

twelvebaskets



ADVENT 3A

A complete Sunday service ready to use
for worship and inspire ideas in your church

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Advent 3 - Year A
11th December 2022



Order of Service

Call to worship

Hymn:

165 STF – Advent candles tell their story OR

706 STF – Longing for light, we wait in darkness

Opening Prayers

The Lord's Prayer

All Age Talk

Hymn:

330 STF – Joy to the world, the Lord is come! OR

166 STF – 'Christmas is coming!' The Church is glad to sing

Readings: Isaiah 35:1-10; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

Hymn:

404 STF – God's spirit is in my heart OR

175 STF – Light of the world, you stepped down in darkness

Reflections on the readings

Hymn:

335 STF – Rejoice, the Lord is King! OR

255 STF – The kingdom of God is justice and joy

Intercessions

Offering / collection

Blessing the offering

Hymn:

264 STF – Make way, make way, for Christ the king in splendour arrives OR

487 STF – You shall go out with joy and be led forth with peace

Blessing

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Call to worship

Lord, we come to you in worship,
We come bringing our whole selves,
We come to come to know more of you.
Come amongst us, advent God, God of waiting times and preparation,
God of this very moment,
Come, by your Spirit, we pray,
Amen.¹

Hymn:

165 STF – Advent candles tell their story OR
706 STF – Longing for light, we wait in darkness

Opening Prayers

Father God,

As we gather for worship today, may we be open to receiving from you. May we expect to learn more about you, expect to be challenged by you, expect to encounter you.

But Lord we gather not just to receive but also to give. To offer worship and to offer our service as the natural response to what we have received.

As we move further through advent, through this time of waiting and anticipation, we thank you that you are not a God who is in a hurry. The process of creation which produced the beauty of a winter's morning took hundreds of millions of years, so the process of new creation, of which Jesus' life and death is the first fruits, will be a slow but steady march towards beauty and restoration.

We ask that in our worship together today, we may catch a glimpse of that beauty. At the same time we acknowledge that sometimes we get in the way of restoration breaking into the world, that sometimes we contribute to its failing rather than its recreation. For this, we are sorry, and we come humbly before you to ask for forgiveness as we take a moment to acknowledge how we have fallen short in this past week.

We ask this in your holy name, and in full assurance of your forgiveness.

Amen.²

We say together the Lord's Prayer

¹ Call to Worship written by Tim Baker

² Opening prayers written by All We Can

All Age Talk

Christmas is a time of year when almost everything feels better, doesn't it? The Christmas season is a glorious time of decorated streets, family get togethers, presents, cosy evenings, good food. What are your favourite things about Christmas time?

Let people either talk in pairs or groups, or just ask people to shout out answers.

And yet, beneath all the tinsel and the wrappings, there's still some things we struggle with, aren't there? Sometimes Christmas can be a hard time – especially if we're feeling sad for some reason, or if we're lonely and on our own, or struggling with a hard experience. Can anybody think of a reason why people might be feeling down, and not feeling as Christmassy as they might hope?

Let people either talk in pairs or groups, or just ask people to shout out answers.

Thank you for sharing those. We all know that just because it's Christmas, doesn't mean that all our problems suddenly disappear.

Our Gospel reading this week tells us the story of John the Baptist, alone in a prison cell, wondering if Jesus really is the one he'd been waiting for. It's not a very Christmassy reading. This close to Christmas we might expect to be hearing about stables and mangers, or at least angels and babies soon to be born. But we've skipped forward over thirty years to this story – of a man in prison, longing for light in a time of darkness.

And so, John's message is relatable to us. Christmas time is still a time for recognising our difficulties and struggles and doubts, too. There is room for difficulty in the Christmas story.

John, who had once proclaimed Jesus, the coming messiah, in the desert, is now in prison and unsure if Jesus really is the messiah. Our own difficult times can cause us to doubt the goodness of God, too.

But this passage teaches us not to ignore the questions we have, but to name them. When Jesus hears John's question, he doesn't condemn him, he responds with grace and says that John is the greatest person ever born. This story reminds us that doubt is okay.

What are your doubts?

You could invite people to share their doubts with their neighbours and pray for one another. Or to reflect silently or creatively. Or to shout them out.

There is room for our doubt in the Christmas story.

So John is sitting in his prison cell, worrying about whether Jesus is the person he hoped. And what's the good news message that John receives back from Jesus? Jesus tells him:

The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.

Jesus is saying: the Kingdom of God is near, and it's amazing! Jesus is saying: miracles are possible and they're happening! Jesus is saying: I know it's tough, but I'm here and I'm bringing you freedom. It's a message that has been proclaimed for many

hundreds of years, the same message we heard in the Isaiah reading and the Psalm today. Jesus is coming: the Kingdom of God is coming! It was a message of hope, for John the Baptist, in his prison cell.

What do you hope for?

You could invite people to share their hopes with their neighbours and pray for one another. Or to reflect silently or creatively. Or to shout them out.

There is room for hope in the Christmas story.

Jesus' message to John includes all the people who might usually not be included: disabled people, poorly people, poor people. But Jesus includes them all, Jesus includes everyone. And this is the good news of the message: There is room for YOU in the Christmas story.

You, with all your difficulties, doubts, hopes and fears. Whoever you are. There is room for you.

You could invite people to write their names on a Christmas bauble or star and come and hang it on a tree, or to write their name on something else like a small pebble, and place it in the crib scene.

The story of John reminds us that Jesus welcomes us with all our doubts and difficulties. Jesus says that John is the greatest person ever born, and that he's played an important part in God's story. Just like John we each have a part to play in God's story. God has made each of us unique so we can all play our own part. We can all talk about the good news: that in God's amazing Kingdom every single one of us is loved and free.

Amen.³

Hymn:

330 STF – Joy to the world, the Lord is come! OR

166 STF – 'Christmas is coming!' The Church is glad to sing

Readings: Isaiah 35:1-10; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

Hymn:

404 STF – God's spirit is in my heart OR

175 STF – Light of the world, you stepped down in darkness

Reflections on the readings

Our Gospel reading this week tells us the story of John the Baptist, alone in a prison cell, desperately waiting for a visitor to bear a message back to Jesus. Not a message of encouragement or gratitude or greeting for the boy he had known his whole life, and

³ All Age Talk written by Holly Adams

the messiah he himself has proclaimed, but a message of doubt: “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”.

It could seem a slightly misplaced Gospel reading for this point of Advent. This close to Christmas we might expect to be hearing about stables and mangers, or at least angels and messages of two baby cousins soon to be born. But instead we’ve skipped forward over thirty years to Jesus as a man performing miracles, and to John imprisoned for speaking truth to power.

But, in so many ways, this story feels more real, more relatable, more honest, than the cosy tales we might expect, or even long for, just two weeks before Christmas. This is a story of a man longing for light in a season of darkness. This is a story of desperate, difficult times.

The Christmas season is a glorious time of decorated streets, family get togethers, excited children, cosy evenings, good food. But there are very few of us, beneath the tinsel and lights, who don’t have something to worry about. Christmas does not magically lift us from our own difficult times, whatever they be.

And so, John’s message is relatable to us. We’re not asked to ignore the realities of our lives, but to recognise them. There is room for our worry and our pain, in the Christmas story.

Just last week we heard about John proclaiming Jesus as the coming messiah in the wilderness. And now, because of some twists and turns in John’s life, he is asking ‘is Jesus really the Messiah?’ John in the prison cell is a different kind of John to the one we met on the banks of the river Jordan. He is isolated and imprisoned... and questioning. Our own dark times can cause us to doubt the goodness of God, too.

Whether our prison cells be built of bereavement, or disappointment, or anxiety, or hurt, or guilt, it’s sometimes hard in our shackles to sing doubtlessly of God’s faithful love and grace.

But this passage teaches us not to ignore the questions we have, but to name them. Jesus, upon receiving John’s question, doesn’t condemn him. If anything, Jesus honours him all the more for it, telling him all the ways he himself is fulfilling the prophecies, and all the ways John is fulfilling his calling. John’s question is received and responded to with grace. There is room for our doubt, in the Christmas story.

But this is not only a story of difficulty and doubt. This is a story of a message of good news for bad times. A message borne back to a prisoner, in desperate need of news of the coming Kingdom, unsure if liberation really is possible. How much do we relate to this, too - in our own prisons, longing for such news of hope and healing on the horizon?

Because John’s question isn’t only one that reflects his struggle, and his doubt, but also his longing. His longing for a different future, his longing that the promises he’s heard from God will be fulfilled, his longing for what could be – and wondering if it’s really possible.

We might all recognise this longing. Longing for miracle cures for our loved ones, longing for death to be undone, longing for an end to worry and pain and poverty. But the sister of longing is hope. To long for, is to believe, in some hopeful corner of our hearts, in a better future – even if that future is seemingly impossible.

It’s the longing of the prophet Isaiah who proclaims with hope that: “the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert.” It’s the hope of the Psalmist who sings with longing of a Lord

who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry, who sets the prisoners free; who opens the eyes of the blind, who watches over the strangers and upholds the orphan and the widow.”

Both Isaiah’s prophecy and Psalm 146 paint us a glorious picture of a place where healing, freedom and wholeness are possible. We are assured by the hopes of these passages, that God’s Kingdom is different to the hurt, captivity and brokenness we experience in our lives and in our world.

In response to John’s question, Jesus tells him that all his hopes and longings are being fulfilled: the blind are no longer blind, the lame are no longer lame, the dead are no longer dead, the Kingdom is near. Instead of telling John who he is, instead of proclaiming himself, he tells him what is happening: healing is winning over brokenness, hope is winning over helplessness, love is winning over lostness. Or, in the words of the carol: the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight. There is room for hope, in the Christmas story.

There are messengers for us, too, in whatever season of life we’re in, offering us this good news– that the Kingdom is here. And the reason it’s such good news is that it includes us. Jesus’ answer to John’s question is as much about who John is, as it was about who he himself, Jesus is. And likewise, when we say to Jesus: “who are you?” the reply we hear is always about the coming Kingdom and our place in it. There is room for you in the Christmas story.

We’re assured that a different future is possible, for the whole world but also for us, for you and for me. I wonder how much John the Baptist, in his prison cell, was reassured by this message? I wonder how much we are, in times of difficulty? We are told to wait for the Kingdom of God, and notice the signs that tell us it’s near.

Our reading today from James is a reminder of the importance of patience in times of waiting. It’s a tough reminder that the Kingdom of God is both here and not yet here: that the reality we experience is still so often tough, so often lonely, so often difficult. The poet W. H. Auden once wrote: “the kingdom of Heaven may come not in our present, and not in our future, but in the Fullness of Time.” This doesn’t mean that we wait hopelessly for a promise that’s never to be fulfilled. Instead, we wait with patience, which is not the same as being passive.

Our waiting is an active thing and advent is a time to practice it. From our prison cells we hold vigil, not only waiting, not only questioning, but also proclaiming the nearness of God and prayerfully, with expectant hope, longing for God’s kingdom. And in the process of proclaiming and praying, in the process of expecting God to act and noticing God’s goodness, perhaps there is a new kind of freedom available to us.

This advent, no matter what you’re going through, no matter what doubts you have, we are called to live in a way which expects miracles, which expects signs of wonder, which expects Christ, Immanuel, to come - with a key to the bars of our prison cell. Hear him speak to you through the bars: you may feel like the least and the last and the lost, but even the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John the Baptist, great than anyone ever born. Hear Jesus’ words to you:

you
are
free.⁴

⁴ Reflection written by Holly Adams

Hymn:

335 STF – Rejoice, the Lord is King! OR

255 STF – The kingdom of God is justice and joy

Prayers of intercession

Lord Jesus,

Thank you that you are the one that history was waiting for, and that we need not wait for another. Thank you for your servant John the Baptist who helps us see this, and may we seek to share this good news with those around us.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

The prophet you chose did not wear the fine robes of royals, but ate locusts and wore camel's hair. Help us to recognise the prophets we may ignore because of their appearance or demeanour, help us to shed that which restricts our service to you.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Thank you that when you are at work in us and at work in your Church it looks like the blind seeing, the lame walking, and good news to the poor.

We pray for the work of Methodist organisations that enable service to the most vulnerable on a scale we could not manage alone. We pray for All We Can and their partners in countries like Zimbabwe, where women have transformed their lives through basket weaving, will continue to tackle poverty using local skills and expertise.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Thank you that as great as John the Baptist was, you promise us that the least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than he. As we look forward to the full realisation of this upside down Kingdom, help us to build it here today.

Amen.⁵

We will now take up the offering.

Thank you Lord, for your liberating words of hope to us.

Put these gifts, the ones here in our offering, and also here gathered for worship, put them all to use for freedom, for liberation, for hope and wholeness,

Through Jesus Christ our Lord,

Amen.

Hymn:

264 STF – Make way, make way, for Christ the king in splendour arrives OR

487 STF – You shall go out with joy and be led forth with peace

⁵ Prayers of intercession written by All We Can

Blessing

Let us go, liberated and set free by the God who loves us, who comes amongst us, and who is here with us.

Let us go out, believing in the miracle of a Christmas God who came, who comes, who will go on coming, amongst us, with us, alongside,

Let us go in the name of the Christ, Immanuel.

Amen.⁶

⁶ Additional prayers by Tim Baker