of your heart?
- How do the names of Jesus listed in this prophecy challenge and inspire you?
- How can you live more intentionally as a citizen of this Reign this Christmas, and every day?



Prayer: It's amazing God, how you can take the thrones of warrior kings and turn them into seats of gracious and just governments. It's wonderful how you redefine what Rulership looks like, and how you call yourself by names that invite us into your comfort, peace and love. As I celebrate the birth of Jesus – the Baby-God-Monarch – keep me always mindful of how it is Jesus who enables me to live as a citizen of your beautiful Reign. AMEN.

CHRISTMAS DAY



Luke 2: 1-20

Reflection:

Today's reading is another one that is so well known that it is easy to miss the simplicity and power of the story. There are so many Christmas Card embellishments and festive additions that have been added to this story, that our common view of it is pretty radically different from what is actually in the Bible. For example, notice that there is no stable mentioned and that the word for — inn is probably more likely to mean the guest room in the home of a relative than the motel-like establishment we imagine today!

But, when we wipe these embellishments away, what do we have left of the story? We have a God who chooses to incarnate God's Self in a human being. We have a God who works through ordinary people in an ordinary town,

going through the ordinary rituals of hospitality at a difficult time in their country. And we have the invitation to allow this God - and God's purpose - to be the framework of our lives. It's all a cause for incredible celebration which is why it is good for us to party through this season as we do. But, it's also a cause for us to stand in awe at the grace and love of this God, and of the Child who was God Incarnate.

- What is your response to the Christmas story?
- In what ways can you allow moments of awe to break in through the celebrations this Christmas?
- How will the amazing reality of the incarnation stay with you and guide your life in the year to come?



Prayer: If I'm honest, God the truth of Christmas is far more than I can really understand. It makes no sense for God to become human, and for a baby to be God incarnate. It's strange to think that you would enter the world quietly, almost undetected, without any real fanfare or massive display of power and glory. But, this is what you ask us to believe – this is who you ask us to believe you are! Please God, let the truth and the incredible power of your coming sink into my heart and life. Help me to know that when I woke up this morning, I awoke into a completely new world – a world in which God has walked among God's creatures, and walks among us still. AMEN.