



Finding Hope: Journeying through Advent 2020

Foreword by Andy Livingston

We all know that we need to read the Word of God. We all know that we need to try and read it daily. And we all know that often we fail to do this and feel bad about it. Lent and Advent are times where we can re-focus and try new ways and start new helpful habits. This Advent Season may be the time which you can kickstart your Bible reading if it has languished, become a bit stale or just stopped.

This Advent Daily Devotion, “Finding Hope” may be just what you need. We hope that the short Bible readings “Journeying through Advent” together with a few thoughts and a prayer, will direct your hearts toward what the Lord has done for us as we head towards Christmas. We pray, above all, that it will re-invigorate your spiritual life.

“Finding Hope” is the heart of the Christmas message. That our God took on flesh, came to this earth as a baby in order to redeem us. Our wonderful Kinsman-Redeemer, Jesus, who takes upon Himself all our debts, worries and burdens willingly, so we can indeed be at peace with Him and others. That really is true hope for this life and a sure hope for the future.

Our prayer is that as you follow this Advent Daily Devotional, “Finding Hope” you will grow closer to the One who is right there beside us in the muck of life willing to take on all on our behalf.

May God bless you this Advent,

Andy

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Week 1: The Patriarchs

Day 1: Sun 29th November: We Hope for a serpent -crushing Saviour (Genesis 3:1-15)

Blessed are you Sovereign God, God of our ancestors. To you be praise and glory for ever. You called the patriarchs to live by the light of faith and to journey in the hope of your promised fulfilment. May we also be obedient to your call, and live by faith, trusting in your promises and great love. And during this time of Advent may we receive more fully all that Christ Jesus has given to us. In his name, Amen.

Listen: Read Genesis 3: 1-15

Is there any food that you find irresistible? I don't imagine that it is an apple! Mine must be chocolate, preferably dark. We don't know that it was an apple for Adam and Eve either, but they found something they shouldn't eat irresistible. They were tempted to do the wrong thing and gave in to temptation rather than obeying God their maker. As a result, their intimate loving relationship with God was broken and they felt ashamed and guilty causing them to hide.

Thankfully, God's love for us is not diminished by our wrongdoing. God made a promise to Adam and Eve and to all people. The promise was that through a man, the serpent who had been instrumental in the downfall of humankind will be crushed. This promise was fulfilled by Jesus Christ on the cross when the power of the devil, hidden once behind the mask of the serpent was exposed and overcome. We rejoice in the knowledge that Jesus has power over all evil and when Jesus returns to earth all works of the devil will finally be destroyed for ever.

Reflect: In what ways am I tempted? Temptation is not a sin; it is a call to battle. Praise God, we do battle in Christ's strength not our own.

Heavenly father, we give you thanks that you have, throughout the ages, remained faithful to your promise to redeem those who trust in you. Through the power of your Holy Spirit deepen our faith, that we might continue to trust in your faithfulness and even in the midst of turmoil view the future with hope.

This we pray in Jesus' name, Amen

Day 2: Monday 30th November: We Hope in God's promise of people, place and blessing (Genesis 12:1-3)

Blessed are you Sovereign God, God of our ancestors. To you be praise and glory for ever. You called the patriarchs to live by the light of faith and to journey in the hope of your promised fulfilment. May we also be obedient to your call, and live by faith, trusting in your promises and great love. And during this time of Advent may we receive more fully all that Christ Jesus has given to us. In his name, Amen.

Listen: Read Genesis 12: 1-3

The story of redeeming grace promised in yesterday's reading begins today with Abraham. It begins the history of God's covenant people leading to its fulfilment in God's son Jesus Christ.

When I am going on a journey, I love to plan it on a map and then book places to stay en route. It means that I can look forward to new places and have assurance that I will have a comfortable place to stay at night. However, suppose I had to go on a journey without any real knowledge of the destination or place to stay. This was the situation for Abraham. God told him to leave his people and his country and go. There was no map or GPS. We may be tempted to think this was easy for him but Ur, where he was living, was at the height of its prosperity. He did not know where he was going BUT he did know with whom he was going. And so, do we!

Life is incredibly challenging this year. We are not sure of what is happening from day to day or what the future holds for us. But we do know like Abraham that we are not alone on our journey. God travels with us. This is better than any GPS as God knows the way and any hazards that may occur. And just like Jesus on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24) God makes it interesting and gives us fresh understanding about who he is and where we fit into the story.

Abraham said 'Yes' to God and God gave a promise of, people, place and blessing. A blessing for all nations that reaches us today. Praise God.

Reflect: Imagine your future journey of life with Jesus by your side.

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This we pray in Jesus' name, Amen

Day 3: Tuesday 1st December: We Hope for someone to take our place in death (Genesis 22:1-19)

Blessed are you Sovereign God, God of our ancestors. To you be praise and glory for ever. You called the patriarchs to live by the light of faith and to journey in the hope of your promised fulfilment. May we also be obedient to your call, and live by faith, trusting in your promises and great love. And during this time of Advent may we receive more fully all that Christ Jesus has given to us. In his name, Amen.

Today's reading is hard, but it does teach us about faith, and reminds us that Jesus took our place in death so that we will have eternal life.

Listen: Read Genesis 22: 1-19

Have you ever had the awful experience of hearing gossip about a loved one? How did you react or how would you react if you did? Hopefully, you would give your loved one the benefit of the doubt and wait to find out the truth.

Abraham's faith is strong. He obeyed God even when he did not understand God's plan. He gave God the benefit of doubt because he did understand that God is Good. All the time God is good. Abraham's faith could be described as **F** feeling **A** afraid **I I T** trust **H** him. It cannot have been easy to obey. Paul Tournier said, "Faith is not shelter against difficulties but belief in the face of contradictions". At the end of today's reading we see that God provides a ram for sacrifice and Abraham's faith is vindicated. This is a picture or foreshadowing of God's provision through his son Jesus Christ who was the ultimate sacrifice for the sin of the world. This means that death has lost its sting and death is now our pathway to eternal life. Jesus has taken the judgement of our sin in his body on the cross; taken our place in death so that we have life with Him forever more. Hallelujah!

Reflect: From your past, what experiences help you to know that God is good. How can this help you in the future?

Heavenly father, we give you thanks that you have, throughout the ages, remained faithful to your promise to redeem those who trust in you. Through the power of your Holy Spirit deepen our faith, that we might continue to trust in your faithfulness and even in the midst of turmoil view the future with hope.

This we pray in Jesus' name, Amen

Day 4: Wednesday 2nd December: We Hope for a stairway to heaven (Genesis 28:10-22)

Blessed are you Sovereign God, God of our ancestors. To you be praise and glory for ever. You called the patriarchs to live by the light of faith and to journey in the hope of your promised fulfilment. May we also be obedient to your call, and live by faith, trusting in your promises and great love. And during this time of Advent may we receive more fully all that Christ Jesus has given to us. In his name, Amen.

Listen: Read Genesis 28: 10-22

What kind of dreams do you have? Joel prophesied that when the Holy Spirit came, we would see visions and dream dreams! In today's reading Jacob encountered God in his dream and was amazed and awed by God's presence. Jacob, one of the patriarchs, vowed that the Lord would be his God, knowing that God would be with him throughout his life.

In his dream Jacob realised that God, the father of Abraham and Isaac, promised his blessing to Jacob as a descendant of the covenant given to Abraham. Through the picture he saw of the stairway he realised that God holds the pathway to heaven. We know that the pathway to heaven is made available to us all through Jesus Christ, God's only son who declared 'I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the father except through me'. Jesus is our stairway to heaven. We do not have to dream it. We can know the presence of Jesus in our lives as soon as we invite him to walk with us on life's journey. This is a wonderful privilege and joy for me, and I hope for you too. If you have never invited Jesus into your life, please do so today and experience his joy and peace.

Reflect: How do I experience God's presence? Ask the Lord to help you recognise His presence with you today.

Heavenly father, we give you thanks that you have, throughout the ages, remained faithful to your promise to redeem those who trust in you. Through the power of your Holy Spirit deepen our faith, that we might continue to trust in your faithfulness and even in the midst of turmoil view the future with hope.

This we pray in Jesus' name, Amen

Day 5: Thursday 3rd December: We Hope for a Passover Lamb (Exodus 12:1-13)

Blessed are you Sovereign God, God of our ancestors. To you be praise and glory for ever. You called the patriarchs to live by the light of faith and to journey in the hope of your promised fulfilment. May we also be obedient to your call, and live by faith, trusting in your promises and great love. And during this time of Advent may we receive more fully all that Christ Jesus has given to us. In his name, Amen.

Listen: Read Exodus 12: 1-13

Everyone's hope seems to be in a vaccine to save them from the pandemic. Is this the answer to all our fears? In today's reading we see the foreshadowing of the true Passover Lamb Jesus, who alone brings true salvation.

The first Passover, as we have just read, is an amazing event in the history of the Jewish people. It marks the end of slavery in Egypt for the people of Israel. As they prepared for this Passover they put their whole trust in God and his power and love to save and deliver them. Their trust had to be acted upon. They chose a perfect lamb; they painted the door posts with the blood of the lamb; they roasted the meat; they made bread without yeast; and they ate while dressed ready to depart. Every house that had the blood on the door posts was passed over when God brought judgement on Egypt. All the people who trusted and obeyed God's instructions were saved. In the same way judgement for our sin is passed over by the blood of Jesus. He is the true perfect Passover Lamb shedding his blood on the cross for us. We do not paint his blood on the door posts but we do accept his shedding of blood as a way for our sins to be forgiven. When John the Baptist saw Jesus he said 'Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world'. We may look for worldly thing to ease our pain but only Jesus can truly save us from sin and judgement. We hope with joy because 'there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus'. (Romans 8:1)

Reflect: What actions demonstrate my faith?

Heavenly father, we give you thanks that you have, throughout the ages, remained faithful to your promise to redeem those who trust in you. Through the power of your Holy Spirit deepen our faith, that we might continue to trust in your faithfulness and even in the midst of turmoil view the future with hope.

This we pray in Jesus' name, Amen

Day 6: Friday 4th December: We Hope for a king like David (2 Samuel 7:1-17)

Blessed are you Sovereign God, God of our ancestors. To you be praise and glory for ever. You called the patriarchs to live by the light of faith and to journey in the hope of your promised fulfilment. May we also be obedient to your call, and live by faith, trusting in your promises and great love. And during this time of Advent may we receive more fully all that Christ Jesus has given to us. In his name, Amen.

Listen: Read 2 Samuel 7:1-17

Genealogy is an immensely popular pastime. There is even a television programme dedicated to helping celebrities find out about their ancestors. In the first chapter of Matthew's gospel we have the genealogy of Jesus beginning with the words- Jesus the Messiah, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham...

David was divinely appointed by God as King of Israel and he established a unified Kingdom. He was not perfect but had amazing faith in God and desired to see God glorified above all else. This is one of the reasons David wanted to build a temple for God. He was living in a palace and the ark of the covenant, symbolising God's presence, was still in a tent. However, God's plan did not allow for David to build the temple. God did make a promise to David that his dynasty would last forever. This is an unfolding of the promise given to Abraham. Jesus fulfils this promise made to King David. Jesus is the King of Kings and will reign for all eternity. When Jesus comes again all nations will bow down before him. Jesus as King is like no other. He rules with truth, justice and goodness and mercy.

Reflect: Imagine what life would be like if world leaders ruled with truth, justice, goodness, and mercy. Pray for God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven.

*Heavenly father, we give you thanks that you have, throughout the ages, remained faithful to your promise to redeem those who trust in you. Through the power of your Holy Spirit deepen our faith, that we might continue to trust in your faithfulness and even in the midst of turmoil view the future with hope.
This we pray in Jesus' name, Amen*

Day 7: Saturday 5th December: We Hope for a Shepherd (Psalm 23)

Blessed are you Sovereign God, God of our ancestors. To you be praise and glory for ever. You called the patriarchs to live by the light of faith and to journey in the hope of your promised fulfilment. May we also be obedient to your call, and live by faith, trusting in your promises and great love. And during this time of Advent may we receive more fully all that Christ Jesus has given to us. In his name, Amen.

We all need some TLC in this difficult year. Today's reading gives us this in shed loads. It is a well-known reading but try and look at it with fresh eyes and ears. Here is real comfort and joy!

Listen: Read Psalm 23

David the shepherd boy knew all about sheep. He knew how foolish they could be; falling in turbulent water and liable to drown; or wandering off and getting lost; or being unaware of the danger from wild animals. David had learned how to care for his sheep and so he writes this beautiful poem of The Lord as our shepherd. The first line is worth remembering as it says it all. The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. The psalm reminds us that God's purpose as our shepherd is to bring us into an intimate relationship with himself. God's promises to those who trust him as their Shepherd are many. He will provide for us; he leads us in the right paths; he protects us; his presence is with us. It is also a reminder of who we are; needing guidance and support in dark times; and whose we are, we belong to the Shepherd who cares for us. This shepherd is no ordinary shepherd. He is the one to pour out His blessings on us with goodness and love. To be blessed by God is the greatest gift of all. He has given His only son Jesus so that as the psalm is completed it gives us assurance and hope that we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. What comfort, joy, and reassurance we have in these words from David the shepherd boy. Jesus said 'I am the Good shepherd I lay down my life for the sheep. I know my sheep and my sheep know me'.

Reflect: In what ways does this illustration of sheep and a shepherd bring you comfort and joy?

Heavenly father, we give you thanks that you have, throughout the ages, remained faithful to your promise to redeem those who trust in you. Through the power of your Holy Spirit deepen our faith, that we might continue to trust in your faithfulness and even in the midst of turmoil view the future with hope.

This we pray in Jesus' name, Amen



Week 2: The Prophets

Day 8: Sun 6th December: We Hope for the Branch (Isaiah 4:2-6)

People of God: be glad! Your God delights in you, giving you joy for sadness and turning the dark to light. Be strong in hope; therefore, for your God comes to save. You are God's children. Lord, make us one in the love of Christ today and for ever. Amen.

Listen: Read Isaiah 4:2-6

Imagine a world of utter chaos: a place of fear, where wickedness rules, and uncertainty is the flavour of all conversations. Sound familiar? This is the world Isaiah the prophet is speaking into. Perhaps you remember this time last year when we studied this wonderful book, the favourite of our dear departed friend Alec Motyer.

The people of God are steeped in sin. They are, says chapter one, a body-big bruise, in need of cleansing. In all the chaos, mess and misery, comes God's promise in our passage today. The branch of the LORD will appear, a place of refuge and safety, a place to embrace true glory. The people are running in fear of the LORD, because they have exchanged true glory for false glory. Yet God himself provides the place of refuge. Like the proverbial branch of the Christmas tree sheltering from the storm, Jesus Christ is the one in whom we find our refuge. Come to him once again today, our rock and our refuge: the glorious branch of the LORD!

Reflect: What examples of false glory do you see around you? How can you take refuge under the branch of the LORD today?

Blessed are you, sovereign Lord, just and true: to you be praise and glory for ever. Of old you spoke by the mouth of your prophets, but in our days you speak through your Son, whom you have appointed the heir of all things. Grant us, your people, to walk in his light, that we may be found ready and watching when he comes again in glory and judgement; for you are our light and our salvation. Blessed be God for ever.

Day 9: Mon 7th December: We hope for Immanuel (Isaiah 7:1-17)

People of God: be glad! Your God delights in you, giving you joy for sadness and turning the dark to light. Be strong in hope; therefore, for your God comes to save. You are God's children. Lord, make us one in the love of Christ today and for ever. Amen.

Listen: Read Isaiah 7:1-17

What are you looking forward to? Is there some good news on the horizon, or perhaps you are looking forward to putting this year aside? Perhaps there is something you're dreading that you wish would go away?

King Ahaz had something he was dreading: neighbouring nations had banded together, and became a significant threat to national safety. The people were terrified, uncertain of what was to come, for a deadly enemy prowled around the outskirts. Sound familiar?

Yet, the people had hope. For God speaks to the King, through the mouth of Isaiah, and promises a future King. One born of a virgin, and called Immanuel, which means "God with us."

Though spoken to Ahaz as judgement for his lack of faith, this promise for the faithful is one of deep hope and encouragement. God does not send a sidekick or a trainee in to sort out the mess. No, God will step in. He will sort the mess. He is, and will be with us, in the Person of Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God.

Reflect: How does the fact that Immanuel has happened impact your watching and waiting this advent?

Blessed are you, sovereign Lord, just and true: to you be praise and glory for ever. Of old you spoke by the mouth of your prophets, but in our days you speak through your Son, whom you have appointed the heir of all things. Grant us, your people, to walk in his light, that we may be found ready and watching when he comes again in glory and judgement; for you are our light and our salvation. Blessed be God for ever.

Day 10: Tues 8th Dec: We hope for the Child (Isaiah 9:1-7)

People of God: be glad! Your God delights in you, giving you joy for sadness and turning the dark to light. Be strong in hope; therefore, for your God comes to save. You are God's children. Lord, make us one in the love of Christ today and for ever. Amen.

Listen: Read Isaiah 9:1-7

There is nothing like the birth of a child that makes us watch and wait. On Thursday 25th May 2017, my friend had text me during the night to say he was on route to the hospital with his wife who had gone into labour. All day we exchanged updates, getting more and more excited as the day drew on. And then on the Friday night he sent me a photograph of my new goddaughter.

The people of Israel have been walking in darkness; a darkness of their own choosing, do not be deceived into thinking they are victims. Their darkness is their sin, and they are blundering about. But this people walking in darkness see a great light! A birth is coming, that will change their entire existence.

This baby brings peace and freedom. A son who has unique characteristics: he is wonderful counsellor, someone who is infinitely wise. He is mighty God, Immanuel, God with us! He is everlasting Father, not as in God the Father, but one who will demonstrate the love of God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son. Finally, he is prince of peace, who smashes weapons and refashions them into farming tools.

The Son born for us is the perfect rule we point others too. How many people are dissatisfied with the rulers we have? Look to Jesus. He is the great light for our dark world.

Reflect: How can we be high visibility Christians in this dark world?

Blessed are you, sovereign Lord, just and true: to you be praise and glory for ever. Of old you spoke by the mouth of your prophets, but in our days you speak through your Son, whom you have appointed the heir of all things. Grant us, your people, to walk in his light, that we may be found ready and watching when he comes again in glory and judgement; for you are our light and our salvation. Blessed be God for ever.

Day 11: Weds 9th Dec: We hope for the one pierced for our transgressions (Isaiah 52:13-53:12)

People of God: be glad! Your God delights in you, giving you joy for sadness and turning the dark to light. Be strong in hope; therefore, for your God comes to save. You are God's children. Lord, make us one in the love of Christ today and for ever. Amen.

Listen: Read Isaiah 52:13-53:12

As a child, a shortcut to bedroom cleaning I attempted was to leave the mess but just switch the light off. Switching the light on didn't change the mess, but just exposed it. The people of God in Isaiah didn't need a new idea, but a new life.

This passage is hard to read, yet without what it teaches us, our sin has not been dealt with. The one who's appearance was unattractive, he was scorned and rejected. Yet he did not busy himself with revenge or resentment. No, he took our pain, he was pierced for our transgressions. That is the only way we can come to a holy God: our sin *must* be punished, otherwise God is not who he says he is.

We have wandered like sheep, stupid animals who cannot fend for themselves. It is his wounds that heal us, bearing the punishment we deserve in our place, dying a wrath-absorbing, life giving death, bringing us peace.

There are huge problems in our world, we all know that. But our greatest need is the forgiveness of our sins. There is only one way, the death of Jesus Christ buys us forgiveness and grants us everlasting life and a record of perfect obedience. That is the hope you and I desperately need.

Reflect: The death of Jesus painted this way is often opposed by many people. Why is it in fact, needed good news?

Blessed are you, sovereign Lord, just and true: to you be praise and glory for ever. Of old you spoke by the mouth of your prophets, but in our days you speak through your Son, whom you have appointed the heir of all things. Grant us, your people, to walk in his light, that we may be found ready and watching when he comes again in glory and judgement; for you are our light and our salvation. Blessed be God for ever.

Day 12: Thurs 10th Dec: We hope for the one born in Bethlehem (Micah 5: 1-16)

People of God: be glad! Your God delights in you, giving you joy for sadness and turning the dark to light. Be strong in hope; therefore, for your God comes to save. You are God's children. Lord, make us one in the love of Christ today and for ever. Amen.

The prophets call us to watch and wait for future hope. Isaiah has painted a full picture: One will be born who is fully God and fully man, to bring peace through the shedding of his own blood. We turn now to Micah to see what other parts of the portrait can be painted.

Listen: Read Micah 5:1-16

Where were you born? Are you Poyntonian born and bred? Have you come from somewhere else? Are you proud to come from where you have? One of the casualties of moving around a lot means I never feel like I'm 'from' anywhere. Born in Wigan, raised in Wales, years in the north west, then London, then Poynton, then...who knows?

One of the most famous things about Jesus, thanks to the abundance of Nativity plays, is that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. That insignificant, little town, small and unimportant, is the birthplace of the God-man. This town will birth God's shepherd. He will be our peace. Jesus was not the only shepherd king from Bethlehem, it is where King David was born too. The prophets proclaim that Jesus is the one whom will bring us our peace: peace with God.

There's a place in South Wales called Bethlehem. Many people travel there around Christmas to send cards complete with a Bethlehem postmark! Yet in Jesus it doesn't matter where we're from, whether it's a place of privilege or poverty, noteworthy or notoriety, we who believe are always home: for we are forever in Christ.

Reflect: Read Romans 6 and reflect on what it means to be in Christ.

Blessed are you, sovereign Lord, just and true: to you be praise and glory for ever. Of old you spoke by the mouth of your prophets, but in our days you speak through your Son, whom you have appointed the heir of all things. Grant us, your people, to walk in his light, that we may be found ready and watching when he comes again in glory and judgement; for you are our light and our salvation. Blessed be God for ever.

Day 13: Fri 11th Dec: We hope for the Son of Man (Dan 7:9-14)

People of God: be glad! Your God delights in you, giving you joy for sadness and turning the dark to light. Be strong in hope; therefore, for your God comes to save. You are God's children. Lord, make us one in the love of Christ today and for ever. Amen.

Listen: Read Daniel 7:9-14

Daniel lived in a land that was anti-God; opposed to true worship, it demanded complete and utter loyalty to the state and the values it promoted. For many Christians today, and increasingly for us in the West, this is our reality.

Daniel's book is like the book of Revelation: it takes time to whisk open the curtains to view the spiritual reality at work in the world, to encourage believers to press on. This terrifying vision in chapter 7 is designed to do just that.

This vision Daniel has matches John's in Revelation: it is a reminder of the one who truly reigns and rules in majesty. This Ancient of Days is God, enthroned above all things. And notice, this Son of man is given that same authority. 'Son of Man' was a title Jesus used to refer to himself. He is God, not a co-deity or a rival to the Father, but one with him. Distinct in operation, united in substance, with the Father, and the Spirit.

COVID-19 does not ultimately rule our lives – despite appearances! We as Christians fully believe and trust in the true ruler, the just and good king above all things. Let's be encouraged, with Daniel, that despite appearances, God rules.

Reflect: How can you remind yourself that Jesus is King?

Blessed are you, sovereign Lord, just and true: to you be praise and glory for ever. Of old you spoke by the mouth of your prophets, but in our days you speak through your Son, whom you have appointed the heir of all things. Grant us, your people, to walk in his light, that we may be found ready and watching when he comes again in glory and judgement; for you are our light and our salvation. Blessed be God for ever.

Day 14: Sat 12th Dec: We hope for the one who rides a donkey (Zechariah 9:9-17)

People of God: be glad! Your God delights in you, giving you joy for sadness and turning the dark to light. Be strong in hope; therefore, for your God comes to save. You are God's children. Lord, make us one in the love of Christ today and for ever. Amen.

Listen: Read Zechariah 9:9-17

Perhaps it feels strange, finishing our week of advent thoughts on the prophets by drawing on something that kicks off Holy Week at Easter? But passages like this bring us great confidence that, even in the small ways, Jesus really is who he claimed to be.

We have a king who rides a donkey, as the old children's song goes. SO what? God's people wanted a warrior King, marching upon a magnificent stallion, to overthrow the oppressive Romans. Perhaps we too long for a stronger Jesus? One who will overthrow the mockers, the scoffers, the greedy, the unjust, the virus?

Yet look at how Zechariah continues. Judgement will come, in time. Yet the shepherd will save his flock: Jesus is not about being big and impressive. He is gentle and lowly, who will fight to the death against sin, but will not be concerned with his own glory, but the glory of the Father. So, as we continue to journey through advent, perhaps we need to look again at our Jesus: the King upon an unimpressive, slow and lowly animal. The Son of Man, who wore a crown of thorns.

Reflect: Read Philippians 2:5-11 and reflect on how your attitude needs to be the same as Christ Jesus.

Blessed are you, sovereign Lord, just and true: to you be praise and glory for ever. Of old you spoke by the mouth of your prophets, but in our days you speak through your Son, whom you have appointed the heir of all things. Grant us, your people, to walk in his light, that we may be found ready and watching when he comes again in glory and judgement; for you are our light and our salvation. Blessed be God for ever.



Week 3: John the Baptist

Day 15:- Sun 13th Dec: We hope, because the way has been prepared (Isaiah 40)

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say rejoice. Indeed, the Lord is near. (Phil 4:4-5)

Listen: Read Isaiah 40:1-8

After a few days of rain some of the paths through the beautiful countryside around Poynton get a little muddy! Often this also leads to a little detour to the path being revealed; a way of not losing an entire shoe to the squelching murky mud. And at some of the kissing gates, a few strategically placed stones provide more solid ground.

The message of this week's readings focuses our attention on the plan and preparation of God. For us the figure of John the Baptist acts as the growing light of the dawn that will be fully revealed in the Son of God. That first light, promised and planned of old, gives rise to hope. Good news is proclaimed as John, another child of promise, prepares the way for the ministry of Jesus.

In Isaiah 40 there is a promise that into the barrenness and stark desert God will break in (v3). These promises came first to those far from home, far from normality and in trouble and distress: God's people in exile. The approach to Jerusalem from the east was not an easy one, and therefore this image of "rough places becoming smooth" provide a way of talking about preparations being made. They can speak to us today of promised refreshment and hope in Christ as well as heeding the call to examine our hearts and lives to align them with the kingdom of God.

Reflect: What are the signs of hope that can bring refreshing in your life today? How might we need to prepare our hearts and lives for the coming kingdom?

*"...because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace." (From the Song of Zechariah, Luke 1: 78-79)*

Day 16: Mon 14th Dec: We hope, because God sends his messenger (Malachi 3)

Hear the word of the Lord, O nations; declare it to the distant lands: Behold, our Saviour will come; you need no longer fear. (Cf Jer 31:10; Is 35:4)

Listen: Read Malachi 2:17-3:5

I wonder how patient you are? When someone is ahead of you in a supermarket queue and seems to be taking a long time to pack their shopping and then find their wallet? Or when you are told you are 9th in the phone queue – but your call “Is important to us”?

The people of God had longed to be back in the promised land, and perhaps expected everything to be glorious and good immediately. They had waited, but the reality of life showed their disobedience and there was disappointment with the lack of God’s presence. Surely the arrival of God’s messenger is going to be good news? Well, yes, but there is also challenge!

Yesterday and today’s passages may be familiar to you from Handel’s Messiah – much is made of the “refiner’s fire”. The refiner’s fire is a fire that purifies, not destroys.

A sign that the waiting for the saving Messiah is nearly over is the appearance of the messenger, John the Baptist. His appearing is a sign of hope, of promise fulfilled, and a call to repentance and faith.

Reflect: How aware are we of God’s messages to us, his call on our lives? How might Malachi 3 encourage us to speak of love, truth and challenge together?

*“...because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace.”*

(From the Song of Zechariah, Luke 1: 78-79)

Day 17: Tues 15th Dec: We hope, for the way will be prepared (Luke 1:67-80)

The Just Judge will bestow a crown of righteousness on those who eagerly await his coming (Cf 2 Tim 4:8)

Listen: Read Luke 1:67-80 (or listen to Elgar's setting of the text:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7GS6rVD1Ff4>)

These words from Luke 1 are often referred to as Zechariah's 'song' – a prophesy, a telling forth of God's word and promise, infused with praise! Did you notice how there are two themes: praising God for the rescue ministry of the Messiah, and celebration of the work of John the Baptist? The image that comes to mind when I think about John's ministry is that of the herald – announcing news, proclaiming status, challenging people to be ready.

John's words will call people to repentance, show them God's call on their lives and bring hope and peace to troubled lives and a troubled situation.

v77 – “knowledge of salvation, through the forgiveness of their sins”

We can hope because John points us to forgiveness and restored relationship with God.

v78 “the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us”

We can hope because John points us to the even more glorious ministry of Jesus.

v79a “to shine on those living in darkness”

We can hope because John points us to light that reaches into the darkness and trouble of our world.

v79b “guide our feet into the path of peace.”

We can hope because John points us to a path which leads to peace.

Reflect: Who introduced you to 'the way'? Give thanks to God for them! Whose life could you speak good news into today?

“...because of the tender mercy of our God,

by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven

to shine on those living in darkness

and in the shadow of death,

to guide our feet into the path of peace.” (From the Song of Zechariah, Luke 1: 78-79)

Day 18: Weds 16th Dec: We hope, because John came (Matthew 3:1-12)

The Lord will come and he will not delay. He will illumine what is hidden in darkness and reveal himself to all the nations (Cf Heb 2:3; 1 Cor 4:5)

Listen: Read Matthew 3:1-12

One of the joys of taking a wedding is to meet the bride outside the church, before anyone else, and to see the reaction of the congregation and the groom as she makes her entrance. The invitations and preparations point towards those moments, an engagement ring is a sign to what is to come; but the ring and the preparations are not the most important part, they look forward to the exchanging of vows, and the giving and receiving of rings.

The work of God in preparation for the birth of Messiah begins hundreds of years before Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. Throughout the Old Testament there are those who are looking forward to rescue and redemption, to the ministry and work of God's Anointed One. In John, we see the time is 'near'.

John's ministry is pulling crowds and bringing many to confess their sins. The message that John gives the Pharisees and Sadducees in v7-10 speaks of the importance of the motives of the heart and bearing fruit in line with the profession of trust in God. John challenges those who wanted to trust in heritage, tradition, and appearance; "God looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).

Our hope in God is based on his mercy and goodness, his power, that John points to: "he who is coming after me" (v11).

Reflect: What are we trusting in for life and salvation? Do John's words to the Pharisees challenge our attitude and behaviour towards God?

*"...because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace."*

(From the Song of Zechariah, Luke 1: 78-79)

Day 19: Thurs 17th Dec: We hope, because of who John witnessed to (Matthew 3:13-17)

*You, O Lord, are close and all your ways are truth. From of old I have known of your decrees, for you are eternal.
(Cf Ps 199:151-152)*

Listen: Read Matthew 3:13-17

Perhaps someone you know has discovered a new television show, a new author or new singer, and every time you talk to them you can guarantee they are going to wax lyrical about their new discovery. John has spoken of one coming after him who is more powerful, greater than him. His witness is not to his own intelligence or insight by looking forward to the work of the Messiah, he simply wants people to respond to God, and rejoice in the good news of Jesus.

Jesus is the one that John, and all who trust in God's word, have been waiting for. This is recognised by John in these verses in Matthew's gospel, and confirmed by God's voice from heaven. God's audible voice is rarely heard in the record of the New Testament, but when it is, it speaks confirming the person and work of Jesus.

'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.' (v17)

The Messiah that John has been pointing to is the Son of God, revealed at the river Jordan and about to embark on a time of trial in the wilderness. We can hope in this revealed Son, because his mission is one of justice and hope:

**'Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen one in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him,
and he will bring justice to the nations. (Isaiah 41:1)**

Reflect: Is Jesus the hero of your story? Do you delight in him?

*"...because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace." (From the Song of Zechariah, Luke 1: 78-79)*

Day 20: Fri 18th Dec: We hope, because John told us about the word (John 1:1-18)

Behold, the Lord will come descending with splendour to visit his people with peace, and he will bestow on them eternal life.

Listen: Read John 1:1-18

This passage is often the last reading at a traditional carol service – the story of God’s promise has been told through the prophets of the Old Testament, and the good news is revealed as ‘God with us’.

Our hope is not vague or uncertain; it is in the one who was promised, and the one who came.

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (v14)

The one who was with God in the beginning, who is full of grace and truth, becomes flesh.

God’s rescue is not just spiritual, not floating on clouds or existing in dreams, it is real: flesh and blood.

Perhaps you have found 2020 particularly difficult? The disruption of so many things we enjoy, the time away from meeting together as a church family and as homegroups has perhaps made you feel that God is distant? These words speak to us of the God who didn’t remain distant, but “made his dwelling”. God by his Spirit is with us now, whatever we are going through and however lonely or disconnected we feel.

Reflect: Think about the different images in John 1 (eg light, dwell) and think about how they are seen in Jesus’ ministry. Can these truths help you see God at work today? How might you encourage someone today to trust in God’s understanding presence and power?

*“...because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace.”*

(From the Song of Zechariah, Luke 1: 78-79)

**Day 21: Sat 19th Dec: We hope, because John told us about the Lamb of God
(John 1:19-39)**

Christ our King is coming, he is the Lamb foretold by John.

Listen: Read John 1:29-34 & Revelation 5

If we conducted a survey on Park Lane this morning what answers might we get to the question:
“What did Jesus come to do?”

Moral teacher? Lived a good life? Miracle worker? Someone who experiences and shares our pain? Another prophet about God?

Whilst some of those things are true – John is a little more direct in identifying that Jesus is to *take away the sin* of the world. The whole of the bible tells us that after the fall, after Adam and Eve sinned, humans have had a problem!

How seriously do we take “sin”, do we see it as a kind of grown up naughtiness? Is it a bit of fun, those things which keep life interesting?

Or do we see sin as other people’s problems? Those people we hear about on the news who have committed rape and murder? Or if you are more ecologically minded, those companies, who are heavily polluting the earth? Or if you are more interested in social justice, those companies who make their workers work in appalling conditions for little pay?

We all have a sin problem. Our own rejection of God, and our desire to live as if we were God. But we have a glorious hope because of the Lamb of God! Jesus makes a way for us to be forgiven, our sin to be dealt with and new life lived to the full.

Reflect: How seriously do we take sin? Where can we speak for God’s ways?

*“...because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace.”*

(From the Song of Zechariah, Luke 1: 78-79)



Week 4: Mary

Day 22: Sun 20th Dec: Isaiah 7:1-17: We hope in a virgin birth

People of God: be glad! Your God delights in you, giving you joy for sadness and turning the dark to light. Be strong in hope; therefore, for your God comes to save. You are God's children. Lord, make us one in the love of Christ today and for ever. Amen.

Listen: Read Isaiah 7:1-17

The encounter with Ahaz in verses 1-12 leads up to the theological key to this chapter in verses 13-16. There is no doubt that verse 14 - 'The young woman is pregnant and is about to give birth to a son, and she will name him Immanuel' – finds its ultimate fulfilment in Christ. In this context if the 'young woman' is Israel, then her son is the faithful remnant who will emerge from her sufferings. That is why he is given the name Immanuel, 'God with us'. God will be with the faithful remnant who gather around Isaiah, not with the unbelieving Ahaz and the rebellious nation as a whole.

The preservation of the remnant in Isaiah's day was part of a process which led finally to the coming of Jesus, the perfectly faithful and righteous one, in whom all God's promises came to fulfilment.

So Matthew was right to say around 800 years later

Now all of this took place so that what the Lord had spoken through the prophet would be fulfilled: Look! A virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they will call him, Emmanuel. (Emmanuel means "God with us.")' (Matthew 1:22-23).

The ultimate fulfilment of the Immanuel saying in Isaiah chapter 7 was the first Christmas – the birth of Jesus Christ.

Reflect: Take a few moments to reflect on what 'Immanuel – God with us' means to you today.

Blessed are you, sovereign Lord, just and true: to you be praise and glory for ever. Of old you spoke by the mouth of your prophets, but in our days you speak through your Son, whom you have appointed the heir of all things. Grant us, your people, to walk in his light, that we may be found ready and watching when he comes again in glory and judgement; for you are our light and our salvation. Blessed be God for ever.

Day 23: Mon 21st Dec: Luke 1:26-38: We hope in Mary's royal child

People of God: be glad! Your God delights in you, giving you joy for sadness and turning the dark to light. Be strong in hope; therefore, for your God comes to save. You are God's children. Lord, make us one in the love of Christ today and for ever. Amen.

Listen: Read Luke 1:26-38

What an experience for Mary, this young, God-fearing, engaged-to-be-married girl. First her relative Elizabeth has conceived a child in her old age. And now, even though she knows full well that she has never had sexual relations with a man, she too is to become pregnant and give birth to a son.

What would she tell Joseph? What would her friends and family think? And what about the strange way she found out – during a visit from an angel! Was it real or had she imagined it all?

Mary's son is going to be a colossal figure. He will be the greatest ruler that not only Israel but also the world (verse 32-33) has ever seen. But if this child is to be so sublime a figure, what is more appropriate than that the manner of his coming should be miraculous. The virgin birth does not stem from Luke's poetic imagination. Rather, it is a matter of fact.

Perhaps it's a combination of all of this that shapes Mary's response. How amazing that through her shock she utters the words: "I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me just as you have said." (verse 38).

Reflect: God doesn't call all of us to a task as significant as he called Mary to. But he does call all of us to a life of obedient service. Can you say with Mary (verse 38) "I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me just as you have said."?

Blessed are you, sovereign Lord, just and true: to you be praise and glory for ever. Of old you spoke by the mouth of your prophets, but in our days you speak through your Son, whom you have appointed the heir of all things. Grant us, your people, to walk in his light, that we may be found ready and watching when he comes again in glory and judgement; for you are our light and our salvation. Blessed be God for ever.

Day 24: Tues 22nd Dec: Luke 1:39-45: We hope in Mary's child, because the unborn John leapt for joy

People of God: be glad! Your God delights in you, giving you joy for sadness and turning the dark to light. Be strong in hope; therefore, for your God comes to save. You are God's children. Lord, make us one in the love of Christ today and for ever. Amen.

Listen: Read Luke 1:39-45

14 years ago I carried twin babies to 36 weeks. From fairly early on, the physical activity in my tummy was vigorous. The constant kicks, jumps and punches convinced me that when these children were born they would do nothing but fight!

When Elizabeth felt her baby jump inside her at six months pregnant, she knew this was a joyous moment. This was different from the baby's normal, daily movements. Elizabeth was a deeply God-fearing woman who had herself experienced a miracle by becoming pregnant in old age. Her young cousin Mary, 'the mother of my Lord' (verse 33) had come to visit, carrying a child inside her. Elizabeth knew what was going on. Her baby was responding to the presence of Mary and her unborn child. This was a deeply spiritual, deeply uniting, shared experience for these two women of faith.

"Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfil the promises he made to her." Is Elizabeth's response (verse 45).

Reflect: As Christmas draws closer, take a few moments to prepare your heart to welcome the fulfilment of God's promise to us all: Jesus.

Blessed are you, sovereign Lord, just and true: to you be praise and glory for ever. Of old you spoke by the mouth of your prophets, but in our days you speak through your Son, whom you have appointed the heir of all things. Grant us, your people, to walk in his light, that we may be found ready and watching when he comes again in glory and judgement; for you are our light and our salvation. Blessed be God for ever.

Day 25: Weds 23rd Dec: Luke 1:46-56: We hope, like Mary hopes

People of God: be glad! Your God delights in you, giving you joy for sadness and turning the dark to light. Be strong in hope; therefore, for your God comes to save. You are God's children. Lord, make us one in the love of Christ today and for ever. Amen.

Listen: Read Luke 1:46-56

Many of us have greatly missed singing in church this year and I keep thinking about how joyful it will be when we can, eventually - without masks or social distancing or limits on numbers - pile into church on a Sunday morning and SING! The great, old hymns and the inspiring modern worship songs – I don't mind. Singing anything in church in praise of God is going to be wonderful!

As Mary and Elizabeth share their news and rejoice in their God-given pregnancies, Mary is inspired to utter the great hymn known to generations of Christians as the Magnificat. 'My soul magnifies the Lord', she sings; and then, describing him more specifically, 'my spirit rejoices in God my saviour.'

As a young, pregnant, single woman, Mary's circumstances are hard. But she knows that, even though this child is still within her, God has set his saving work in motion and this saving work will be one of total renewal. Joy and hope are the order of the day.

Reflect: As this difficult year draws towards a close, even though your circumstances may have been difficult, how do you feel about saying with Mary 'With all my heart I glorify the Lord!' (verse 46)?

Blessed are you, sovereign Lord, just and true: to you be praise and glory for ever. Of old you spoke by the mouth of your prophets, but in our days you speak through your Son, whom you have appointed the heir of all things. Grant us, your people, to walk in his light, that we may be found ready and watching when he comes again in glory and judgement; for you are our light and our salvation. Blessed be God for ever.

Day 26: Thurs 24th Dec: John 1:1-14: We hope, because the Word became flesh

People of God: be glad! Your God delights in you, giving you joy for sadness and turning the dark to light. Be strong in hope; therefore, for your God comes to save. You are God's children. Lord, make us one in the love of Christ today and for ever. Amen.

Listen: Read John 1:1-14

As I write it's mid November and we're in the middle of lockdown 2.0. I've been getting my daily exercise and a rare chance to meet up with a friend by walking the streets of Poynton in the early evening when work is done. It's noticeable how many people have put Christmas lights up in their gardens and driveways already. And I've seen campaigns on social media for such Christmas festivities to start early because we all need some brightness in our lives at present.

In today's fourteen verses 'light' is mentioned eight times. Light shines through darkness and brings hope. Driveway lights put up at Christmas can be temperamental. They sometimes conk out and darkness prevails. But the darkness doesn't extinguish **our** light - the light which is Jesus. He is the true light that shines on all people, and the world came into being through Him, even though the world does not recognise Him.

But those who did welcome him, those who believed in his name, he authorised to become God's children. May Jesus, the Word who became flesh, be your light this Christmas.

Reflect: How does it give you hope this Christmas, to know that you are a child of God, that the Word became flesh for you ?

Blessed are you, sovereign Lord, just and true: to you be praise and glory for ever. Of old you spoke by the mouth of your prophets, but in our days you speak through your Son, whom you have appointed the heir of all things. Grant us, your people, to walk in his light, that we may be found ready and watching when he comes again in glory and judgement; for you are our light and our salvation. Blessed be God for ever.



Christmas Day

Day 27: Friday 25th December: We hope in the radiance of God's glory (Hebrews 1:1-3)

Listen: Read Hebrews 1:1-3

There are many ways to talk about Christmas. Of course, this year is very different. At the time of writing (the end of November), I have no idea what circumstances we are to find ourselves in today.

I really hope though, that having journeyed with one another through advent, that we have found hope. We have seen that our hope is in something outside of ourselves: to whom the Patriarchs longed for, the Prophet's proclaimed, John the Baptist prepared for, and Mary worshipped, and carried with her.

I once spoke with a Christian, who had been really going through the mill, but radiated their deep trust and rest in the goodness of God. Feeling rather low at the time, I said something about wishing I had their faith. Someone else saw me say this, and here is what they said: "You do, because faith is defined by its object, not its subject."

On this Christmas day, let's remind ourselves of the object of our faith, which defines our faith. In the past God spoke to our ancestors through prophets, but now he speaks to us through the Son Jesus Christ. Jesus is God's mouthpiece; Jesus is God's revelation. He is the radiance of God's glory, and the *exact representation of his being*. Jesus is who God is, for Jesus is God. Jesus is what God looks like in a mirror. The God-man reveals the whole of God to us.

Faith is in Jesus, and so he the object defines us, the subject. I don't know about you, but that is hope that sustains me through the darkest of days. This Christmas day, however much it measures for good or ill with previous Christmas days, let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, the radiance of God's glory, and the object of our faith.

Reflect: How can you focus on your faith's object today?

Almighty God, you have given us your only-begotten Son to take our nature upon him and as at this time to be born of a pure virgin: grant that we, who have been born again and made your children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by your Holy Spirit; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Further Reading

We really long that these devotionals have stirred up comfort, joy and hope this advent. As we see the close of 2020 and head into a new year, why not consider exploring ways to read the Bible for yourself each day, for your own encouragement. We have some suggestions below, all can be found by exploring online

- Nicky Gumbel's Read the Bible in One Year
- The Good Book Company's Explore Bible notes
- Our Daily Bread
- Scripture Union