

Companions on the Way



Worship Resources

Advent Year A

Overview: Weeks 1-4

Week One: Awake

"... it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep." (Romans 13:11)

Most spiritual traditions have the theme of awakening as one their primary messages. But what are we awakening to? Isaiah can be read as quite triumphant. Matthew can be read as quite frighteningly about end-times. And Romans makes it clear that believing, or conversion to the Christian faith, is not necessarily awake enough! It may seem that after all these years (and some of us have been celebrating and earnestly "doing" Advent for decades) we are waiting still to be awake enough!

One way of understanding the perennial call to awaken is that we all live historically and spiritually in between the time of the historical incarnation of the divine in human flesh (the time of Jesus walking upon the earth) and the second coming, or fulfilment of the human-divine relationship. Our awakening then is in this context of always coming to experience more fully the implications of the incarnation and the still to be fulfilled potential of our part in the cosmos. In a sense then we are always awakening, growing in awareness and enlightenment (or being filled with the light). So, year after year it is right that we should be reminded of the need to awaken. And season after season we grow in grace because we grow not from our starting place at the beginning but from where we are now.

Week Two: Prepare for the Reign of God

Well this sounds a bit more like Advent- Isaiah gives us messages of hope and images of natural enemies like the lion and the lamb lying down together. Well yes and not so much. Yes, these are hope filled messages of what the world living out of God's notions of justice and mercy

might look like. But once again these are pretty-demanding and provocative statements about what is required of the person of faith and the people of faith. God is not going to do all the work, and even the work that God does will be fairly-hard spiritual and psychological work - an axe to the root of the tree and a winnowing fork with chaff for the fire.

Christians have often interpreted these sorts of Scriptures as suggesting that individual persons and whole groups of persons are going to be in (the surviving shoot or the wheat rather than the chaff) or out (the pruned branches and the chaff) but this is a rather black and white reading of colourful nuanced metaphors. Any farmer or agricultural worker in Biblical times would have known that pruning and sorting were normal agricultural practices and that they were not necessarily signs of wrongdoing or failure. Rather we might see them as images of the rigorous work of encouraging growth and recovery in order to yield a good harvest.

Week Three: Rejoice, even Fools shall not lose their way

I love our reading from Isaiah this week. What is not to love? Images of gardens dripping with moisture and beauty in the barren lands; feeble hands and knees strengthened again; the most marginalised - the blind and the lame - able to participate fully. Even vengeance- if we desire it- will be taken care of for us. If we only had this reading we could hear that we get to faithfully prayerfully sit back and wait for God's generous righteous reign to get started.

But read in the context of the other readings it is a bit more complex than that. Indeed, heard all together it poses a question about for what and for whom are we waiting?

Week Four: Coming Ready or Not

At long last the Christmas story we have all been waiting for. Sort of. Once again hearing the gospel in the context of the prophets and psalmists both makes the meaning more emphatic but also more complex.

We think the way in which Jesus saves us is by dying for us. This is what we celebrate every Easter and every Sunday when we take part of the holy meal. And, of course it is true that the death of Jesus has a salvific effect. But there is no talk of death here. The prophecy and the gospel focus is all on birth and those who contributed to the birthing of Emmanuel by prophesying, by dreaming, by succumbing to the spirit. At the very least we need to hold birth and death as intertwined and of equal importance. Not just to be polite or theological fair but because you cannot have one without the other. Indeed, with Jesus it is always birth into life,

death and resurrection into the bigger cosmic life. This is not a cute small story. It is no less than the pouring of divinity into human life with all the delight and vulnerability that birth means. Now we are ready to celebrate the remembrance of the birth of baby Jesus and to invite the Christ into our world.

Daily Reflections: Week 1

Awaken

For personal devotions, I suggest that you spend time each morning before the other concerns of your day overtake you. If you are of the discipline of formal Morning Prayer then you may wish to incorporate these readings and reflections into worship instead of other readings. Keep it as simple as you can for you are inviting your heart as well as your mind to quieten and open. Less is often more.

Day One: Read Matthew 24: 36 - 44

Acknowledge whatever jolting or jarring of the spirit, feel any reluctance or excitement or dread, allow whatever reaction/s you have to happen in response to this reading. This is Scripture that intends to awaken the reader.

Many of us are tired before Advent even starts knowing that it heralds our busiest time of the year. Maybe all we want is a little more sleep or at least rest before we start the work of Advent. But we hear Jesus speaking to his own near the end of his earthly life and he is urging his followers to awaken and stay awake as things are about to happen. Jesus asks his followers to look back to just before the flood and the ending of the then known world and forward to the ending of their known world.

Great things are nearing. The new order, the reign of God, requires that the old order get shaken about - disordered, disturbed, disrupted.

Reflect on what in your inner world, in your shared life with others, and in the outside world needs disordering (or at least significant reordering), needs a little disturbing, needs to be disrupted? How ready and desirous of being disrupted by the coming reign of God are you? What do you long for to be different? And what are you not quite ready to hand over or have overhauled? Identify the longing and the resistance. No judgement just self knowledge.

Be encouraged that Maria Boulding says in her wonderful work "The Coming of God" that we need only desire to have desire and that is enough for the spirit to begin its work.

And if you can find any desire for disturbance and being stirred up consider checking out the band [Disturbed sing Sounds of Silence \(several versions are available on YouTube\)](#) to allow yourself to be disturbed by the unorthodox treatment of a classic song and- for me at least - to get a thrilling sense of why our world needs to be disturbed and reordered. Whenever I watch this video I feel a deep desire for things to be disturbed and changed in our world, I get a sense of the urgency of the coming of God into this world. See how you react.

Day Two: Read Isaiah 2: 1 - 5

What beautiful words. Think of the barren and broken parts of your life and relationships as you hear the promise of justice and a new order being established. Think of all the things on the evening news as you visualise the nations coming for just judgement and reordering.

Can you visualise spears being beaten into ploughshares? What examples of spears being beaten into ploughshares can you identify in your life, in the world that you know?

If you need some help visualising this google images of this, listen and watch [TEDtalk by Jolyon Mitchell "Swords into Ploughshares: Arms into Art"](#). I have a pair of earrings my adult children bought me last Mother's Day that are made from bullets by women in Ethiopia who have been treated for obstetric fistula. Many charities have similar products. It can help our stuck imaginations break free and begin to recognise the need and the opportunities to see a new way of being the nations, communities, and families of earth.

And consider listening to the gospel favourite "Down by the Riverside" sometimes also known as Study War No More. YouTube has great renditions by gospel singers Sweet Honey in the Rock and a more bluesy one by Ben and Micah Hester. Sing along; nurture the desire for a different world. Go about your day with this song in your heart, with images of how weapons can be turned into art. Let Isaiah be the lens through which you experience the everyday.

Day Three: Read Psalm 122

"Pray for the peace of Jerusalem; 'May they prosper who love you. Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers.' For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, 'Peace be within you.'"

To a great extent - our peace, our prosperity, our very survival depends on each other. We can think of this in political and environmental terms. I cannot pray for my family and friend's wellbeing without invoking justice, mercy and abundance for all. Not in this interconnected world.

How does the image of an interconnected world sit with you? Does it fill you with love and concern for others or feel overwhelming? Do you want to determine who you are connected with and who is left out of your world?

[You might like to look up the YouTube video called Cosmic Eye.](#)

Day Four: Read Romans 13:9 - 14

Does this reading sound menacing to you? Does it make you feel like you and others are running out of time? Certainly, as Paul wrote this from within a prison cell he may have felt a sense of time running down for himself and for those waiting for the return of Jesus in their time. But this can also be read as an invitation - albeit it in urgent language - to ever deepening levels of awakening and awareness. Conversion, coming to belief and baptism, is just the beginning. There is yet more, always more. Maybe rather than anxious we might feel excited, hopeful, affirmed by this reading.

The path we are on is important, is so important that it is always inviting us deeper and further. The urgency of the passage need not be understood as threatening rather than as encouraging. The moral urgency is not only about what not to do but all the good that is called from us for our sake and for the sake of the world.

I can't help but think of that old Advent hymn "There's a Light Upon the Mountain." 'He is breaking down the barriers, he is casting up the way, he is calling for his angels to build up the gates of day: but his angels here are human, not the shining hosts above; for the drumbeats of his army are the heart-beats of our love.'

Day Five: Read all four readings set for the First Sunday in Advent. I share with you where my reflections have taken me. Where are you being led?

" ... it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep." (Romans 13:11)

Most spiritual traditions have the theme of awakening as one their primary messages. But what are we awakening to? Many of us in the church and in the general community are getting ready to remember and welcome a baby, the baby Jesus. We are getting ready for Christmas and all the wonderful things that means for many of us. So why are our Advent readings so disturbing? Year after year we get taken by surprise and unsettled. Advent, especially in the light of Matthew's gospel, prepares us for making room for the baby Jesus and the new world that he heralded by having our known world shaken up.

Isaiah can be read as quite triumphant. Matthew can be read as quite historically about end-times. And Romans makes it clear that believing, or conversion to the Christian faith, is not necessarily awake enough! It may seem that after all these years (and some of us have been celebrating and earnestly "doing" Advent for decades) we are waiting still to be awake enough!

One way of understanding the perennial call to awaken is that we all live historically and spiritually in between the time of the historical incarnation of the divine in human flesh (the time of Jesus walking upon the earth) and the second coming, or fulfilment of the human-divine relationship. Our awakening then is in this context of always coming to experience more fully the implications of the incarnation and the still to be fulfilled potential of our part in the cosmos. In a sense then we are always awakening, growing in awareness and enlightenment (or being filled with the light). So, year after year it is right that we should be reminded of the need to awaken. And season after season we grow in grace because we grow not from our starting place at the beginning but from where we are now.

And I believe that as the community of believers we are called to be awakened in the space between the triumphal image of Israel (or our religious side) being the wise centre of the known world that all come to for wisdom and righteous judgement and the frightening images from Matthew of end time destruction and uncertainty. Both images can be projected onto the world as we experience it personally and through our newsfeeds. And yes, who among us does not wish that a spiritually righteous wise nation might enact God's laws in our seemingly lawless world? And who among us does not see and hear things that make us fear that surely we are getting near the end of where our human error and greed can take us?

I believe that we are called to hear and see both images and to awaken to both the reality of how things are-wonderful and dreadful- and to be awakened to how things might be if we lived as expressions of the reign of God now where we are, individually (Gust us) and collectively (all of us). We are to awaken to what is and what can be.

Personally: in our souls, in our most intimate relationships, in our workplaces and in our communities. And that means first and foremost in our imaginations and hearts and minds. We are called upon to develop a longing, an appetite for justice and mercy and grace and peace and joy. We need to desire the reign of God so much that we not only want it later when our lives are finished but now while we live. And to dedicate our lives into living into and out from the certain knowledge that God loves matter, human flesh, creaturely existence not only in his son whose historic birth we are getting ready to celebrate but in every expression including us and our enemies and our fragile precious planet!!!

Questions for the faithful people:

1. What are you afraid of?
2. What hopeful signs of the kingdom do you see?
3. What are you prepared to do with your life to make the kingdom real?

Can you hear the drumbeats of your heart over whatever other noises clamour outside your door? And if you're not entirely excited then remember even the desire to desire the coming of God is enough.

Daily Reflections: Week 2

Prepare for the Reign of God

Personal Devotions: I suggest that you spend time each morning before the other concerns of your day overtake you. If you of the discipline of formal Morning Prayer then you may wish to incorporate these readings and reflections into worship instead of other readings. Keep it as simple as you can for you are inviting your heart as well as your mind to quieten and open. Less is often more.

Day One: Read Isaiah 11:1-10

How beautiful the image that Isaiah foresees, how tender and merciful the prophesy of how the people of God might live under the leadership of a just and righteous leader. Allow your heart and imagination to respond to the image.

And allow the fear and distress to surface of what it is like to live in this time when we see and hear of leaders around the world slaying not only lions but their own people and destroying the

creation. Notice whatever tension, musing or wondering you might have as you seek to hold the vision of what might be and what is.

It is thought that the historical context of this prophecy was the downfall of the Assyrian empire, possibly the exile, and maybe even the young Josiah whose father Amon was assassinated. There were many times when the people of God might have heard these words with bitter sweet longing and we in our time can feel the longing for such a time of justice and mercy and lament the injustice and lack of mercy we see everywhere.

We followers of Jesus of course see in his earthly ministry many of these qualities. And yet he did not exercise authority and ministry in ordinary human society as leader although some of his followers seem to have wanted him to be a mighty leader. How then do we live in this “in-between time” when we recognise the longed-for but not-yet quality of the kingdom of God that Jesus announced? Is this part of the understanding of what it means to wait for, work towards readiness for, the second coming of Christ, or the fulfilment of creation?

Pray for all that is broken and unjust in our world, in your world, and pray for the imagination (the things that eyes cannot yet see and ears not yet hear) of how, when and in whom the kingdom of God might be emerging. If your imagination needs stimulating you might like to look up on [You Tube Leonard Cohen - Hallelujah - Flash Mob](#) (a wonderful image of a broken hallelujah breaking out in the midst of ordinary life). Or is you like your Hallelujah's more traditional then look up [Christmas Food Court Flash Mob Hallelujah](#).

Day Two: Read Psalm 72

One of the many things I love about our forebears in faith, the Hebrew people, is that they understood that a blessed life was expressed in the ordinary and earthy things of a good harvest, healthy livestock, a growing family and a just political system. Allow this psalm to be like rain upon a new mown field, an abundance of food for all including the poor, and the shared peace that flourishes where there is righteousness. Let your imagination and longing detail how you want your life, your community's life, and this world to look and feel. Let the vision of justice and peace grow in you. We spend so much time being sensible and reasonable in what we ask of life, we lower our standards as a community, we are being beaten into believing that destruction of habitat and human diversity is inevitable. Allow the God inspired vision of how life for a whole people and interconnected community of beings can be when there is justice. Recognise, treasure and encourage the vision.

As you go about today look with eyes that have seen a better way of being, listen with ears that strain for echoes of justice and mercy, perceive with a heart open to all including most especially those who are in need of rescue.

If you enjoy having your imagination tickled with videos then have a look at [What a Wonderful World](#), either the hand puppet version or [Playing for Change](#).

Day Three Read Romans 15:4-13

Allow these words to encourage you and feel whatever hope there is in you to well up from within like a spring fed pool. Reflect on all that gives you hope in your life - your family, your friends, your church community, and the world around you.

And, also acknowledge all that works against hope in you and the world as you see it. Hope does not cancel out problems. Indeed, if we truly live as the people of hope we will stir up reactions that might be hurtful or in other ways costly to ourselves. Many of those Paul was writing to were hosts in the home churches of Rome and invited in to their homes those who were not observant Jews (especially an issue in the community related to food and purity laws) so there were very real consequences to living out there hope and faith.

The hope that we have is the fruit of our forebear's faith. And our faith is a channel for the hope that others will inherit. We need to embody this hope for others. How do you, or might you, embody hope for your community, family, world?

If it is to your taste you could listen to [Make me a Channel of your Peace](#).

Day Four Read Matthew 3:1-12

Here he is - John the Baptist. He gets so many really good lines! Those of us of a certain age probably cannot help but hear [Prepare Ye the Way from Godspell \(look up the 1973 video on YouTube\)](#). Do you feel a thrill of the good news that is coming?

And how do you respond to the accusation that those who came to hear him speak were a brood of vipers? Are you squirming? It is easy to hear these words while watching the evening news - it is easy enough to recognise the viperfishes of others. Do we feel that we might need to wear that description?

What did John really mean? It is clearly an insult and a way of calling out hypocrisy. It also probably alludes to the image of being of the seed of the serpent or evil forces. And he then contrasts this with being of the seed of Abraham. It is strong language but not without hope and life giving challenge. 'Well, bear fruit worthy of repentance.' And then John describes in the language of agriculture of his day what happens to trees that don't bear fruit, and the parts of the crop (chaff) that are left over.

John is challenging them and us and not writing us off. It is more like a slap across the face (still alarming enough!) in order to awaken us out of whatever daze we and our world might be in

Day Five: Read all four readings set for the Second Sunday in Advent. I share with you where my reflections have taken me. Where are you being led?

The theme of the second week of Advent seems to me to be all about preparing for the reign of God - throughout the history of the chosen people, back in the first century getting ready for Jesus, now in our hearts, and in our world.

Preparing for the reign of God is both about recognising what God has done in the world, is doing in the world now, and hearing what is required of us as our part in the process. It is therefore both thrilling and daunting, hopeful and challenging, liberating and self-surrendering.

In the vision of Isaiah and the psalmist we see how just, merciful and abundant the world might be like under the reign of God and god's faithful servants. These images are hope inspiring and balm to our exhausted and broken hearts and minds. We who have been fed a diet of appalling news, human tragedy and corruption, and environmental degradation can succumb to despair. The prophetic vision of how things might be can revive our spirits within us.

But the readings are also deeply challenging and leave us no wriggle room as we are confronted with the hypocrisy and life limiting choices we have individually and corporately made. Preparation for the coming reign of God is a promise and a rallying cry to step up and to become what and who we are most fully meant to be, for our sake and for the sake of others. Part of that process of becoming is I think to allow ourselves to be deeply informed by the vision of God's good intentions and desires for the world. What we attend to informs and influences us so it is important to stay focused on the things that make for life and love.

And I think the agricultural images in the gospel remind us that part of the process is also to give ourselves over to being pruned and sorted, just like any vine, tree or crop. I come from the dry Wheatbelt and the thought of pruning anything that was even slightly green always seemed shocking to me. But since I have come to live in a greener world and have roses, fruit trees and vegetables I have learnt to take a deep breath and prune - for the greater flourishing of flower and fruit. I am beginning to grasp how the language of pruning is actually the language of love, growth and fulfilment! Alternating seasons of being built up and then being seriously pruned.

Images of fire rightly frighten us in Australian summer, when Advent falls. But burning the pruning's and the chaff and agricultural waste was and is normal land management and need not be seen as final judgement. Likewise, most of us now know that language that was interpreted by many to be about eternal fires of damnation were more specifically about the burning rubbish tip on the outskirts of Jerusalem. Certainly, a place where the most outcast worked and maybe lived (a little like rubbish tips in many of the world's most overpopulated cities now) and that made a wretched stench. But it was a place of everyday earthly management of what was not wanted by the city population. So, to be threatened with fire is certainly not pleasant or easy but it is not necessarily about eternal damnation, rather about the serious aspects of waste management of what was a by-product of human life and agricultural work.

I don't know about your life but mine produces waste that needs taking care of and fire is part of the cleansing process.

So, as we prepare for the reign of God in our hearts, communities and world we turn toward the vision of how things might be even yet. And we take a deep breath and give ourselves over to the work of being changed and growing into the people of God's kingdom.

Advent Group Week Two

The theme this week seems to be Prepare for the Reign of God. As the awakened people of God - we are invited, challenged and provoked into getting ready to welcome the reign of God and to be co-workers in the in-pouring and out-working of God's activity in our world.

John the Baptist emerges from the wilderness crying, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, "Prepare the way of the Lord". Which is good news but it does seem to be disturbing - to the

people who gathered on the edge of the wilderness to check out John, and to those of us who hear this year by year. News of the nearness of God is always good news but it is often disturbing because it heralds change.

We may not particularly like the way the world is - the corruption and the injustice, the sadness and grief, and all the other problems - but we have learnt how to live within it and even good change threatens our sense of security that we get from understanding the world order. Living in this world and welcoming the reign of God creates tension and dilemma for most of us. Some of us thrive on that challenge and others of us are unnerved by it. Advent encourages us into the ultimately hopeful task of engaging with change, growth and becoming citizens of the kingdom of God.

Discuss

When you hear the words "Prepare the way of the Lord" are you excited or a bit wary and quite possible weary? And, of course it may be a mixture of all of these reactions and others. Share where you are up to this year, this week.

How do you react to the wonderful vision of how God's chosen people might live in justice, mercy and abundance? Do you still hold these hopes for this world, for your corner of it, for your own relationships? Share what you most long for to be different about our world.

How do you, and how might you, keep yourself hopeful and working toward the kingdom? What are the words and images that keep you hopeful, what spiritual practices keep you focused on the bigger glorious image of Isaiah's and your vision? (For me a variation of this question is how do I stay hopeful in the light of the evening news?)

And how do we as the people of God (the collective of faithful people rather than the individual persons of faith) live out this vision in such a way that we are leaven in the bread, salt of the earth, encouragers within our community? What difference do we make in our community? Is there a visionary quality to what we do that is different to what other good people do?

Daily Reflections: Week 3

Day One: Read Isaiah 35:1-10

What wonderful, uplifting, joyous words. My heart dances and smiles in anticipation of this wondrous promise of the restoring of the world, of our world, to fullness and joy. How does your heart react? What hope stirs in you? And what if any resistance or cynicism pushes back?

These promises were made to an exiled people, who although chosen had every reason to feel judged, punished and abandoned. These promises must have felt like restorative rain in a parched desert, and news of arriving rescue workers to the survivors of a terrible natural disaster.

And as followers of Jesus the Christ most also hear this as the promise of the one who would come and become the highway to God for all people. Last week we heard John the Baptist use the language of Isaiah when proclaiming "Prepare the way of the Lord".

I am also struck by the description of the way in verse 8. "A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveller, not even fools, shall go astray." It suggests to me that it is the process of journeying on the way that does the restoration. The decision to travel on the Holy Way and the process of travelling sorts us out - the unclean, or uninterested, cannot find or enter. Yet those who do want to travel, even those of us who are fools, shall find we are changed, refined, saved, and grown by the process of travelling the Holy Way.

Many in this age, as in the centuries before us, have walked in pilgrimage. If you want your imagination expanded have a look at some of the material available on the Camino. One saying, from the mystic Rumi, is "As you start to walk out on the way, the way appears." It is a decision to walk the Camino, or the Way of faith, but what unfolds on the path cannot be limited to what we choose or prepare ourselves for - the path will walk us as much as we walk the path.

Day Two: Read Psalm 146:5-10

One of the many things I love about the psalms and I presume those who wrote them is the honesty and faithfulness. At times the psalmist shakes their fist at heaven before then bowing in reverence and surrender to the greatness of God. Today's psalm is not that angry but there is a chronicling of both the blessings down through the generations from creation to the time of

Jacob and to the time in which the faithful are gathered (us now saying these psalms together) and a chronicling of the sufferings of humanity - oppression, hunger, being a stranger, being bowed down.

It is one of the tasks of mature faith and personhood to be able to hold both the blessing and the struggle and not pretend one or the other does not exist. In our times of blessing we need to be open to the struggles of others. And in our time of struggle and suffering we need to be able to hold onto the blessing of God.

Where are you at the moment? Can you recount the blessings in your life? And can you open your heart to the suffering and struggle in yourself, your family, your neighbours both near and far, well known and strangers? What we find to be opposites God manages to hold in the one loving embrace.

Day Three: Read James 5:7-10

You can almost hear the tender yet urgently encouraging tone of voice of the author. How do you respond when you are called Beloved? Does your heart lift within you at the encouragement that the Lord is coming, the harvest will come to those now suffering and waiting. And/or does your heart sink a little at the inference that the waiting will be more of the same - patience, waiting on the rain over which we have no control, withholding our grumblings (no matter how much due cause we are given!). As with yesterday it seems that we must learn how to hold and live with blessings and struggles, promises and waiting in the very real and sometimes painful world. In this way maybe Advent is practice for how we must live all of this earthly life. Informed by hope and able to translate the implications of our hope in the midst of very ordinary reality.

In the quietness of your prayers allow your hope to rest in the palm of one hand and your fears and struggles in the palm of the other hand. And then in prayer bring your hands together gently knowing that it is the rich mess of your life that you give over to God.

Day Four: Read Matthew 11:2-11

Which one amongst us has not asked of Jesus or God a variation on the question: "Are you the one ... or are we to wait for another?" And especially in those dark moments when we are imprisoned by pain, fear, confusion, grief. If we can imagine John the Baptist, who has lived his whole strange life in prophetic isolation and zeal is now a prisoner for his truth telling and facing

death. It sounds as though he is asking the inevitable question – “Has my life been worth it? Was I actually doing God’s will and not just wasting my time?”

Jesus’ response is a little curious. He does not directly say Yes but points to the evidence of the healing ministry he is undertaking. He does so using the words of Isaiah’s prophecy which is particularly relevant given John’s ministry has been to prepare the way for him using the language of Isaiah so I suspect that John would have heard not just ‘evidence’ but also the reassurance of his own world view being echoed positively back to him. Yes, you got it right; yes, your ministry has been important; yes, your achievements will echo down the halls of faith long after your life and death.

What leads you to question, doubt, and feel confused and directionless? And what language, images, promises of God help you know that you are on the right path? In faith there is room for both our uncertainties and our certainties – indeed probably both are necessary. Questions make room for answers and reassurances. A measure of certainty allows us to go on.

Day Five: Read all four readings again (and the Magnificat)

At long last, on the third Sunday of Advent, we have some readings that sound a note of joy. Not yet the sweet innocent joy of the baby in the manger but the deep joy of the exiled remnant of God anticipating returning to Zion as fast as their feeble knees will allow them; the courageous joy of the young Mary who glimpses that in her Yes to God is the raising up of the one who will make real the promises of God; and the relief of John the baptiser in hearing the evidence that Yes the one he baptised was indeed the holy one of God making real the promises of God in this broken world.

Each of our readings this week is amazing. Read together they are almost like a dialogue, a conversation between the hope and promise of Isaiah’s prophecies and the real-life struggles and limitations of our existence. Who is not encouraged by images of gardens dripping with moisture and beauty in the barren lands; feeble hands and knees strengthened again; the most marginalised – the blind and the lame – able to participate fully. Even vengeance – if we desire it – will be taken care of for us.

If we only had this reading we could hear that we get to faithfully prayerfully sit back and wait for God’s generous righteous reign to get started. But the other readings place us firmly in real life with all its struggles and uncertainties.

This means that the sort of rejoicing we are invited into is the sort of joy we can fully participate in. We do not need to pretend that all is easy or good or joy-joy-happy-happy to take our part in rejoicing. Indeed, this is the deep faith-filled courageous rejoicing of the broken, frail and failed ones who recognise in the promises of God the hope of the world.

Advent Group Three: Rejoice

At long last, on the third Sunday of Advent, we will hear a note of joy. Not yet the sweet innocent joy of the baby in the manger but the deep joy of the exiled remnant of God anticipating returning to Zion as fast as their feeble knees will allow them; the courageous joy of the young Mary who glimpses that in her Yes to God is the raising up of the one who will make real the promises of God; and the relief of John the baptiser in hearing the evidence that Yes the one he baptised was indeed the holy one of God making real the promises of God in this broken world.

Discuss

Several times it has been my privilege to read the Isaiah reading in a nursing home and the first few times I was uncomfortable about reading the promise that even the feeble knees would carry us on the way when I was surrounded by those whose knees didn't work anymore. However, I found that those with bad knees delighted in the reading! At some level those with bad knees understood the task of faith to hear and declare the promises of God while still living in the limited state that we so often do. How do you read the promises of God for wholeness and healing when you are in a place of pain or suffering?

James encourages the tribes of faith to have patience. How are your patience levels when you consider the issues on the evening news and the slowness sometimes to realise our plans and dreams in the tribe of faith?

When like John the baptiser have you wondered if your life's work has been misplaced or mistaken? What reassured you? And what helps you live with any remaining questions you may have?

What are you rejoicing about at this time in your life individually, as a faith group and as a community?

Daily Reflections: Week 4 (Ready or Not)

Day One: Read Isaiah 7:10-16

Emmanuel, God is with us, is one of my favourite titles for Jesus and given the number of beautiful timeless hymns it is a title that has deeply resonated with the people of faith for a very long time.

For many of us I suspect we hear "O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel." Those words and that haunting melody that captures the longing for the coming of God in such a way that we can sing the final verse "O come, O dayspring, come and cheer our spirits by your advent here; disperse the gloomy clouds of night and death's dark shadows put to flight. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel." with great hope in the face of whatever darkness that is threatening our world and life. (You can find either beautiful and conventional choir versions or a haunting version by the Piano Guys on You tube.)

Allow this hymn and the strange dark reading from Isaiah to stir the gloomy clouds of night and death's dark shadows, to stir the longing for a new day, to stir the hope that in the advent of Jesus, who is God with us, we may find our new again life. Imagine and anticipate how the coming of Jesus into human life, and the coming of the Christ into our world now is and can be the dayspring of our life.

Note to preachers: this is a complex text set against the political machinations of the 8th century BCE and needs, in all fairness, to be understood in that context before being projected onto the birth of Jesus. I recommend [Anathea Portier-Young's Commentary on Isaiah 7:10-16](#).

Day Two: Read Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

Through much of the history of the chosen people there was this great longing for the intervention of God to restore to the people their homeland, their flourishing as a nation with political stability, peace and respect with neighbours, and with a rich life-giving economy that brought abundance to all. Into this hope, Jesus was born at one of the low points in the chosen people's history. No wonder some of his followers would hope that he would step up into political worldly leadership. And we are inheritors of that longing, that desire for life to be restored to some past moment in which we apparently were a society in which we all flourished and lived abundantly. (Personally, my read of history is that there was never such a time but

there were times in history when there was a sense that incremental improvements were being made and that history was moving in the right direction at least. I don't think many feel that at the moment).

There is also in this psalm a sense in which our present sufferings are a judgement upon us for our past unfaithfulness as a nation, a chosen people, and as individuals. Reflect on what you think and feel we as a western culture, a nation, a church, and individuals are doing or not doing that might bring judgement or block the flow of the spirit of God in our world.

And hear the psalmist's hope that there would be one, a son of man, upon whom the power of God would rest. We see that fulfilment in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. How does the anticipation of the remembering of his humble birth give us life, give your life?

Day Three: Read Romans 1:1-7

At first read this is disappointingly formal and a little 'abstract' in the lead up to the longed-for birth of the Christ child. I can only assume that the lectionary writers have included it because it demonstrates Paul understands that Jesus was born of the line of David according to the flesh. Paul is mainly interested in the meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus but even Paul is convinced of the humanity of Jesus. And Paul is convinced that Jesus was and is the Son of God (which means in his context that Cesar is not!). Therefore, what might appear to us as formal, and dare I say it - boring, is actually quite incendiary in its time and place.

Paul is making it clear on his business card, or his job description, that he serves the one who was truly human and the Son of God. Paul is declaring this in his letter to the Romans where those reading it will know that Paul is dangerously claiming that the Emperor of the Roman Empire is therefore Not the Son of God.

As we get ready to gather around the cradle and sing lullabies to the infant Jesus we need to keep this claim in the back of our mind and allow the vulnerability of the infant and the power of the divine one coming among us to be felt.

Day Four: Read Matthew 1:18-25

At last the story we have been waiting for, the birth of baby Jesus. After all the build-up, all the hopes of Israel down through the ages, the longings of our own time, we come to the humble

story of a man and a woman, a pregnancy and a birth, and a baby. God comes to be with us, to become one of us, in the usual way of creatures through birth.

It is both a birth like any birth and an amazing birth. It is worth reading the first 17 verses of Matthew with all the begetting that went into the family tree of Jesus. It is a reflection on God's gracious activity in the midst of very conflicted and haphazard human history. "The genealogy is unusual in citing women, non-Jews, and morally questionable characters among the ancestors" - Aaron M. Cole in Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler editors of *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*.

One of the curiosities of this description of the family tree is that the names of several women are mentioned and they are all women who were on the outer and unlikely in that regard to be suitable carriers of the hope of Israel and yet here they are named as great, great, great, great grandmothers of this humble baby in whom the hopes of the world lay.

Tamar, possibly Gentile, who conceives twins by her father-in-law (having posed as a prostitute and seduced him because he had failed to take up his family responsibilities by his deceased son's wife). Rahab, the Canaanite prostitute who was faithful to Joshua's spies and therefore spared when Jericho fell and it seems became a wife of Salmon a solid citizen and produced Boaz.

Ruth, a Moabite woman whose mother-in-law Naomi works in desperate and dubious ways to have widowed daughter-in-law Ruth married to Boaz. And Bathsheba, wife of Uriah, who is seduced by King David who then has the husband murdered so he can claim his pregnant lover as wife. The child of their first union dies but they go on to produce Solomon. These scandalous women and the scandalous liaisons contributed to the genealogy of Joseph, the father of Jesus. Even though the story of the miraculous conception removes Joseph from the role of biological father it is his name and genealogy as line of David that Jesus is understood to be the fruit of.

Many have speculated about the common theme between these women but maybe most simply their presence reminds us that Jesus became one of us, and came out of and in to our very human history. (See Elizabeth A. Johnson "Dangerous Memories: A Mosaic of Mary in Scripture") And whilst Mary is revered as personally pure it also places in context the scandalous accusations that occurred to Joseph and that he only let go of because in a dream the Spirit called him to not be afraid to take this woman as his wife and as mother of this holy child.

Where in your own family tree and life has new life and blessing emerged out tawdry, broken, not very respectable history? In your prayers give thanks that the life giving Spirit of God has woven a garment of blessing out of the mess of your life and your history in the past. And pray that whatever is messy now might be made anew by the Spirit of God.

Day Five: Read all four texts

At long last the Christmas story we have all been waiting for. Sort of. Once again hearing the gospel in the context of the prophets and psalmists both makes the meaning more emphatic but also more complex.

We think the way in which Jesus saves us is by dying for us. This is what we celebrate every Easter and every Sunday when we take part of the holy meal. And, of course it is true that the death of Jesus has a salvific effect. But there is no talk of death in the gospel account. The prophecy and the gospel focus is all on birth and those who contributed to the birthing of Emmanuel by prophesying, by dreaming, by succumbing to the spirit.

At the very least we need to hold birth and death as intertwined and of equal importance. Not just to be polite or theologically fair but because you cannot have one without the other. Indeed, with Jesus it is always birth into life, death and resurrection. And with Jesus death is always a dying into the bigger cosmic life. This is not a cute small story. It is no less than the pouring of divinity into human life with all the delight and vulnerability that birth and bodily life means.

Now we are ready enough to celebrate the remembrance of the birth of baby Jesus and to invite the Christ into our world to be our hope, our restoration, and our initiator into a larger more just more loving life that will have no end.

Advent Week Four Group

The theme this week announces that the birth of the holy child, God is with us, comes to us ready or not. We are longing for his arrival but somehow never quite ready.

According to the witness of Matthew this child comes to us, the fruit of all the generations of human kind, including all the famous and the infamous. A family history and relatives that we may not think fit for the Messiah and yet would recognise in our own family tree. There was a time when if we had a convict or criminal in our family tree we would keep quiet about it. But now we claim such relatives with pride. Partly I suspect to right the wrongs of history but I hope

also because we recognise ourselves in the sinners and the saints in our family tree and in society.

Discuss

We may embrace the scandalous in our own family tree but how do we feel about Jesus having some curious and dubious forebears in his own family tree? Are we shocked or a bit thrilled? Does it make sense to us that Emanuel, God with us, should join us so completely in the human enterprise that Jesus took upon himself not only humble flesh as in "flesh" but also flesh that was humble because it was so particularly human as in a very particular family that was both royal and terribly common? (Now we don't know anything about Mary's lineage but it would hardly be more noble than the royal line of David.)

Joseph has often been almost left out of the Jesus story but in Matthew's account he is at least as important as Mary. Joseph is both very conventional - he wishes to dismiss his betrothed for being pregnant - but also very open to the spirit and twice listens to and follows the prompting of the spirit that comes to him in dreams: firstly, in taking Mary as his wife to protect her and insure the care for the unexpected infant; and then in discerning that they are at risk from Herod and taking his little family to Egypt by a back road and thus escaping the terrible jealous rage of Herod. How do you, or don't you, identify with Joseph and his struggle to be faithful in difficult and confusing circumstances?

The story of the birth of Jesus can be told as a very beautiful Christmas card or carol, or as a rather earthy and troubled story with characters very like ourselves. There is a wonderful quote from Meister Eckhart "What good is it to me that Mary gave birth to the Son of God fourteen hundred years ago, if I do not also give birth to the Son of God in my time and in my culture? We are all meant to be mothers of God. God is always needing to be born." How do you see yourself as giving birth to God in your world?