

WEEK 1 – An Early Prophet Isaiah

Most of the content for this week's devotions was inspired by "Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus: An Advent to Christmas Pilgrimage".
Andy Langford and Ann Langford Duncan.

MONDAY – Invitation to a pilgrimage towards Jesus



Isaiah 2: 3a, 5 *Many peoples will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the temple of the God of Jacob. He will teach us His ways, so that we may walk in His paths."*
⁵*"Come, descendants of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the Lord."*
Isaiah 8: 17 *I will wait for the Lord, who is hiding His face from the descendants of Jacob. I will put my trust in Him.*
John 14: 6 *Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."*

Advent is the four-week period in the Christian calendar that prepares people for Jesus Christ's birth at Christmas, while also pointing ahead to His promised return. Traditionally, the four weeks of the season spotlight key themes, namely hope, peace, joy and love. For the Advent sermons and devotionals, we use material by the Langfords, which uses a spiritual pilgrimage as a metaphor to cover these key themes.

Consider: When I read Isaiah 8: 17 and I think of the current state of

affairs in the world, I sometimes wonder whether God sees what is happening. Thinking back over time, I can identify a number of instances where I had all but given up hope in a difficult situation and where the end result was eventually hugely positive.

I challenge you to do the same; you will be amazed by how much you learn about yourself and your relationship with God by doing this. I have also realised that scriptures like John 14: 6 and Jeremiah 29: 11 fill me with a divine-inspired hope.



Prayer: Heavenly Father, in the words of the classic Advent hymn, we pray, "Come, long-expected Jesus, born to set Your people free; from our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in Thee. You are our strength and consolation, and You are the hope of all the earth; the dear desire of every nation; and the joy of every longing heart." Join us on our Advent Pilgrimage, which for us is a spiritual journey. We pray this in Jesus' name. AMEN

Inspired by and adapted from the Charles Wesley Advent hymn "Come, thou Long-Expected Jesus".

TUESDAY – Isaiah conveys God’s message of judgement and hope to Judah



Isaiah 1: 2, 4 *Hear me, you heavens! Listen, earth! For the Lord has spoken: “I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against ⁴Woe to the sinful nation, a people whose guilt is great, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption! They have forsaken the Lord; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on Him.*

Isaiah 9: 6 *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on His shoulders. And He will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

Especially during Advent and Christmas, the full riches of God’s grace for all persons are revealed. Prevenient grace is when God prepares our hearts and minds to hear and receive the gospel of Jesus Christ; justifying grace occurs when God embraces us and we have faith in Him; and when God empowers us and we live faithfully, we experience sanctifying grace.”

When I reflect on my life since childhood, I am reminded of a number of incidents where, at the time, I thought that the outcome was not that which I had anticipated. As I grew older,

however, I have come to recognise a divine pattern in all of these incidents, with every one of these actually building a skill in me that collectively prepared me for the present time. It is a strangely comforting thought. God knows the plans He has for me (Jeremiah 29: 11)

Consider: We will encounter all these gifts of God’s grace on this Advent-to-Christmas pilgrimage. Considering your life, can you identify any or all of these types of grace in your past? This Advent is a good time to let go of old baggage and experience the grace of God when you do.



Prayer: Holy Spirit, I praise and thank You for never giving up on me, regardless of how hard I sometimes try to turn away from God. I thank you for walking with me every step of the way, every day. I seek God’s face with all of my heart, my mind and my strength. Thank you, Holy Spirit, for being with me daily, and for reminding me about God’s judgement, should I stray from God to follow my own path. In Jesus’ name. AMEN

WEDNESDAY – Prevenient Grace – God seeks us before we ever seek God



Isaiah 1: 2 *Hear me, you heavens! Listen, earth! For the Lord has spoken: "I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against Me."*

Isaiah 6: 8 *Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!"*

Isaiah 9: 6 *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on His shoulders. And He will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

The Hebrew prophet Isaiah, living in ancient Jerusalem, is our first pilgrim guide. He was, like Samuel, called by God to serve before they even knew God. When God asked Isaiah to be His prophet, Isaiah immediately said "YES!" (Isaiah 6: 8). Isaiah listened to God, conveyed God's words about a coming judgment, and offered hope to the people of Judah.

In the early chapters of the book of Isaiah, a strong emphasis is placed on how the nation of Israel (all twelve tribes) rebelled against God, which makes Isaiah's message to Israel and Judah unpopular. But God also provided hope for future salvation through the promise of the coming of the Messiah (Isaiah 9: 6). This promise, given centuries in

advance, is a work of prevenient grace for all humanity, with God delivering humanity from the power of sin and drawing people to Himself.

In the 1960s, I deliberately started attending the church Youth Wednesday evening gatherings, to rest my mind for a few hours a week of academic thought, mainly listening and saying as little as possible. Within months, I was elected as chairperson of the Youth Movement. I was not really reaching out to God, but He sought my presence. That started me on a trajectory towards this particular community of believers.

Consider: Have you ever felt that God is seeking your presence? How did you respond to that call?



Prayer: Thank you, God, for knowing me and reaching out to me even when I wasn't seeking Your presence. I am grateful for Your unconditional love and grace. I realise now that Your timing is always perfect. Thank you, Abba Father, for inviting me into a relationship with You. I open my heart to You anew. I pray this in the name of Christ Jesus. AMEN

THURSDAY – Encounters during the Advent Christmas Pilgrimage



Jeremiah 29: 11 *For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.*

Ephesians 2: 8,9 *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.*

As I continue my Advent Christmas pilgrimage along the interesting pathway towards the celebration of the birth of Christ Jesus, the Messiah, my life balance sheet slips in and out of sight to my mind's eye. On the negative side are a number of items that weigh heavily on me; our health at an age where we had dreamt of ticking off items on our bucket list, the rising inflation that eats away at our pensions, the growing feeling that our beautiful country is a broken society, and coupled to the last two items our concern about the future of our children and grandchildren in this beautiful country.

With such a list, it becomes difficult to believe the promise in Jeremiah 29: 11 above. Sometimes, not even the substantial positives in my life balance sheet can lighten my mood.

But God is there/here, to embrace us in our moments of weakness when we doubt our faith. He gives us a shoulder to lean on, like a crutch or walking stick, and when the going gets really tough, He carries us through the difficult passages in our life journey.

This is justifying grace, which means that it is only through God's unmerited favour, and not through our works, that we will survive the difficult stretches during our pilgrimage.

Consider: Take time during your own Advent Christmas Pilgrimage to consider your own life balance sheet, both the positive and negative sides, and make peace in those areas where it has been long overdue, and let go of grudges, idols or whatever is holding you back. The Advent season is the perfect time for that.



Prayer: Abba Father, Christ Jesus, Holy Spirit, help me to be really honest in dealing with my life balance sheet and to have unwavering faith in Your justifying grace. I ask this in the name of Christ Jesus.
AMEN

FRIDAY – Holy Communion – spiritual water station on our Advent Pilgrimage



1 Corinthians 11: 23-25, 28 *The Lord Jesus, on the night He was betrayed, took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me." In the same way, after supper He took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me."* ²⁸*Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup.*

Isaiah 40: 27, 31a *He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. ³¹but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles.*

Luke 21: 27 & 28 *At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."*

Athletes running a marathon rely on the water stations along the route where they can get water, and even when needed, medical support. When you are on an actual pilgrimage, like the Camino de Santiago, and need sustenance, there are numerous ways in which you can find it. Just talking with fellow pilgrims about what is mulling in your mind during the walk is frequently all that's needed to get clarity. We can also get spiritual sustenance in our community of believers, but partaking in Holy Communion

during Advent is like having a spiritual water station to guide our preparations for the celebration of the birth of Christ Jesus.

Consider: How do you sustain yourself during periods of weakness and spiritual doubt? My experience has been that studying the Scriptures, repentance and prayer, and reminding myself of all that God has done for me over the years is all I need to keep my heart centred on Christ.



Prayer: Eternal God, in this Advent, where we celebrate the birth of Jesus, we are grateful that You have given us Holy Communion, where we are reminded of the sacrifice of Your Son Christ Jesus and of Your sanctifying grace. Grant that we may go into the world in the strength of Your Spirit, to give ourselves for others, in Christ's name. AMEN