



WHAT ARE YOU
waiting
FOR?

**LISTEN TO
YOUR LONGING**

*An Advent and Christmas Guide
for Personal Spiritual Practice
from Sacredise.com*

WHAT ARE YOU
waiting
FOR?

An Advent and Christmas Guide
for Personal Spiritual Practice
from Sacredise.com

John van de Laar

Sacredise
Johannesburg



© Copyright by John van de Laar, 2021

All rights reserved. Permission is granted to make copies of all prayers and liturgies and of all small group and daily devotional resources for congregational use only.

No part of this publication may be copied or transmitted by any means or in any form, outside of fair congregational use, unless prior written permission is received in writing from the publisher.

The ministry of Sacredise is supported through sale of these resources. If you genuinely cannot afford the purchase price, then please contact the publisher at john@sacredise.com for a complimentary copy. If, however, you can afford to buy a copy, please refrain from passing on or making use of unpaid copies of this resource outside of a single congregation. Thank you.

This publication may not be resold, in whole or in part, by any means electronic or otherwise, without prior written permission of the publisher.

SACREDISE PUBLISHING

16 Geelvink Street

Atlasville

Boksburg

1459

South Africa

www.sacredise.com

Cover image by [Enrique Zafra](#) from [Pexels](#)



Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	4
WE LONG TO BE ALIVE (ADVENT 1)	6
WE LONG TO MATTER (ADVENT 2)	13
WE LONG FOR KINDNESS (ADVENT 3)	19
WE LONG FOR ACCEPTANCE (ADVENT 4)	25
WE LONG TO BELONG (CHRISTMAS DAY)	31
WE LONG FOR WISDOM (CHRISTMAS 1)	35
WE LONG FOR TRANSCENDENCE (CHRISTMAS 2)	41
CONCLUSION	46

Introduction

When the world is in turmoil and we become weary, we often begin to feel off-balance and insecure. We want to hope, but we're not sure we can because our hopes have been dashed so many times. We long to go back to a life that feels more 'normal'. We want to relax and laugh. We want the freedom of not having to be always on the alert as we navigate the stress.

The last few years have been a very difficult season. And many of us have found that our faith has come under pressure in ways we've never experienced before. We have learned that we need a stronger, more resilient, and more sustaining spiritual practice.

Advent and Christmas are wonderful opportunities to connect more deeply with the God who came in human flesh. They are designed to lead us into a deeper and richer experience of God's abundant life—if we will just learn the lessons they offer. And if we enter into these seasons intentionally, we can set ourselves up for a richer and more vibrant life in the year ahead.

Advent is a time of waiting and longing. It's a time when we connect more deeply with God's saving purpose. And it's when we place the incarnation of Christ in the context of God's eternal work in our world and our lives. This is the key to unlock the treasures of these seasons.

One of the most important things we can do to maximise the opportunity for growth and health that Advent and Christmas offer is to listen to our longings. When we listen to our hearts, we get in touch with what we really want in our lives. We connect with what would make us feel more fully alive and connected. We discover what really matters to us and what gives our lives a sense of meaning and purpose. And when we've taken note of what our longings tell us, we can then turn to the incarnate Christ to find out how to fulfil those longings! The Jesus who comes to us in Christmas shows us what we need to do to find the abundant life he promised.

WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?

That's why I'm so excited to share this new Guide for Personal Spiritual Practice with you! *What Are You Waiting For?* is designed to lead you on a spiritual practice journey through Advent and Christmas. Each week you will explore one of your primary longings and allow Christ to show the way to fulfilment and abundant life.

Based on the Lectionary readings for Year C (the Gospel of Luke), *What Are You Waiting For?* will take you deeper into the incarnation story and offer practical ways to plan for a deeper and richer life in the year to come.

To get the most out of this guide, you will need to set aside at least ten to fifteen minutes every day. I recommend that you have a journal, or a dedicated document on your phone, tablet, or computer to record your thoughts, questions, and insights. You can also make notes of any specific practical things you want to bring into or change in your life.



If your church is using this journey in your Sunday worship, the content in each week is the same as that which is used to guide the sermon in church. The practices you find in this guide are based on this content and you are invited to return to it throughout the week. The practices themselves are tailored to help you to engage more deeply with the message of the week, and are repeated throughout the week. Some of the practices remain the same or similar throughout the entire Advent and Christmas journey for the same reason.

A REPEATING PRACTICE

Repetition often moves us past an initial, shallow engagement and removes any resistances we may have to more difficult or challenging insights. As we repeat a practice, so our defences begin to relax and the Spirit is able to speak to us in ways that are not possible without the repeated practice. I encourage you not to skip over the repeating parts, but to engage in them with intention throughout the journey.

It is my hope and prayer that *What Are You Waiting For?* will not only be meaningful for you, but that it will be transforming. I believe that a mindful and intentional use of the Advent and Christmas seasons can set us up for a more intentional and meaningful life in the year to come. And that is what I hope this guide will do for you!

May God guide and bless you as you listen to your longings through the twin seasons of Advent and Christmas with *What Are You Waiting For?*

John

We Long To Be Alive

Advent 1

REFLECTING ON SCRIPTURE

SCRIPTURE READING

Luke 21:25-36

REFLECTION

How alive are you in this moment? How attuned are you to the thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations happening within you? How connected do you feel to the world around you? How attentive are you to your loved ones? Take a minute or two and allow these questions to heighten your awareness of yourself and of the life pulsing within you.

If you find yourself feeling vibrantly alive, to what do you attribute that sense? Most of us associate feeling alive with feeling good, energised, inspired, and happy. We love feeling this way and miss it when it's gone. We may even give lots of time and energy to preserving this sense of aliveness. But we all know what it feels like to be less than fully alive. In one sense we need times when we feel sad, tired, or depressed in order to know what aliveness feels like. But it isn't healthy to remain in a perpetual state of lifelessness. We know this and that's why we long to feel alive as much as we can.

There is no shortage of things that can rob us of our most alive and engaged self. The last two years have given us a close up look at many of these things: isolation, insecurity, polarisation, financial stress, misinformation, and threats to our health, to mention a few. We tend to take it for granted that certain events or experiences that we call 'negative' will leave us feeling deadened. But does life have to work that way?

I'm not saying that we can always live in a state of bliss. No one gets through this human experience without tragedy, suffering, and failure. But I do believe that it is possible to navigate life, with all its joys and sorrows, in a way that keeps us alive, alert, and engaged most of the time. And the key to sustaining our aliveness is our miraculous human capacity for hope.

When Jesus' disciples applauded the magnificence of the Temple, they were expressing more than amazement at great architecture. The Temple was not just a building, and it was not just the home of their religious life. It was a symbol of their national identity and a reminder of the time when Israel was a free and prosperous nation under King David. When the disciples praised the Temple they were giving voice to their hope that Roman occupation would end, that a new, free Israelite nation would be established, and that they would return to the glory days of the past. You can imagine how shocked they must have been when Jesus started describing the destruction of the Temple that would surely come.

The disciples must have wondered why Jesus was so callously dashing their hopes. Perhaps they questioned his patriotism and his faith in the God who had promised to deliver God's people



from oppression. But Jesus knew that their hope was misplaced. The Temple could not save them. They would find no life by clinging to symbols of a glorious past. Jesus could see the trajectory the nation was on, and he knew that Rome would not deal kindly with rebellion. And so he challenged them to see the coming struggle and to prepare for it well. He invited them to place their hope in something that gives them a full and vibrant life event in the darkest and most painful times.

As Jesus described the destruction and suffering that would come, he also described another reality that would be at work even in the troubles. Using an image from Daniel's prophecy, he painted a picture of the victorious Messiah returning in glory to the throne room of God. He invited his friends to become aware of God's presence and life permeating their world, unaffected by the machinations of human empires and conflicts.

And then he challenged them to be careful about how they would respond to their changing world: "Don't let your hearts be dulled by carousing and drunkenness, and by the worries of this life." Jesus knew that, when faced with turmoil, we have a tendency to numb ourselves out or get overwhelmed by our anxiety. We are very good at avoiding or denying our pain and losing ourselves in mind-altering substances or momentary experiences of pleasure. Or we allow our fear of suffering to overwhelm us to the extent that we become paralysed. But neither of these strategies lead us to life. And, since we all suffer, we all need to learn more effective ways to live fully even in the midst of our pain. But Jesus didn't just warn against letting our hearts be dulled. He offered some simple, but effective, ways to stay engaged with life even in the face of death.

The first thing Jesus recommends is that we stay alert. It doesn't help us to deny the difficulties we're facing or the disruption in our world. It is useless to embrace a blind optimism that pretends everything is fine even when it clearly isn't. What we need is to observe, listen, and take note of what is happening. We need to understand our reality in order to know how to respond well. And that takes attention and work. It requires us to avoid numbing out or freezing in fear and be intentional about staying alert so that we find the wisdom we need to navigate the chaos.

The challenge of staying alert is that it can overwhelm us when we see the truth of our situation, especially when it is extreme. And so the second strategy that Jesus recommends is to stand and look carefully for the other reality—the presence of God's reign of love and the beauty, truth, and goodness that continues to be revealed around us—in the midst of the upheaval. When we can remember that evil, violence, corruption, chaos, and death do not have the final word in our universe we can cling to hope even in seemingly hopeless circumstances. And we can resist the temptation to give in to the forces of darkness and join the polarisation, hatred, anger, and self-protectiveness that we see around us. When we stand tall and remember the Reign of Love, when we open ourselves to experience the Divine presence and goodness in our toughest times, then we free ourselves to choose a different way. We provide fuel for our hope and we empower ourselves to continue to live in grace, love, and kindness.

But Jesus also knew that we can't respond to crises in the most creative way unless we are prepared. Tragedy almost always strikes unexpectedly and we find ourselves reacting instinctively. In our pain-avoidant world it is unpopular to think about preparing for tragedy. We go through life expecting the best at all times and when turmoil comes we are surprised and convinced that something is wrong with the world. The result is that our responses to turmoil are usually thoughtless, self-protective, and shrouded in fear and negativity. But when we recognise that

suffering is an integral and even necessary part of our human existence, we can prepare ourselves for the worst before it happens. We can free ourselves from the false belief that pain shouldn't happen unless something is wrong and we can teach ourselves to slow down, consider our options, and respond with creativity, compassion, and hope.

Jesus taught that when we try to save our lives we will lose them. This is just the inevitable consequence of allowing our anxiety and fear to keep us from living fully. This is what happens when we become obsessed with protecting ourselves and defending ourselves against people and events that we perceive as threatening. But when we are willing to lose our lives—to risk living fully and releasing our self-protectiveness even when life is tough—then we remain open to hope and love. And that's when we discover that we are truly, vibrantly alive even when our eyes are filled with tears and the world around us is in chaos.

This is not easy. But neither is the alternative. It takes work to stay alert, remember our hope, and prepare well for the struggles ahead. But if we make this work part of our daily spiritual practice—as it should be in any authentic spirituality—then we will find that our longing to be alive can be richly satisfied. And that is a goal worth pursuing.

DAILY SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Repeat this practice every day this week. The preparing, responding, and integrating elements remain the same every day. This repetition enables you to dwell in the practice more deeply through the week and it often opens you to new insights and experiences of God.

The listening part of your practice changes so that each day can focus on a different aspect of the reflection on Scripture. Feel free to use the questions provided to guide you or to follow your own process as you meditate with the reading and the thoughts presented here.

PREPARING

Spend a few moments in silence. Get comfortable and ground yourself in your body. Slow and deepen your breathing and focus on your breath entering and leaving your body. If any thoughts come up, notice them and then let them go. If you need to make a note of anything so that you can return to it later, then do that.

When you're ready, shift your awareness to your emotions, motivations, and longings. The following questions may help you in your reflections:

- How comfortable are you in your life right now?
- What troubles you?
- What excites you?
- What do you hope for in the coming year?
- What do you need to help you feel more deeply and vibrantly alive?

When you feel ready, you may want to offer this, or some other prayer:

Thank you, God, for your life that pulses in me.

Thank you for your Spirit who enlivens and empowers me.

Thank you for your desire, expressed in Jesus, for me to know abundant life.

I open myself to your life that it may fill me and flow through me a little more today.

Amen.



LISTENING

Insert the **LISTENING EXERCISES** for the relevant day at this point in your spiritual practice.

RESPONDING

When you feel ready, spend a few moments responding to your reflections of today. If you have an Advent wreath, light the first Advent candle as a symbol of your commitment to cling to hope.

Spend a few moments meditating on the flame and connecting with the life in your body. Be aware of your breath entering and leaving your body, your heartbeat pumping life-giving blood through your veins and arteries, the synapses in your brain giving you thought and imagination. Immerse yourself in this awareness of your aliveness—however frail or difficult it may be.

Give thanks for your life, and once again affirm your openness to Spirit and to the Divine Life that God offers you.

INTEGRATING

As you end your spiritual practice consider what would help you to feel more vibrantly alive today. Make a note of that thing and set aside some time in the day to do whatever it is. At the end of the day, journal the impact that doing your life-giving activity had on you and your day.

Close your time with a short moment of silence or a prayer of thanksgiving and preparation for the rest of your day.

LISTENING EXERCISES

DAY ONE (ADVENT SUNDAY)

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

What does it mean to you to be fully alive? To what extent do you feel that you experience fullness of life?

Are you aware of a longing in you to be more vibrantly alive? What is keeping you from fullness of life? What contributes to a more meaningful life for you? How can you minimise the things that rob you of life and maximise those that add to your depth of life?

DAY TWO

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

Spend some time meditating on the story of Jesus and his disciples looking at the Temple. Place yourself in the story and consider what it was like for them to look at the amazing architecture of the Temple. Then imagine their shock when Jesus told them it would all be destroyed.

What, in your life, resonates with the disciples' experience in this passage? Have there been things of great beauty and wonder that you have admired and then seen destroyed? How did that experience affect you?

Why, do you think Jesus told his disciples that it would all be destroyed? Why didn't he protect them and just allow them to enjoy the beauty?

How does being alert and aware of the realities in your world—both good and bad—help you to be more fully alive? Are there any positive experiences in your world that you could appreciate and enjoy more? Are there any negative ones that you could learn from and grow through?

DAY THREE

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

Jesus taught his disciples not to let their hearts be dulled. What dulls your heart today? If necessary, make a list of the things that make you want to numb yourself out. Spend some time reflecting on these things and why they have this effect on you.

Now reflect on how you respond to these things that make you want to numb out. Do you let them dull your heart? Do you find ways to avoid feeling the feelings that these things stir up in you? What is your chosen way to numb out? How does numbing out help you? How might it be hurting you?

Is there perhaps a different way to respond to the things that tempt you to let your heart become dull? What might you do instead of numbing out?

DAY FOUR

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

In his teaching about not letting our hearts be dulled Jesus mentioned two specific ways that struggle, pain, and difficulty can affect us. Both are ways to numb ourselves out and avoid dealing with the difficult realities of life. And both rob us of vibrant and meaningful life.

The first is to focus on experiences or substances that alter our moods and minds and keep us from having to deal with our pain. This doesn't have to be illegal substances. It can be food, or chocolate, or television, or music, or parties, or exercise, or a million other things. What is your favourite pain-avoiding activity or substance?

The second thing Jesus mentioned is worry. When we allow our anxiety to dominate our thoughts and feelings, it grows and takes on a life of its own. Not all worry is destructive. We do need to worry to protect ourselves from danger. But when worry becomes irrational or all-consuming it no longer protects us and it begins to hurt us. Do you have any toxic or destructive worry in your life?



How can you resist allowing these two responses to pain to control you today? What can you do to keep your heart from becoming numb?

DAY FIVE

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

The first strategy that Jesus taught to keep from letting our hearts be dulled was for us to stay alert. This is about taking the realities of our world and our lives seriously. Seeing things for what they are and not trying to deny reality. It is only in staying alert that we can understand our world and what we need to do to navigate it well. This alertness brings wisdom and leads us to a richer more meaningful life.

What does it mean for you to stay alert? In what ways are you already living with alertness? Where do you struggle to be alert?

What is your response to Jesus' call to stay alert? Does it help you or does it make you anxious? How could being more alert help you to be more fully alive? If it is helpful you may want to list in your journal the ways alertness can help you.

What can you do to nurture a healthy alertness? Make a note in your journal.

DAY SIX

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

The second strategy that Jesus taught to keep from letting our hearts be dulled was to stay aware of God's Presence and Reign. We need to be alert to what is happening in the world. But we also need to remember that there is another reality at work too. The Spirit is always present and active even in the turmoil of our world.

What does it mean for you to stay aware of God's presence and activity in your life? Where do you see Spirit at work today? What beauty, truth, and goodness can you enjoy today? How can you draw strength, courage, and hope from your awareness of God's Reign?

Make a list in your journal of all the ways you sense God's Spirit being present and working in your life today.

DAY SEVEN

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

The third strategy that Jesus taught to keep from letting our hearts be dulled was to be prepared. Or to put it in a way that we often speak of: be prepared for the worst but hope for the best. It can be tempting to believe that we can avoid pain and difficulty in this life. But no one gets through a human life without scars. And so we can prepare ourselves to cope with struggles even before we know what they may be. And one way to do that is to learn to risk living fully even though we know we will sometimes get hurt.

How can you nurture your preparedness to face pain and suffering in healthy ways? What strategies have you used in the past that have helped you? What strategies haven't been helpful?

What would it mean for you to risk living fully even though you will get hurt sometimes? What does living fully look like for you in this context? How can you prepare yourself to live more fully even when things are difficult for you?

Spend some time journaling your thoughts.

We Long To Matter

Advent 2

REFLECTING ON SCRIPTURE

SCRIPTURE READING

Luke 3:1-6

REFLECTION

We don't all need to be important. But we do all need to feel that we are important to someone. We don't all need to change the world. But we do all need to feel that we have a contribution to make. One of the most devastating things that we could ever experience is to feel that our lives are meaningless or that we are worthless.

In their wonderful book, *The Art of Possibility* (Penguin, New York, 2000) Benjamin and Rosamund Zander compare the attitudes of oboe players and second violinists in an orchestra:

A string player just entering a new position in an orchestra will often start with great enthusiasm, take his part home at night, and continue to do careful and regular practice in his spare time. However, when it begins to dawn on him that his stand partner stopped practicing years ago and that the conductor does not seem to care or even to hear when players are out of tune, he too quickly begins to show signs of the onset of the disease [second fiddle-itis].

A first oboist, on the other hand, is unlikely to give up making reeds or to miss a rehearsal. It is simply too noticeable. In all my years of conducting, I do not believe I have ever known a first oboe to be late for a rehearsal. Is it because the oboe has to be there at the beginning to tune everyone to the A? (p.40-41)

When the writer of Luke's Gospel announces the start of John the Baptist's ministry, he describes the political context of John's world. For the average Israelite, life was controlled by wealthy and powerful leaders. Seven such authorities are listed in the first verse and a half of chapter three. But God's message is given not to these VIPs, but to John—a nobody who is living in obscurity in the Judaeen wilderness. In John's Gospel, when the religious leaders ask John who he is, he refuses to answer. All he does is give them a quote from Isaiah about being a voice in the wilderness. Yet in all the Gospels, this is the person through whom the Divine Messianic purpose is set in motion.

There is no shortage of ways that our society can make us feel worthless and unimportant. Depression and suicide are on the increase across the globe. And social media can easily become a roller coaster of affirmation and denigration in staggeringly swift succession. Spiritual gurus, business coaches, and self-help experts all love to tell stories of humble, unknown people who, against the odds, rise to fame, wealth and greatness. These stories are meant to inspire, but too often all they do is confirm for the rest of us that we don't measure up. They remind us that it is



only the prominent and powerful who matter. The rest of us seem to exist for no reason other than to adore our betters and buy the products that make them rich.

But the Gospel, and the Advent story, give us a completely different perspective. When significant, world-changing events are happening, it is not the VIPS who make the greatest difference. It is the unseen, unrecognised, ordinary people who in small acts of courage, kindness, and justice contribute to meaningful changes. It is the Johns hiding out in the wildernesses of our world to whom God's message comes and who prepare the way for the Messiah's arrival in our corner of the world, our particular circumstances.

At the end of the reading for Advent 2 the writer of Luke includes the words from Isaiah: 'And then all the people will see the salvation sent from God.' This is a much-needed reminder that we are not saved by mighty armies, Presidents and Prime Ministers, political parties, billionaires or celebrities. We are not saved through the grand acts of individuals who are uniquely gifted or widely connected. We are saved when ordinary people hear God's message and begin to opt out of the competitiveness, greed, power-hunger, and polarisation of our world. Margaret Wheatley was absolutely right when she said, "Never underestimate the power of a small group of committed people to change the world. In fact, it is the only thing that ever has."

We long for a world of peace. We long to feel secure in our homes with enough resources to live comfortably. We long to know that our children will never have to question whether they are safe and loved. We long to live in a world where everyone can live and love freely and securely with enough food and water, a place of shelter, access to education, and meaningful work. And we all long to play some part in building that world. But most of us don't have any clue where to begin. The obstacles to realising this world seem to be too many and too big for our small efforts to matter.

But we forget the power of a mother's love, the mutual care and support of brothers, or the kind mentoring of an elder who helps a young person create a viable business. We forget the impact that just showing up each day and living with kindness and generosity can have on those around us. We forget that our capacity for joy and wonder and compassion can shift the temperature in our homes, neighbourhoods, schools, and workplaces. And we forget that the message of God does not call us to become rich and famous in order to make a difference. It is a simple invitation to love God, ourselves, and our neighbours.

Imagine what would happen if each day every one of us took a minute to allow the message of God to come to us. Imagine if we listened for just one thing we could do each day to shift our corner of the world a little closer to Jesus' ideal of the Reign of Love. And imagine if we took the time to remind ourselves each day that how we live does matter because it contributes to building the just, compassionate, and connected world that we long for.

It's time to stop waiting for the VIPs to hear God's message and do something to fix our world. It's time for us, in our ordinary, hidden lives, to hear God's message and do the few little things we can to offer healing, comfort, friendship, love and joy to the other ordinary people in our small patch of the Earth.

DAILY SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Repeat this practice every day this week. The preparing, responding, and integrating elements remain the same every day. This repetition enables you to dwell in the practice more deeply through the week and it often opens you to new insights and experiences of God.

The listening part of your practice changes so that each day can focus on a different aspect of the reflection on Scripture. Feel free to use the questions provided to guide you or to follow your own process as you meditate with the reading and the thoughts presented here.

PREPARING

Spend a few moments in silence. Begin by lighting the first Advent candle. Then, get comfortable and ground yourself in your body. Slow and deepen your breathing and focus on your breath entering and leaving your body. If any thoughts come up, notice them and then let them go. If you need to make a note of anything so that you can return to it later, then do that.

When you're ready, shift your awareness to your emotions, motivations, and longings. The following questions may help you in your reflections:

- How much do you feel that you matter?
- What makes you feel worthless or like you're not as valuable as some other people in your world?
- What helps you to feel valuable?
- What contribution are you able to make in your world?

When you feel ready, you may want to offer this, or some other prayer:

Thank you, God, that I matter to you.

Thank you for your Spirit who gives me gifts, talents, and abilities to make a contribution to my world.

Thank you that in Christ I know that I have value just because I exist, and I am a child of God.

I open myself to your life that it may fill me and flow through me a little more today.

Amen.

LISTENING

Insert the **LISTENING EXERCISES** for the relevant day at this point in your spiritual practice.

RESPONDING

When you feel ready, spend a few moments responding to your reflections of today. If you have an Advent wreath, light the second Advent candle as a symbol of your commitment to peace and to valuing yourself and others.

Spend a few moments meditating on the flame and connecting with your worth. Be aware of God's love for you and be aware of the Spirit's peace within you. Then take a few moments to think about one thing you feel that you are good at and how you can use that to make a positive contribution to those around you.

Give thanks for your life, and once again affirm your openness to Spirit and to the Divine Life that God offers you.



INTEGRATING

As you end your spiritual practice consider one thing you can do today that will make you feel more empowered to make some contribution in your relationships, home, family, or neighbourhood.

Close your time with a short moment of silence or a prayer of thanksgiving and preparation for the rest of your day.

LISTENING EXERCISES

DAY ONE (THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT)

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

What does it mean to be important, valuable, or worthy as a person? How much does your view of value align with the values of your society and how much is it different?

What do you feel gives you value and worth? What do your family and friends value about you? Are you happy with their valuing of you? Or are there things they're missing?

Spend some time journaling about what you feel makes you matter as a human being. And also note anything that undermines your sense of worth.

DAY TWO

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

Benjamin and Rosamund Zander describe the difference between a second violinist in an orchestra who feels unimportant and an oboist who feels very valued. With which musician do you most identify today? Spend some time exploring exactly what it is that makes you feel unimportant or what makes you feel valued. How can you shift the balance so that feeling valued becomes stronger?

How can you protect yourself against the things that undermine your sense of value? Do you need to distance yourself from some people on social media? Or be intentional about resisting the messages in society that say you only matter if you're wealthy, beautiful, and powerful?

Spend some time journaling what you can do to remind yourself that you really do matter.

DAY THREE

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working

through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

Return to the story of God's word coming to John the Baptist. What does it say to you that God chose John and not any of the VIPs that are mentioned at the start of this week's reading? Does this story resonate with your life in any way?

Are there any stories in your life of unlikely people who achieve great things that have either inspired or discouraged you? What is it about these stories that inspire you? What discourages you? Does your life reflect any of the elements of these inspirational stories? Does it matter?

How can you, in your ordinary life, make a meaningful positive difference to someone else today?

DAY FOUR

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

What impact can you see in your life and world that is being made by celebrities and VIPs? Do these people really make a meaningful difference to your world? Now make a list in your journal of the people who make the biggest difference in your life. How many of them are VIPs?

Now make a list of the people in whose life you make a difference. What does it mean for you to see that your life matters to these people?

DAY FIVE

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

Are there any VIPs to whom you look to save you? What would it mean to stop putting your hope in the wealthy, famous, powerful, and connected?

How do you respond to Margaret Wheatley's challenge: "Never underestimate the power of a small group of committed people to change the world. In fact, it is the only thing that ever has." Would you want to be part of a small group of ordinary people who change your world? What can you do to be part of such a group?

What changes do you long for in your world? What small and ordinary contribution can you make to help those changes happen?

DAY SIX

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.



Think back on the people and experiences that have had the biggest positive impact on your life. What actually happened? Were those experiences dramatic or surprisingly ordinary? What made them so important to you?

What simple routine thing can you do to make someone else's life a little better today? What small thing can you do with great love that might not change *the* world, but that could change *someone's* world?

How can you make sure you don't forget that the small things you do to make a positive difference to the people around you matter very significantly? How can you make sure you get a reminder on a regular basis?

DAY SEVEN

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

How does God's word come to you? What can you do to listen a little more carefully for God's word to you? And how can you respond more intentionally to God's message? What would it mean to listen each day for one small thing you can do to move your world a little closer to Jesus' ideal of the Reign of Love?

How can you develop a habit of doing the few little things you can to offer healing, comfort, friendship, love and joy to the other ordinary people in your small patch of the Earth?

We Long For Kindness

Advent 3

REFLECTING ON SCRIPTURE

SCRIPTURE READING

Luke 3:7-18

REFLECTION

Are you feeling bruised by life? Living through a pandemic is hard enough, but when you add the conflicts over masking, social distancing and vaccinations, it gets overwhelming. And that's before we even begin to address racial conflict, public shootings, the struggle to get billionaires to pay taxes, and the fights over climate science. With all of this and more going on in our world it can begin to look like kindness has abandoned us. And we all feel the anxiety and grief of watching human beings destroy one another.

On a personal level, lockdowns have been tough on relationships. For many of us being locked in limited space, even with people we love dearly, has increasing the frequency and intensity of misunderstandings and fights.

When we find ourselves in circumstances that leave us feeling vulnerable and unsafe, the longing for kindness in our souls becomes desperate. When it seems like we see anger and antagonism at every turn, one kind word brings overwhelming relief and can leave us in a flood of emotion. And this is all the proof we need that we all long for simple kindness in our lives and in our world.

Isn't it strange, in the face of this longing, that we have come to view kindness as weakness? We have a complicated relationship with kindness because we doubt that it can really address the threats we face. When evangelical Christians see no conflict between their faith and supporting a man like Donald Trump, kindness seems naïve. When religious terrorism is a constant source of danger, kindness feels irresponsible. And when our attempts at compassion are met with suspicion and anger, kindness begins to appear foolish and misguided.

Yet our longing refuses to be silenced. Our souls yearn for a society where civility, consideration, and care are the norm rather than the exception. We long for kindness so much that any kind of confrontation, however gently and thoughtfully done, feels belligerent. And so we avoid conflict at all costs and we tolerate unkind, rude, and bullying behaviour that we should be standing against. It's all so emotionally exhausting and so stressful.

John the Baptist's preaching should give us some measure of comfort as we navigate our kindness-challenged world. The first words John spoke to the people seeking baptism seem anything but kind: "You brood of snakes! Who warned you to flee the coming wrath?" (Luke 3:7). Yet when the people responded to his message and asked what they should do, his response was all about kindness. They were to share their food and clothing with those who didn't have enough and do their jobs fairly and kindly.



The messenger who came before the Christ made kindness the centre of his message. So why start with a rather harsh insult? Perhaps it was because John could see that the people had become mesmerised by their ancestry and religious arrogance. They were God's chosen people. They had Abraham, God's friend, as their ancestor. They were the children of the covenants of Moses and David. They were in with God. The sense of entitlement and privilege that this gave them—especially the religious leaders and wealthy aristocrats—was destructive. It marginalised women, the poor, the sick, and the so-called 'unclean' people like lepers and those possessed by demons (as they understood it). John knew that he had to shock them out of their complacency and make them face their brokenness and injustice. And so he challenged them. Strongly. As an act of fierce kindness.

Of course this kind of confrontational kindness isn't always appropriate. In our highly polarised world it probably wouldn't have the same positive impact that it had on John's listeners. It's more likely to entrench people in their polarised positions and bring out their worst, most aggressive reactions. Which doesn't mean we can't confront at all. It just means that we need to do so gently and sensitively.

If we are to find our way through the polarisation and division in our world, we cannot do it by adopting the same strategies as those who perpetuate and profit off the current dysfunction. We can only do it by beginning to live what we long for. This is a fundamental principle of the Gospel—we live as if we are already experiencing the fully manifested reality of God's Reign. And it is in this alternative way of being that we find not just kindness, but the joy of being more deeply connected with others and of helping bring a little more joy into angry and depressed places in our world.

To live with kindness is to live as embodiments of the values and priorities of God's reign of love. It is to refuse to be dictated to by the divisive, polarising values of the hate-mongers. And it is to commit to intentionally viewing all others with respect, dignity, and compassion, as Christ did. It is to reject any notion that our faith entitles us to special power, privilege, or exemptions from what serves the common good. We cannot claim to be following Christ if we choose our own freedom over the health and welfare of others.

We long for kindness. And the beginning of seeing that longing fulfilled is to hear the message of John and recognise that the Christ he proclaimed is a kind Messiah. We find kindness by being kind, by copying the kindness of Jesus, not just in action but in attitude. Because as we share kindness, including being kind to ourselves, we will find ourselves being drawn to other people of kindness. And together, our small contributions of kindness expand and multiply and raise the kindness quotient in our world.

As the actor Morgan Freeman once said, "How do we change the world? One random act of kindness at a time."

DAILY SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Repeat this practice every day this week. The preparing, responding, and integrating elements remain the same every day. This repetition enables you to dwell in the practice more deeply through the week and it often opens you to new insights and experiences of God.

The listening part of your practice changes so that each day can focus on a different aspect of the reflection on Scripture. Feel free to use the questions provided to guide you or to follow your own process as you meditate with the reading and the thoughts presented here.

PREPARING

Spend a few moments in silence. Begin by lighting the first and second Advent candles. Then, get comfortable and ground yourself in your body. Slow and deepen your breathing and focus on your breath entering and leaving your body. If any thoughts come up, notice them and then let them go. If you need to make a note of anything so that you can return to it later, then do that.

When you're ready, shift your awareness to your emotions, motivations, and longings. The following questions may help you in your reflections:

- How much kindness do you experience in your life?
- Where do you feel that kindness is lacking?
- What does kindness mean to you?
- How could more kindness increase your sense of being fully alive in the year to come?

When you feel ready, you may want to offer this, or some other prayer:

Thank you, God, for your kindness toward me.

Thank you for your Spirit who comforts, guides, and counsels me and who fills me with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control.

Thank you that in Christ your divine kindness has come into my world and brought me such healing and joy.

I open myself to your life that it may fill me and flow through me a little more today.

Amen.

LISTENING

Insert the **LISTENING EXERCISES** for the relevant day at this point in your spiritual practice.

RESPONDING

When you feel ready, spend a few moments responding to your reflections of today. If you have an Advent wreath, light the third Advent candle as a symbol of your commitment to kindness and joy.

Spend a few moments meditating on the flame. Think about those who have been kind to you and who have brought you joy in the last while. Then consider what you can do to express appreciation to these people. Finally, think about one thing you can do to carry kindness with you into their corner of the world.

Give thanks for your life, and once again affirm your openness to Spirit and to the Divine Life that God offers you.



INTEGRATING

As you end your spiritual practice consider one thing you can do today to connect with what brings you joy and to express kindness more intentionally.

Close your time with a short moment of silence or a prayer of thanksgiving and preparation for the rest of your day.

LISTENING EXERCISES

DAY ONE (THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT)

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

Would you classify the world, generally, as a kind place or an unkind place? Where do you see kindness at work in the world? Where do you see unkindness at work? Which do you feel is dominant?

In your personal world, where are you experiencing kindness? And where do you feel that your life lacks kindness? In what ways do you feel insecure and vulnerable?

What is your feeling about kindness? Have you ever been tempted to view it as a weakness? Or do you think of kindness as strength? How do you experience and express kindness in your own life and relationships? What could you do to nurture more kindness in your world?

DAY TWO

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

How has your longing for kindness affected your life? Have you sought to avoid conflict at all costs? Have you resisted standing against unkind, rude, and bullying behaviour in order to ensure that you stay kind?

What is your response to the strong support leaders like Donald Trump have received from Christian people? What is your feeling about the storming of the US Capitol on 6 January 2021, with many of those involved praying before they marched?

Is your relationship with kindness complicated at all? Do you doubt that kindness can make a real difference in our world? And what alternative would you suggest in place of kindness? What do you think the world would look like if everyone adopted some alternative to kindness as a primary value in society?

DAY THREE

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

Return to Luke's account of John the Baptist preaching. Begin with his seemingly unkind challenge to his listeners—calling them a brood of vipers. How do you reconcile this with your longing for kindness? Is there a way to justify John's approach and still see some kindness in it?

How might things like entitlement, status, and feeling that we come from a privileged background lead us to be unkind, often without even realizing that we are? How does arrogance make it harder for us to be kind?

And when might the kindest thing we could do be to confront and challenge injustice in our corner of the world? Would you be willing to express kindness in this confrontational way?

DAY FOUR

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

The Gospel often calls us to live as if the world is already just, loving, and kind even when it is still so far away from these values. The challenge of this Gospel call is to refuse to be dictated to by the values of our society. And it is to seek to live in alignment with God's values and priorities even when they are not popular or easy. What would it mean for you live as if everyone in the world is kind even though you know that not everyone is?

Make a list in your journal of as many ways as you can think of to live kindly in an unkind world. Explore what it might mean to live with kindness while still protecting yourself (kindly) from those who would seek to do you harm. Also explore how choosing kindness can be contagious and lead others to be more open to kindness as well.

How might living with kindness lead you into a deeper sense of joy? And how might your joy lead you to be kind more consistently?

DAY FIVE

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

So often followers of Christ are seen to be anything but Christlike. When Christians are seen to support torture, to reject (sometimes violently) people of different religions and races from their own, or those of different sexual orientations or gender expressions, then it sends the message that our faith does not value kindness very highly. Are there any ways that you have used your

faith to justify actions or attitudes that are unkind toward others? How do you feel about that now?

“We cannot claim to be following Christ if we choose our own freedom over the health and welfare of others” What is your response to this statement in the light of the past two years? Where have you seen Christians putting their own beliefs and freedom above the safety, health, and welfare of their neighbours?

How are we to respond to such faith with kindness? Does kindness have a place in a polarised world?

DAY SIX

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday’s sermon. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

When we review what John asked his listeners to do, we cannot miss that he called them to be kind to one another. For John, this was the repentance that was needed before the Messiah would arrive. And that implies that John believed that the Messiah would value kindness.

How do you see kindness at work in the life and message of Jesus? How does that kindness relate to the idea that Jesus will return to send sinners to hell for eternity? How would the kindness of Christ, as seen in the Gospels, continue into his divine reign over the universe?

What does it mean for you to think of God as a kind God?

DAY SEVEN

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday’s sermon. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

How can you begin to fulfil your longing for kindness by being a kind person yourself? How might your kindness lead you to connect more deeply with other kind people? And how might small groups of kind people raise the kindness quotient in our world?

What can you do to avoid being overwhelmed by unkindness? And how can you commit to changing the world through random acts of kindness? What kind acts can you do for those around you in the next few days and weeks? And how can you include being kind to yourself in your commitment to kindness?

We Long For Acceptance

Advent 4

REFLECTING ON SCRIPTURE

SCRIPTURE READING

Luke 1:39-55

REFLECTION

When have you experienced a deep sense of shame or rejection? When have you felt judged unfairly by others and wanted to hide or run away to find safety? Have you ever, while experiencing that sense of humiliation, encountered someone who expressed unconditional acceptance and understanding? When we feel like the world is against us, just one person who is safe and welcoming can make the difference between sanity and complete breakdown.

And yet, in spite of the fact that we all share this longing, acceptance can be frustratingly difficult to find. Few of us have been taught how to celebrate difference. Not a day goes by without the news reporting stories of people who do not fit the white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant norm being mistreated simply because of who they are. Even among our friends and family, acceptance can be hard to come by. Our loved ones can subtly pressure us to conform to what they expect from us and many of us know the loneliness of feeling that we have to hide significant facets of ourselves in order to keep the peace and feel loved.

But what if things could be different? What if acceptance could be the norm, rather than the exception? And what if our acceptance was rooted, not just in a grudging 'tolerance' but in enthusiastic love for the other? That is the dream that the Gospel asks us to share.

When Mary became pregnant as a young, unmarried maiden, the consequences could have been life-threatening. As a betrothed woman, one accusation of adultery could have ended her life. And even if she had survived, she could have been doomed to a life on her own, without a man to protect her and care for her. In a world where women could not own property, enter into business contracts, or testify in court, to be unable to find a husband was a catastrophe. And so, as the Gospel story tells it, before anyone else knew about the child within her, Mary set off to see her cousin—the one person in her world who might possibly be able to understand what had happened to Mary. Elizabeth had also become pregnant in an unusual and miraculous way and so perhaps she wouldn't dismiss Mary's story completely.

In the wonderful mythology of Luke's birth narrative, Mary's arrival at the home of Elizabeth and Zechariah was greeted not just with acceptance but with celebration and love. Elizabeth honoured Mary and expressed a depth of respect that Mary had probably not experienced in her life before. And in Elizabeth's wholehearted welcome, Mary sensed such a new depth of divine acceptance that she could not contain her relief and thankfulness.



Her famous Magnificat begins as an expression of amazement at how God has taken notice of this humble young woman and has accepted her. I have always thought that she was referring to God's choosing of her to carry the Messianic Child. But it occurs to me that in Elizabeth's greeting, Mary felt God's acceptance and honouring of her in spite of her being in a situation that would be frowned upon by the religious elite, by her culture, and even by her family.

But it doesn't stop there. In seeing how God has loved and welcomed her, Mary realised that God's acceptance extends to all those whom her society would reject and judge. Her praise flows from the realisation that all those who would have been condemned for being too young or too old, too inappropriate or too sinful, too poor or too unclean, are now celebrated as much—or perhaps even more—than the wealthy, powerful, and 'civilised'. It's a great turn around that reveals how much we miss when we fail to share acceptance with one another. And it also reveals that no matter how unwelcome we may feel, no matter how others may reject us, we belong. We are part of the Cosmos, we are connected with the Earth and everyone and everything in it. And we are enlivened by the same Divine Spirit that permeates all things.

So what are we to do with our status as divinely welcomed beings? And how are we to share the acceptance that we have come to experience as Mary did? It begins with living into the knowledge that we are welcomed, beloved, and accepted as we are. And it is to allow ourselves to release our need to be constantly on guard against rejection. It is to claim the truth that we are accepted and to allow it to fill us with confidence and courage. And it is to allow it to change us into an ever-more radiant reflection of the love, grace, and acceptance of God.

And then, as we immerse ourselves ever-more deeply in the acceptance of God, we can begin to open our hearts to others. We can begin to be more intentional about extending grace and welcome to those who know the pain of rejection. We can learn the skills of compassionate listening, of seeking to understand what feels so other, and of withholding judgement and assumptions. And as we do this, so little by little, we will discover both that our longing for acceptance is being fulfilled, but also that our ability to live as accepted ones helps to make our corner of the world a little more accepting and welcoming.

What a wonderful liberation it is when, like Mary, we come to know that we are beloved even when others tell us we're not worthy of love. There is great power in knowing our worth and claiming our place in the world. But we don't have to do this by rejecting, excluding, or dominating anyone else. We find our place as we make space for those around us and learn to love them as they are, not as we would have them be. And when we take our place beside the ones that are different, strange, non-conforming, and misunderstood, that's when we know that, in God's country, everyone truly is welcome.

I am reminded of the words of that old Apple 'Think Different' ad campaign. And of course these words don't just apply to the crazy geniuses who change the world. They apply to us all.

Here's to the crazy ones, the misfits, the rebels, the troublemakers, the round pegs in the square holes... the ones who see things differently — they're not fond of rules... You can quote them, disagree with them, glorify or vilify them, but the only thing you can't do is ignore them because they change things... they push the human race forward, and while some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius, because the ones who are crazy enough to think that they can change the world, are the ones who do.

DAILY SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Repeat this practice every day this week. The preparing, responding, and integrating elements remain the same every day. This repetition enables you to dwell in the practice more deeply through the week and it often opens you to new insights and experiences of God.

The listening part of your practice changes so that each day can focus on a different aspect of the reflection on Scripture. Feel free to use the questions provided to guide you or to follow your own process as you meditate with the reading and the thoughts presented here.

PREPARING

Spend a few moments in silence. Begin by lighting the first three Advent candles. Then, get comfortable and ground yourself in your body. Slow and deepen your breathing and focus on your breath entering and leaving your body. If any thoughts come up, notice them and then let them go. If you need to make a note of anything so that you can return to it later, then do that.

When you're ready, shift your awareness to your emotions, motivations, and longings. The following questions may help you in your reflections:

- How accepted do you feel in your life and relationships?
- Where do you feel rejected or longing for a deeper sense of acceptance?
- What does acceptance mean to you?
- How could feeling more accepted increase your sense of being fully alive in the year to come?

When you feel ready, you may want to offer this, or some other prayer:

Thank you, God, for the way you accept me as I am.

Thank you for your Spirit who lives within me and reminds me that I am your beloved child.

Thank you that in Christ I can know without a doubt that you welcome me and celebrate who you have made me to be.

I open myself to your life that it may fill me and flow through me a little more today.

Amen.

LISTENING

Insert the **LISTENING EXERCISES** for the relevant day at this point in your spiritual practice.

RESPONDING

When you feel ready, spend a few moments responding to your reflections of today. If you have an Advent wreath, light the fourth Advent candle as a symbol of your commitment to acceptance and love.

Spend a few moments meditating on the flame. Think about what makes you different from others and how you feel about your difference. Reflect on any ways you may be tempted to hide your difference and any ways you may be negative toward the differences of others. Finally, think about one thing you can do to express your uniqueness and to show acceptance to others in the next while.

Give thanks for your life, and once again affirm your openness to Spirit and to the Divine Life that God offers you.



INTEGRATING

As you end your spiritual practice consider one thing you can do today to express acceptance and love more intentionally toward yourself and others.

Close your time with a short moment of silence or a prayer of thanksgiving and preparation for the rest of your day.

LISTENING EXERCISES

DAY ONE (THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT)

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

Go back to the questions at the start of this chapter: When have you experienced a deep sense of shame or rejection? When have you felt judged unfairly by others and wanted to hide or run away to find safety? Have you ever, while experiencing that sense of humiliation, encountered someone who expressed unconditional acceptance and understanding? Spend a few moments remembering times when you felt these things. Journal how these experiences have shaped your longing for acceptance.

What would acceptance look like for you? What would you need from someone else in order to feel fully accepted? And what kind of difference would it make to your life if you knew, without a doubt, that you were completely and unconditionally accepted by another person?

How can you give yourself the acceptance you long for today?

DAY TWO

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

Why do you think acceptance is so difficult for us to find? What could make it easier to receive acceptance from those around you? And what could make it easier for you to show acceptance to those in your life who need it?

Are there any ways that you feel a subtle pressure from your loved ones to be who they expect? How can you help them to give you greater freedom to be yourself?

Are there any ways that you exert a subtle pressure on any of your loved ones to be who you expect them to be? How can you give them greater freedom to be who they are?

How can you move closer to making enthusiastic, loving acceptance the norm in your life?

DAY THREE

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

Return to the story of Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth. Try to let go of all the assumptions and interpretations of this story that you've heard over the years and place yourself in Mary's situation. What might she have been feeling as she rushed from her home to visit her elderly relative? Do you think she told her parents about her pregnancy? Did she tell them she was going away for a while? Or did she just run away before they could know?

How might she have felt when she approached Elizabeth's house, not knowing how she would be received? And what do you think she felt when Elizabeth greeted her so lovingly and enthusiastically?

What does this story tell you about the power of acceptance? What does this story say to you about your own longing to feel accepted?

DAY FOUR

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

Read Mary's Magnificat as a meditation. Go through it slowly and allow the words and images to speak to your heart. What stands out for you in Mary's words of praise?

Who is accepted in Mary's poem? What is the criteria for their acceptance? And how does this poem express Mary's sense of being fully accepted by God? Spend a few moments in silence and meditation. You can journal any thoughts or insights you may receive.

End by noting what your deepest response is to Mary's words. Where do they resonate with you? Where do they challenge you? Where do they excite you or disturb you? What would you want to apply to your life?

DAY FIVE

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

This week's reflection speaks of how we all belong and we are all accepted by God. How can you affirm your belonging and acceptance today? How can you live from an awareness that you are beloved and accepted?

Can you let go of the things that you might feel keep you from acceptance? Can you release the need to always be on your guard against rejection? How can you do that?

What difference might it make, if someone does reject you, to handle that experience from a place of knowing that you are divinely accepted?

DAY SIX (CHRISTMAS EVE)

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

How can you use today to prepare your heart to celebrate Christ's birth more deeply and intentionally tomorrow? What does Christmas say to you about God's love and acceptance?

If you were to live into the knowledge of your acceptance by God and yourself, how might that change you? What could you gain from doing the work to accept yourself and be more aware of God's acceptance of you?

How can you practice reflecting the love, grace, and acceptance of God more in your life?

We Long To Belong

Christmas Day

REFLECTING ON SCRIPTURE

SCRIPTURE READING

Luke 2:8-20

REFLECTION

There is a curious contradiction at this time of year in Western Culture. All year long we highlight the supremacy of the individual. In the last two years this has been particularly clear as we've seen numerous people claim their right to personal freedom as an excuse not to wear masks, social distance, or get vaccinated. Personal religious freedom has been used to justify people gathering for worship—which is often about individuals having a personal encounter with a personal God while being in the same physical space as other individuals—even during lockdown restrictions, in spite of the fact that their 'freedom' literally killed people. And yet, in spite of the power of this cult of the individual, the worst thing to be during these 'holidays' is alone.

It is deeply ironic that we gather at Christmas, singing of 'peace on earth and goodwill to all' even as we attack our neighbours when they choose to say 'Happy Holidays' instead of 'Merry Christmas'. Then we head home to open gifts that are bought in the hopes of fulfilling our personal wants and eat meals cooked to our personal taste. And for many this whole process is done with family members with whom we have complicated or even dysfunctional relationships. Even as we trumpet our independence, freedom, and individuality, we prefer to be with broken families than be on our own at Christmas.

And yet we still do it. In spite of the complexities and pain, we still feel the need to be together. We still ache for a sense of belonging. One of the worst things we can feel is that we are alone in the world with no one who mirrors our internal world, values, and ways of being. And one of the most liberating things we can ever experience is finding someone with whom we feel a deep resonance and connection. As C.S. Lewis famously said:

Friendship arises out of mere Companionship when two or more of the companions discover that they have in common some insight or interest or even taste which the others do not share and which, till that moment, each believed to be his own unique treasure (or burden). The typical expression of opening Friendship would be something like, "What? You too? I thought I was the only one."

All of which is simply to say that we all carry a deep and intense longing to belong.

One of the reasons that I love the Gospel of Luke is the way the writer goes to such lengths to tell stories and highlight teachings that bring the outsider into the inner circle of God's Reign. And that begins in the nativity narrative, especially with the shepherds.



Most of us know that shepherds lived a contradictory existence in Israel at the time of Christ. On the one hand, they provided an essential service to the agrarian economy and the religious culture of the day. Sheep were wealth and food, they provided raw material for textiles, and they were important as sacrifices for religious purity. With this background we could be forgiven for thinking that shepherds would be revered and respected. But they weren't. They had no status or wealth and were counted among the poorer members of society. Their work was difficult and dirty, which made ritual cleanness difficult. There was at least some danger involved in defending their flocks against predators and thieves. And living outside of city gates meant that they weren't really a part of respectable society. It's probably not that they were rejected and outcast as much as that they just weren't able to belong.

Luke uses every opportunity to show that the Reign of God does not follow the rules of human society. It does not exclude or dominate. It doesn't treat the wealthy and powerful differently than the poor and vulnerable. And it doesn't have insiders and outsiders. In the new world that Jesus proclaimed and lived, everyone belongs. By making the shepherds the first heralds—the first apostles?—of the incarnation, Luke shows that even the least likely have value in God's Reign. The shepherds are as important as the VIPs that get named at the start of the chapter. They are worthy of a divine visitation. And they are capable of participating in the divine mission. They have a voice. They have a purpose. They aren't spectators. They are witnesses and participants. They *belong*.

In her wonderful TEDx talk, Emily Esfahani Smith asserts that *There is More to Life Than Being Happy*. She argues convincingly that what we really seek is *meaning*. And one of the four things that helps us find meaning is *belonging*. She explains that true belonging comes from knowing that we are valued for who we are, not what we do or believe or who we're against. In Luke's mythology, the shepherds' lives would have been filled with great meaning and a deep sense of belonging in God's beloved community after their Christmas experience. They were valued for who they are and they found connection and purpose in witnessing Christ's birth.

Perhaps Descartes' philosophy of 'I think therefore I am' isn't the only reason that Western society has become so individualised. Perhaps it's because so few of us have found true belonging where we are accepted, celebrated, and loved for who we are. In our work, we are valued only for our output. In our society we are valued only for our wealth, fame, or power. In our politics we are valued only for our vote. In our faith communities we are valued only for our conformity and willingness to bring friends and families into the fold. There are very few places or people with whom we feel safe and free to show our whole, true selves. And so perhaps we have no choice but to go within to seek some sense of acceptance and belonging. But, as the pandemic has shown, that doesn't work for most of us.

And perhaps the Christmas story doesn't really change that in any practical way. It won't make our dysfunctional families suddenly healthy. It won't make the companies for whom we work suddenly see us as the gifted and creative people we know we are. It won't make our politicians wake up and recognise how wonderful our world would be if we were all taught to love one another.

But what the Christmas story does offer us is the realisation that we are inherently valuable and important. We do belong in this universe and we are beloved of the Divine Spirit that keeps it all alive and connected. And it gives us a glimpse of how we can, in our own small ways, find a

deeper connection with one or two other people with whom we can know a belonging that is deep and real and affirming.

We long to belong. Or perhaps, since our belonging is already assured in Christ, we long to *know* that we belong. And all we have to do to experience this belonging is to be willing to witness and celebrate another the way the shepherds were celebrated by the angels, and the way they, in turn, celebrated the Christ Child. This Christmas, perhaps we can let go of all the conditions and qualifications for belonging that our society teaches us. Perhaps we can welcome one another as we are and learn to understand and appreciate the wonder of each unique person. And perhaps, in giving each other the gift of true belonging, our own longing can be met in some small way.

DAILY SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

CHRISTMAS DAY

PREPARING

Spend a few moments in silence. Begin by lighting the first four Advent candles. Then, get comfortable and ground yourself in your body. Slow and deepen your breathing and focus on your breath entering and leaving your body. If any thoughts come up, notice them and then let them go. If you need to make a note of anything so that you can return to it later, then do that.

When you're ready, shift your awareness to your emotions, motivations, and longings. The following questions may help you in your reflections:

- Where, and with whom, do you feel that you truly belong?
- Where, and with whom, do you not feel completely at home?
- What does belonging mean to you?
- How could feeling more at home in your world and your life increase your sense of being fully alive in the year to come?

When you feel ready, you may want to offer this, or some other prayer:

Thank you, God, for giving me a place to belong.

Thank you for your Spirit who chooses to make me a temple where God can belong.

Thank you that in Christ I can know that I belong in your family and share in your Divine Life.

I open myself to your life that it may fill me and flow through me a little more today.

Amen.

LISTENING

Return to the reflection at the start of this today's practice, or to your notes from the Christmas sermon you may have heard if you went to church today. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

Go back to the story of the shepherds and take a note of what stands out for you. What does this story tell you about the power of belonging?

How does your sense of belonging add meaning to your life? How might feeling more at home enrich your life even more? How does the story of Christ's birth expand your feeling that you belong in God's 'family'?



How can you celebrate and share a sense of deep belonging with your loved ones on this Christmas Day? And how can you carry today's sense of belonging into the year ahead?

RESPONDING

When you feel ready, spend a few moments responding to your reflections of today. If you have an Advent wreath, light the central Christ candle as a symbol of your commitment to belonging in the Reign of Christ.

Spend a few moments meditating on the flame. Reflect on the places where you feel you truly belong. Remember a recent time when you felt welcomed and comfortable with your place in the world. Finally, think about one thing you can do to be welcoming and to help others find a space to belong.

Give thanks for your life, and once again affirm your openness to Spirit and to the Divine Life that God offers you.

INTEGRATING

As you end your spiritual practice consider one thing you can do today to express your sense of belonging and to make space for others to belong.

Close your time with a short moment of silence or a prayer of thanksgiving and preparation for the rest of your day.

We Long For Wisdom

Christmas 1

REFLECTING ON SCRIPTURE

SCRIPTURE READING

Luke 2:41-52

REFLECTION

One of the most surprising features of the last two years, for me at least, has been the way the pandemic has sparked a surge in conspiracy theories, fake news, and false information. On one level it shouldn't have been a surprise. The pandemic arrived during the tenure of a US President who, according to analysts, told over thirty thousand lies in his four years in office—many of them directly related to the pandemic and related medical issues. But on another level I think I can be forgiven for expecting—wrongly, as it turns out—that in a time of global crisis, people would be more careful with the information they consumed and passed on.

When the internet launched it seemed like the answer to our prayers. For the first time in history anyone could access all the information they might need—and lots that they didn't. We hoped this would mean that we would grow in both intelligence and wisdom. Yet somehow, all too often, the opposite seems to be the case. As scientist E. O. Wilson has said, "We are drowning in information, while starving for wisdom."

The internet may not have given us the wisdom we seek, but it hasn't kept us from the longing for wisdom. As we face the growing challenges of navigating the world in the 21st Century, we know that we need wisdom more than ever before. But perhaps our biology, our evolution, works against us in our quest for wisdom.

In their wonderful podcast, *Learning How to See*, Brian McLaren, Richard Rohr, and Jacqui Lewis explore the biases that we must overcome if we are to see the world clearly. One of the most prevalent in our world today is called 'complexity bias'. This refers to the reality that we generally prefer a simple lie to a complex truth. If we can find an explanation to something that troubles us it brings relief, *even if it's wrong*. And once we have that relief, we have no reason to search any further for wisdom.

So how do we learn to resist the siren call of conspiracy theories, fake news, and misinformation when the simple lies they offer are so attractive and satisfying? As we stand on the threshold of a new year, the answer to this question is not academic. Our health, security, and possibly even our lives depend on it.

The only story we have in the Gospels of Jesus' childhood is found in Luke 2:41-52. After Jesus and his family had traveled to Jerusalem for Passover, Mary and Joseph started the journey home with a group of others. When they finally realised that Jesus wasn't with them, they hurried back only to find him in the Temple talking with the religious teachers.



We are told that Jesus was only twelve years old—not yet a man, since his bar mitzvah would still have been a year or two away. The Gospel writer clearly wants us to see that Jesus was indeed growing in wisdom as Luke mentions in verses 40 and 52.

It is easy to miss the nature of the wisdom Jesus was manifesting. Luke's account tells us that Jesus was *listening and asking questions*, but the onlookers were amazed at his *understanding and answers*. The wisdom of Jesus was not based in certainty but in curiosity. Although the onlookers seem to have heard him giving answers, Jesus' wisdom was rooted rather in questions. Jesus, it seems, was not interested in simple explanations, whether true or false. Rather he was willing to do the work, to embark on the quest, for a wisdom that takes work. The wisdom he embodied was the wisdom of debate and conversation, the wisdom of exploration and experimentation, the wisdom that steps outside of accepted norms and enters the complex and unexplored in order to learn and grow beyond what is already known. For Luke this anecdote describes who Jesus was—a lifelong seeker after true wisdom.

It may sound like a religious platitude, but if we are to find the wisdom for which we long, we can do worse than follow Jesus' example. The wisdom for which he began searching in his pre-teen years was unmistakably evident in his life and teaching, and has guided millions of wisdom-seekers through the centuries.

We long to feel that we know what we have to do to live well, have our longings satisfied, and make a contribution. We want to feel that we can interpret the world and our place in it well and be able to make good, life-giving decisions for ourselves and, together with others, for our society. And to find that wisdom we need to do the same things that Jesus did.

The first thing that we notice from Luke's account is that Jesus sought wisdom not alone, but with others. He got left behind in Jerusalem because he had sought out the religious teachers and connected with them. He knew that he couldn't find wisdom alone, that he needed to explore with others—especially those who could show him the way. This is always the case with spirituality and wisdom. The moment we make ourselves the definitive source of our own wisdom, and the moment we reject input from others, is the moment we turn our backs on wisdom. We can only learn when we are willing to journey with others, enter their perspectives and experiences, read the Scriptures in community—which is how they were always meant to be read—and test our ideas against those who have studied and travelled further down the road than we have.

Then, within this learning community, Jesus found wisdom by listening and asking questions. Clearly he was not there to tell the religious teachers what he knew and how they were wrong. While we tend to interpret this passage as an account of how Jesus stumped the religious teachers with his wisdom, there is nothing in Luke's account to support such a view. Rather what we see is a precocious young man who wasn't afraid to find teachers who could teach him to think well, not just find information. And that openness, listening and curiosity is a clear sign of Jesus' growing wisdom.

Finally, the Gospels show us that Jesus did not restrict his quest for wisdom to accepted doctrines, norms, and boundaries. He went where the questions took him. He followed wisdom into whatever mysteries, complexities, and new insights it led him. Matthew's Gospel makes it clear that Jesus was eager to embrace new insights and perspectives when it portrays Jesus saying, "You have heard it said, but I say to you..." (Matthew 5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38 and 43).

We long for wisdom, but it is not easy and it is not simple. Wisdom is complex. It takes work to discover and learn. It is wild. It draws us into ideas and experiences that we might prefer to avoid. It challenges accepted 'truth' and it refuses to be comforted by simple lies. But if we are willing to hear its call and follow its guidance, it is worth every bit of sweat, struggle, and discomfort. And, as we face an increasingly complex world, nothing can guide us more effectively and surely than authentic, spiritual wisdom.

DAILY SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Repeat this practice every day this week. The preparing, responding, and integrating elements remain the same every day. This repetition enables you to dwell in the practice more deeply through the week and it often opens you to new insights and experiences of God.

The listening part of your practice changes so that each day can focus on a different aspect of the reflection on Scripture. Feel free to use the questions provided to guide you or to follow your own process as you meditate with the reading and the thoughts presented here.

PREPARING

Spend a few moments in silence. Begin by lighting all your Advent candles. Then, get comfortable and ground yourself in your body. Slow and deepen your breathing and focus on your breath entering and leaving your body. If any thoughts come up, notice them and then let them go. If you need to make a note of anything so that you can return to it later, then do that.

When you're ready, shift your awareness to your emotions, motivations, and longings. The following questions may help you in your reflections:

- When have you benefitted from the wisdom of others or from a wise insight you have received?
- When have you felt anything but wise?
- What does wisdom mean to you?
- How might growing in wisdom make your life richer and more meaningful?

When you feel ready, you may want to offer this, or some other prayer:

Thank you, God, for your divine wisdom.

Thank you for your Spirit who teaches me and leads me into wisdom.

Thank you that in Christ your wisdom is revealed in practical ways that I can follow in my own life.

I open myself to your life that it may fill me and flow through me a little more today.

Amen.

LISTENING

Insert the **LISTENING EXERCISES** for the relevant day at this point in your spiritual practice.

RESPONDING

When you feel ready, spend a few moments responding to your reflections of today. Spend some time meditating on your Advent candles as a symbol of your commitment to wisdom.

When you're ready, reflect on people you know whom you consider to be wise. Think also about ways in which you feel you have been wise. Finally, think about one thing you can do to grow in wisdom in the next year.

Give thanks for your life, and once again affirm your openness to Spirit and to the Divine Life that God offers you.

INTEGRATING

As you end your spiritual practice consider one thing you can do today to grow in wisdom.

Close your time with a short moment of silence or a prayer of thanksgiving and preparation for the rest of your day.

LISTENING EXERCISES

DAY ONE (THE FIRST SUNDAY OF CHRISTMAS)

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

Spend a moment reflecting on E. O. Wilson's statement that, "We are drowning in information, while starving for wisdom." Do you agree with this assessment of our world? How do you see this at work in your corner of the world or in your own life?

When have you wished that you were wiser? What made you long for wisdom in that moment? How might wisdom have made things different for you?

Where do you go to seek wisdom? How can you be sure that what you learn from the internet and other sources of information are true wisdom? How can you discern true wisdom from foolishness more reliably? What difference would it make in your life to be secure that you have access to true wisdom?

DAY TWO

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

When have you seen someone prefer a simple lie over a complex truth? When have you? How can you resist the relief that simplicity brings in order to confirm the truth of things before committing to believing them?

How have you been affected by fake news and conspiracy theories in the last year? How would wisdom have been helpful for you to address false information in your world?

When you know that you are witnessing wisdom or being wise in yourself, how do you feel? How does wisdom impact your emotions, your thinking, your actions, and your relationships?

DAY THREE

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take

note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

Return to the story of Jesus in the Temple. What is your immediate response to this story? How do you interpret what was happening with Jesus and the religious teachers? Are you surprised to read that Jesus had to grow in wisdom and understanding?

Why do you think it was important for the writer of Luke's Gospel to demonstrate that Jesus was open to learning and that he grew in wisdom as he grew older? What can you learn about wisdom and how to acquire it from this story?

What else stands out for you in this story? And how can you apply the insights you're receiving to your own life?

DAY FOUR

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

Return to the Luke reading for this week once again. Why do you think Luke describes Jesus as *listening* and *asking questions*, but describes the onlookers as amazed at Jesus' *answers* and *understanding*? What is the relationship between listening and wisdom? And what is the relationship between asking questions and wisdom?

How do you feel about the idea that it takes work to find wisdom? What work can you do today to grow in wisdom? To whom can you listen? Of whom can you ask questions?

DAY FIVE

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

In Luke's account we see that Jesus didn't only look for wisdom on his own. He also sought out others from whom he could learn. The journey to wisdom was a shared journey with others. What is your response to this?

When are you tempted to seek out wisdom on your own? Why do you feel this need in those times? When have you found wisdom through relationships with others? What would it mean to seek wisdom with friends and companions more often? How would you do that?

Who are the people to whom you would want to turn in your quest to discover wisdom? Why not approach one or two of those people today?

DAY SIX (NEW YEAR'S EVE)

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take

note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

In the Gospel reading for this week we see Jesus asking questions and listening to the religious leaders. It can be surprising for some of us to think that Jesus needed to learn from others—especially the religious leaders of whom he is so critical in his ministry. We like to think of Jesus as knowing everything right from his first breath. But this isn't the Jesus that Luke shows us. Here we see a human Jesus who was curious, keen to learn, willing to ask questions and admit that he didn't know everything. And it was out of that questioning and listening that he developed his incredible wisdom later in his life.

What is your response to this vision of Jesus? What does it mean for you to see Jesus as curious, questioning, listening, and learning? What does it mean for you to follow *this* Jesus?

When are you tempted to hide what you don't know? When are you tempted to always have answers and avoid questions? What can you do today to become more comfortable with what you don't know? And how can you be more intentional in questioning and listening?

What wisdom do you need? What questions can you ask in your question to find that wisdom? And to whom will you go with your questions?

DAY SEVEN (NEW YEAR'S DAY)

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

In his quest for wisdom, Jesus went far beyond the religious teachers of his youth. His wisdom outstripped even the most learned teachers and leaders of his day, as we see in so many confrontations in the Gospels when they tried to trick him and failed.

And his wisdom was often expressed in ways that were challenging or even offensive to the religious people of his day. He welcomed women among his disciples. He rejected legalistic interpretations of the Hebrew Law. He was friends with 'sinners' and spoke very critically of those who thought of themselves as righteous. The wisdom of Christ is very different from the wisdom of human society.

Where do you accept the wisdom of society, or of the Church, or of other people without question? What would happen if you laid the wisdom of Christ alongside that 'worldly' wisdom? Might you begin to see wisdom differently? And what impact would that have on your life?

What would happen if you allowed yourself to follow your curiosity and questions without censoring them or refusing to stray outside of accepted boundaries? What gifts might you gain if you allowed the Spirit of truth to lead you into truths you have not yet explored or understood? Could this New Year be your chance to discover a deeper wisdom than you've known before? And could that perhaps lead you into a deep and more meaningful life?

We Long For Transcendence

Christmas 2

REFLECTING ON SCRIPTURE

SCRIPTURE READING

John 1:1-18

REFLECTION

Do you feel the need to be an 'influencer'? Do you ever feel inadequate because you do not have enough likes on your Facebook posts or followers on Instagram? Do you ever find yourself wondering what's wrong with you when you hear about the incredible reach or impact of a peer's work?

We live in a world where, it seems, we are all supposed to want to be more, do more, have more, and experience more. There is this desperate need to 'go viral' in order to validate our existence. In a presentation I recently attended I learned that teenagers in South Africa are experiencing massive mental health crises in their quest for approval by their peers. When the weekend comes around they know that they have to post pictures of their activities. And if they don't get hundreds of likes by Monday morning, school becomes hell for them.

We all long for our lives to be worth living, but we seem to have chosen some very problematic criteria by which measure the value of our lives. As Dr. Lyndon Duke—a specialist on teen suicide—wrote, after analysing the notes left by teens who have taken their own lives:

When everyone is trying to be exceptional, nearly everyone fails because the exceptional becomes commonplace, and those few who do succeed feel isolated and estranged from their peers. We're left with a world in which a few people feel envied, misunderstood and alone, while thousands of others feel like failures for not being good, special, rich or happy enough.

The cult of the extraordinary can be very attractive. But it isn't healthy. Yes, we all love those moments when we feel like we've stepped through a veil into a more vibrant and intense world. We love the feeling of transcendence when our boundaries fall away and we sense our connectedness with the cosmos. And we need these experiences. But they are not an end in themselves.

We sometimes think that dramatic spiritual experiences are what transform us and help us become our best, healthiest and most connected selves. But the truth is that profound spiritual experiences can just as easily cause us to become stuck in self-centred, narcissistic, or arrogant navel-gazing. These extraordinary moments, these transcendent moments, are useless unless they lead us to an ordinary life that is deeper, richer, and more whole.



In the extraordinarily poetic and profound prologue to John's Gospel, we learn of the Divine Word through whom the universe is created. We are informed that this Word is the Light of the universe and that this Light chose to step into our world, becoming human, and living among us. You can't get more transcendent and exceptional than the Cosmic Christ creating and filling the universe. But, for John this is not the point. The point is when the Cosmic Christ chooses to become human in Jesus, the very ordinary carpenter of Nazareth. And there is a very specific reason that John gives us for this incredible self-reduction—Christ takes on flesh to reveal to humanity our own dignity. Christ becomes ordinary to reveal to us that we are, in our very ordinariness, extraordinary. Or to put it in the words of two ancient spiritual teachers:

He became what we are so we might become what he is—Irenaeus.

For the Son of God became [human] so that we might become God—Athanasius

John expresses the experience of the divine image and likeness within us as receiving the right (I would say the awareness) that we are children of God. In Jesus the Christ is incarnate. And in us, the Divine Spirit of Christ is incarnate again—in billions of ways.

We do not need to be exceptional to have a life worth living. We do not need to search for transcendence and go from experience to experience to feel fully live. We already are transcendent! We already are extraordinary in that we are little incarnations of God! We are star dust, and we are inseparably interconnected with the infinite Cosmos. We just need to recognise and embrace the transcendent in our every day ordinariness.

We find ourselves once again at the threshold of a New Year. The last two years have been devastating in so many ways, and this kind of trauma and struggle can leave us feeling depleted, depressed, and puny. But as we enter into the year to come we need, perhaps more than ever, to remember and live into our divine nature. We need everyday transcendence to sustain us and empower us to live fully, to connect deeply, and to contribute meaningfully to the world in whatever small way we can.

So how do we nurture a sense of transcendence and live from our divine centre? How do we claim our true nature as children of God and allow that to sustain and strengthen us in even the toughest times? I believe John's Gospel is all about showing us the answer to these questions.

Throughout John's Gospel we are called to see not just with our sight but with our *insight*. We are to see the Light of the Divine in our world and in ourselves, and to do so we need to believe and receive Christ into our lives. This isn't about praying a sinner's prayer and agreeing to certain doctrines. It is about learning to live in a deeper, more spiritually connected way. And to do this we need spiritual practices that train us to see more deeply and that teach us the habits of transcendent living. It doesn't really matter what spiritual practice we adopt—it's good to find one that speaks to us in our own unique way—as long as it teaches us a little more each day to live with a deeper sense of transcendence and connectedness.

Flowing out of our regular practice of learning to see and learning to live, we can nurture our capacity to be intentionally open to, and aware of, the divine visitations that are always happening with us and around us. We must walk by so many 'thin places' (as Marcus Borg called them, quoting the Celts) every day without noticing. But when we start intentionally to watch out for



moments of wonderful and ordinary beauty, truth, and goodness, we will see them more and more often. And when we start to recognise the transcendence in the ordinary, we cannot help but embrace it and dive into it wholeheartedly.

And then, when we become more familiar with everyday transcendence, we will begin to realise our nature as children of God. And then we can strengthen our awareness and experience of our own transcendence by regularly affirming to ourselves that we are children of God, we are temples of the Spirit, we are little incarnations in whom the Cosmic Christ is manifest.

We long for transcendence because we so easily allow the drudgery and struggle of life to overwhelm us and make us blind. There is no shame in this—it is understandable and natural. But we do not have to settle for such an existence. We do not have to believe the lie that we are ‘only human’ and of little value. This year will be better if we can find the courage and commitment to believe that our ordinary lives and selves are filled with transcendence. We just need to listen to our longing and let it show us who we really are—children of the divine.

DAILY SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Repeat this practice every day this week. The preparing, responding, and integrating elements remain the same every day. This repetition enables you to dwell in the practice more deeply through the week and it often opens you to new insights and experiences of God.

The listening part of your practice changes so that each day can focus on a different aspect of the reflection on Scripture. Feel free to use the questions provided to guide you or to follow your own process as you meditate with the reading and the thoughts presented here.

PREPARING

Spend a few moments in silence. Begin by lighting all your Advent candles. Then, get comfortable and ground yourself in your body. Slow and deepen your breathing and focus on your breath entering and leaving your body. If any thoughts come up, notice them and then let them go. If you need to make a note of anything so that you can return to it later, then do that.

When you're ready, shift your awareness to your emotions, motivations, and longings. The following questions may help you in your reflections:

- What does the word ‘transcendence’ mean to you?
- To what extent are you aware of a longing for transcendence within you?
- What would it mean for you to feel more connected to God, the Cosmos, yourself, and others?
How would this help you to feel a deeper sense of transcendence in your life?
- How different would your life be if you lived with a constant sense of transcendence?

When you feel ready, you may want to offer this, or some other prayer:

Thank you, God, for your divine nature which is beyond my capacity to grasp or define.

Thank you for your Spirit who envelopes and immerses me in your divine presence.

Thank you that in Christ you have revealed yourself in ways that I can relate to, while calling me ever deeper into your great mystery.

I open myself to your life that it may fill me and flow through me a little more today.

Amen.



LISTENING

Insert the **LISTENING EXERCISES** for the relevant day at this point in your spiritual practice.

RESPONDING

When you feel ready, spend a few moments responding to your reflections of today. Spend some time meditating on your Advent candles as a symbol of your commitment to acceptance.

When you're ready, connect with your sense of the Spirit within you. Connect with your own divine centre and be aware of yourself as a little incarnation of the Divine. Then think about one thing you can do to dive more deeply into that sense of transcendence and to intentionally seek to allow God to be revealed through you.

Give thanks for your life, and once again affirm your openness to Spirit and to the Divine Life that God offers you.

INTEGRATING

As you end your spiritual practice consider one thing you can do today to reveal God in your life.

Close your time with a short moment of silence or a prayer of thanksgiving and preparation for the rest of your day.

LISTENING EXERCISES

DAY ONE (THE SECOND SUNDAY OF CHRISTMAS)

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

Do you ever feel pressured to be exceptional? Do you ever feel like a failure because you haven't got the same level of popularity or influence as your peers? Does the need to be special ever undermine your mental and spiritual health?

Where does that pressure to be exceptional come from? What makes you feel that you need to follow the call to be special? What would happen if you opted out of the 'cult of the extraordinary' and embraced an ordinary life? Would you want to be comfortable with ordinariness?

How might the pressure to be extraordinary be robbing you of abundant life? How can you find a richer and more meaningful life in the ordinary?

DAY TWO

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

What significant spiritual experiences have you had? What impact did they have on your life? What benefits did you gain through those experiences? Were there any downsides to them?

How much do you seek extraordinary experiences in your life? What value do they add to your life? How could they help you to experience all of life as transcendent—even the ordinary moments?

What would it mean for you to experience the extraordinary within the ordinary parts of your life and world?

DAY THREE

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

Spend a moment reflecting again on these statements from two ancient teachers:

He became what we are so we might become what he is—Irenaeus.

For the Son of God became [human] so that we might become God—Athanasius

What is your immediate response to these quotes? How do they speak to you? What do they teach you about finding transcendence within yourself?

How do you feel when you consider John's teaching that Christ makes it possible for us to be children of God? What does it mean for you to be a child of God?

How can you live as a child of God today?

DAY FOUR (THE LAST DAY OF CHRISTMAS)

Return to the reflection at the start of this week, or to your notes from Sunday's sermon. Take note of anything that stood out for you. If you want to, you can spend your whole time working through what spoke particularly to you. Or you can use the following focus to guide your prayer and meditation today.

If we are to experience a more transcendent life, we need to learn to see with insight, as John teaches. We need to learn to recognise the divine presence in our ordinary routines, in our ordinary world. We need to learn to watch for 'divine visitations' in the ordinary. And then we can learn to be more connected and aware of the divine within us.

What would it mean to nurture your capacity to see the divine, the transcendence, within and around you? What would it mean for you live with this constant, gentle awareness of Spirit? How might the sense of transcendence help to make your life more meaningful and abundant?

How can your spiritual practice train you to see God's presence more clearly? What spiritual practice will you use as you enter this new year to stay more connected with the divine presence within you and around you?

Conclusion

You have now reached the end of your *What Are you Waiting For?* Advent and Christmas journey. Tomorrow we enter a new season which begins with the Epiphany, the celebration of the magi's journey to visit the Christ Child. In this season we open ourselves to new insights and experiences of the God who is revealed in Jesus.

If you would like to continue the journey with a new spiritual practice guide, you may want to check out *Into the Unknown* in the Sacredise store.

I hope you have found this journey meaningful and challenging. If you have managed to work intentionally and mindfully with the practices in this guide, you will have set yourself up for a richer and more vibrant life in the year to come, regardless of what you may have to face. I pray that you will experience a deeper sense of connection with God, yourself, others, and your world. And I pray that each day will be another step into the abundant, creative, and loving life that Christ offers us all.

Thank you for sharing in this journey!

John