

ADVENT 4

19/12/21

CALL TO WORSHIP

Like Mary, we praise God: praise of wholeheartedly,
from the depths of our souls.

**For God has not forgotten us, insignificant as we feel
ourselves to be.**

God's name is Holy; God's compassion lasts from one generation to
another.

**God has scattered the proud, and shown that kings and
rulers: scattered are nothing special.**

God has lifted up the lowly, and given food to the hungry.

All: God has kept the promises: kept made to the people of God;

God: mercy of will always be merciful. Thanks be to God!

Opening Prayer

God of Grace, come close to us and bless us.
As Mary was surprised by the visit of the angel,

Prepare us for the Holy, the unexpected, at this season.

As Mary carefully thought out the meaning of the angel's visit,

**Enable us to reflect on the meaning of Christ's coming for
us.**

As Mary courageously allowed God's way to become her way,

Show us how we can work in faith together.

As Mary voiced God's care for the poorest and humblest of all people,

**Give us courage to stand beside those
who have least in the world.
Come close to us and bless us,
as you blessed Mary: blessed with Jesus.**

HYMN 316 O little town of Bethlehem

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H_q430z13oc

CANDLES

(a person lights the candles of hope, peace, and joy)

The fourth candle of Advent is the Candle of Love.

Its light is meant to remind us of the love that God
has for us.

Jesus shows us God's perfect love. He is God's love

in human form. The bible says that "God so loved the
world that he gave his only Son, so that whoever
believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life."

Love is patient; love is kind and envies no one.

Love is never boastful or conceited, rude or selfish. Love is not quick to
take offense, it keeps no records

of wrongs, it does not gloat over other people's

troubles, but rejoices in the right, the good, and the

true. There is nothing that love cannot face, there is no limit
to its faith, to its hope, to its endurance.

Love never ends.

We light this candle today to remind us of how God's

perfect love is found in Jesus

Light the Fourth Candle

TIS 289 VS 1-4 Light one candle

PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING & CONFESSION

God of great blessing, Elizabeth called Mary, an unmarried pregnant girl,
blessed.

Jesus called the poor and the hungry blessed.

Your way of understanding the worth of the world is so different from ours.

What we so often overlook, you honour.

What we so often ignore, you give close attention.

You treasure what we reject.

For your love and care of us, in all our brokenness and unloveliness we give you great thanks.

For looking with love on all that you have created, we give you our thanks.

We live in your love and welcome.

Thanks be to God!

God of faithfulness, the Scriptures tell us of your faithfulness from generation to generation. Sometimes we find it hard to experience that faithfulness.

We often see so clearly all the pain and suffering in our world, our communities, and in our own lives

but our sight and insights are too often dimmed to your faithful presence.

We live too often in anxiety and despair rather than trust and hope.

Forgive us God of love and grace for our smallness of vision, our limited sight and our disbelief.

We pray for the wisdom and the clarity to live as you call us to live,

in abundant generosity and great hopefulness.

This is our prayer of faith.

Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

Let the spirit of God within you leap for joy!

We are forgiven!

We are restored!

We are set free!

Let us live in the freedom and forgiveness
that is our God what a wonderful gift.

Thanks be to God!

READINGS

- **Micah 5:2-5a**

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.

3 Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labour has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred shall return
to the people of Israel.

4 And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.

And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth;

5 and he shall be the one of peace.

If the Assyrians come into our land
and tread upon our soil,

we will raise against them seven shepherds

and eight installed as rulers.

- **Luke 1:39-55**

39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, 40 where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42 and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43 And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44 For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

46 And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,

47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,

48 for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,

and holy is his name.

50 His mercy is for those who fear him

from generation to generation.

51 He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;

53 he has filled the hungry with good things,

and sent the rich away empty.

54 He has helped his servant Israel,

in remembrance of his mercy,

55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,

to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

HYMN 312 Angels from the realms of glory

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ViVs2bq60ZM>

SERMON

I doubt that anyone has missed the massive Christmas celebrations going on around us at the moment! You would have to lock yourself away at home with no TV or Radio or internet to miss that great summer festival that we call Christmas.

We are confronted by this festivity everywhere. Sounds and symbols keep popping up when we go to places like the shops and even medical centers. People have extra tinsel and baubles not just on their clothes but also their houses and cars.

From Boxing Day we enter into a time of celebration of the Incarnation. This lasts for 12 days. Unlike the stores, which will be seeking to get rid of any Christmas images on December 26, we will continue ours. The mood in the general community seems to quickly move on to that of an ongoing summer festival of holidays and outside events to entertain everyone. Christ's birth is soon forgotten.

This seeming growing chasm between the central Christian event and the general celebration of summer seems strange in so many ways. It is almost like there are two festivals running concurrently. Unlike many people in the church I am not one to try and force faith on others by trying to force Christ back into Christmas. They are two separate and very distinct events running concurrently.

Well before Christianity took precedence in Europe there was a popular tradition of pagan celebrations set around their winter solstice. They even decorated trees in their festivals.

With the advent of the Christian movement into Europe this festival was smashed together with celebrations surrounding the birth of Christ. In recent times the forcing together of these distinct traditions seems to have broken down completely. The idea of an all-encompassing 'Christian

Society' has folded and so has the tie between a pagan and a Christian event being the same thing.

I am in no way opposing secular events. I am sure that at the carols at Speers Point last Sunday there would have been a lot of performance and little, if any, Christian spiritual input. That event would have been quite enjoyable for those who could get to it. COVID restrictions meant that a lot of people who turned up a bit late were shut out of the event. What I do know was that there was little Christian emphasis.

For us the summer solstice is an excellent time to get together with family and hopefully it will be an enjoyable time for most of you, Omicron strain permitting. But for us, running at the same time, will be our continuation of the celebration of the incarnation of God's Son.

God among us.

God with us.

The 'Holy Mystery' of God's connection with our world.

In the time following Christmas we will probably still sing a few Christmas carols. There will still be the manger scene here on the stage. It was the church which tried to force a merger between the pagan and the Christian festivals. It should not surprise us today when today the secular and the religious seem to be separating to see this approach changing.

The fact that the world is now increasingly separating Christian Festivals from secular events means that we should work all the harder to make the message of Advent and Christmas clearer to those around us.

What is it that God might be saying to us and the people around us at this time?

Our message is no-where as well promoted as those of the local council, the TV programmers and the conglomerates like Coles and Woolworths. Each of these have virtually removed any passing reference to a baby boy or faith.

Over the last few weeks we have reflected on what the coming celebration means. We looked at things through the lens of that baby who came to us from Bethlehem.

Into this mix we have the readings we heard this morning. Luke is very prophetic in his warnings about the future. This is also the first time in our Advent readings that the baby Jesus is referred to specifically. At this stage

He is still in utero. So what is the insight that comes to us from this passionate passage from Luke?

If we think of the lovely nativity scene here in the church and in some local shops we see a picture of serenity and innocence. However in the passage from Luke we have images of radical and earth shattering changes ahead. Our hymns seem to perpetuate that serene approach. While the Bible passage today is more confronting.

If we are honest most of our fellow Australians give little thought to the current relevance of that birth. They are simply lovely images that they recall from their childhood. It can be seen as some stability in an otherwise dynamic and frightening world. Stability is often sought by people when faced with a world which seems to be increasingly bewildering and disorienting.

With growing reports of global warming, ever more reports of wars breaking out among neighbouring countries and stories of children around us being caught up with growing mental health needs as well as abuse, we can all want to gently move back to the 'good old days.' In the midst of all this disruption we tend to want to look back at that peaceful manger scene. People want to sing more about peace and goodwill as we avoid making the basic changes needed to bring peace and tranquillity into reality.

This reminds me of the story of the soldiers sitting in the trenches of the front lines in WW1 who heard one another singing carols on Christmas Day across the battlefields. Slowly they emerged from their hideouts greeted one another, exchanged stories about their families and relaxed for a day. This lovely and heart warming story was soon shattered when the next day they resumed their senseless attempts to destroy one another.

Luke's message of the pregnant Mary visiting Elizabeth almost seems to draw us into some sentimental space. We have two very pregnant women getting together to share their joy. Even the babies still inside their mothers started to react physically as they drew near. This has a clear theological overtone as we see a reaction which foresaw those amazing events which were about to take place.

Then we come to Mary's song! This song looks at the big picture as we prepare for the birth of Christ. This is no simple nursery rhyme. And, as is pretty much always the case when the Bible or the liturgy juxtapose things against each other in ways that startle and jolt us, the deepest meaning is in the juxtaposition itself, not in the two parts taken separately.

The two things which seem to resist being put together like two same poled magnets. They need to be held together and kept together until we begin to see God's mysterious truths emerging from the juxtaposition itself.

Mary sings of a radical vision of the future world that is very different. The song moves quickly from her thanking God for being so generous and merciful to her, to her foretelling the shattering upheaval of the world as she knew it. This message is just as relevant today as we look to bring back some sense of reality to those who would want to rule the world powerfully from some remote throne.

Well laid plans will be caught up in the upheaval while the abusive schemes of the rich and powerful will be upended, as those in need and suffering will be lifted up so that they are crowned with honour and glory.

This radical approach to life is something that even today's tyrannical regimes go to great lengths to prevent their population from singing. In China the state has done its best to remove any radical thinking from Christianity as they seek to remove any sense of the transforming Christ from their faith. From El Salvador to Burma to Uganda you will find stories of military regimes killing or maiming the poets and folk-singers, and violently breaking up gatherings whenever the poor and oppressed begin to sing. Mary's song is just the sort of revolutionary vision that sends shivers down the spines of those who profit from the way things are here and now.

This song is so radical that deposed presidents and dictators will be left with nothing. The heads of some massive companies should be aware that they could be jailed for profiteering from the misery that they have imposed on people on the margins of society. Tycoons might have to end up on welfare and needing to beg on a street corner. Perhaps the homeless will be rehoused in their empty mansions. Those who have been oppressed will end up celebrating in the street as they no longer have anyone or anything to fear.

At this pivotal time in Advent we are being asked to fulfill that disturbing, and unsettling and wonderfully hopeful vision in our hearts and bring it into reality. As we look to the visions we have of an innocent little baby about to be born to a young and excited mother in a strange little town in the Middle East, we should be prepared.

I am sure that all expectant mothers have foreseen that their new bundle of life will turn their world upside down and that their life will never be the same again. It is here that Luke says it is with the birth of this one particular baby that the status quo of the whole world will be thrown into a whole new

place, just like the mayhem when the money changers tables were upended in the temple in Jerusalem a few years later.

This whole Gospel experience in Advent is about preparing Christians to be part of a celebration which sounds a clear and loud warning to the world.

- Do not kneel before the manger holding that baby unless you are ready to wholly embrace a world which is being remade in the image of God.
- Do not blindly come and adore Him until you have your whole life upended and renewed so as to be part of a world where there is justice, truth and graceful hospitality to others.
- Do not bring gifts to honour this baby until you are prepared to be caught up in the strong winds of God's Spirit.

This sweet and harmless little baby nestled in Mary's womb is the One who comes to do God's will, to bring the world to its knees, and to upend the world as we have known it. This baby is the powerful presence of God whose kingdom will come and whose will shall be done on earth as in heaven. And that's not good news for retailing giants or men of war, but it is very very good news for all who suffer under the weight of the sin of the world and cry, "How long, O Lord, how long?"

How it will happen, we can barely imagine. When it will happen is not ours to know. But be aware that it is drawing near as surely as the birth of a baby in a swelling womb, it is our promise and our hope and our deepest craziest desire.

HYMN 265 O come, O come Emmanuel

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kKu0or0t8Uw>

PRAYERS FOR THE OFFERING

God of every good gift,

we bring these our gifts that were gifts to us from you
as everything in our lives has always been.

We bring them as one way of dedicating ourselves
to blessing the earth with the goodness of God.

In the name of Christ we pray.

Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Christmas cards 2021 We are living in an age where people are "over it " about lots of things – COVID-19 - QR codes – covid tests – quarantines – yes, and even Christmas cards!

The Christmas season crept up on me this year and I must admit I was surprised when on 1st December our first Christmas card arrived in the letterbox – I was excited by its envelope because it was beautifully decorated with coloured stickers and a sprig of Holly and red berries Somehow it inspired me and so the Christmas season began! I can't imagine a Christmas season without sending cards to friends and dangling cards ,from friends ,on strings ,above the doorways

We went to visit our 91-year-old friend Keith – he was sitting alone in his lounge room and didn't feel well -but after we gave him his Christmas card and chatted on – he felt better taking us for a tour of his beautiful garden – and even insisting on making us a cup of coffee!

He said his daughter would be calling in later that day

We visited George and Doreen in order to give them their Christmas card – George had had his second operation within a month and was recovering beautifully. Doreen chatted on as I held her hand – they are both 93 and are lovingly cared for by their family Doreen told me that , she found as she gets older ,she allowed things to happen and to change ,without worrying about them. She sent her love to our people at Caves beach .

This week we received a Christmas card from another couple in their 90s from our church with a note inside which said “hi all, it would not seem like Christmas if we did not get in touch and send the seasons greeting to the folks who mean so much to us “signed Myra and Jack

Actor Jack Thompson was chatting about his amazing life in the ABC program “Ahrn's Brush with Fame” –Jack is now in his 70s and on dialysis three times a week for five hours

he concluded his interview by saying “life is beautiful – thank you life”

In Psalm 23 King David said “the Lord is my Shepherd I shall not want “ or “I don't need a thing”

So let us all be grateful for our lives ,opportunities and comfort.

Let us pray

Lord God – the creator of all things

We thank you for the birth of Jesus Christ – your son in human form – for the presence of the angels, shepherds and Wisemen together with the guiding star and the lowly cattle.

We thank you for Christmas music – for carols and Contact as– for Christmas plays & for different forms of church worship

We pray that the traditions of the Christmas lights - Christmas trees - Christmas cards -Christmas gatherings will fill us with peace ,joy ‘thoughtfulness ,happiness and humility We thank you for friends ,family and caring neighbours & for precious memories also for the privilege of meeting together this morning

Lord we bring before you our Prime Minister and the Australian parliament.... we know decisions are being made on a daily basis which affect our standards and attitudes – our relationship with other countries – our relationship with fellow Australians We pray for all the local councils, churches, service clubs, charities, schools, hospitals, health workers.

We thank you for our aged ones – those joining in our church service this morning – we know there are aches, pains and difficulties – Some are not well and are unable to join in fellowship today– others have left the region to be with family – or are in care.

We pray for a blessing and guidance on those who are busy in the name of the church – for Mark the minister – for Jan our leader (facing sadness at the moment) for the church organist, Iris ,-for the Church Council -for those involved with the audio presentation -for the Bible study & prayer group, - Crafty Chat - for the ladies running the kitchen and the production of the “chatter”.

We add these prayers to the perfect prayer of Jesus Our Father...

Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be your name,

your kingdom come,

your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours
now and for ever. Amen.

HYMN 305 Let earth and heaven combine

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WyoSU3UT3IM>

BENEDICTION

God made a promise to Abraham.

OUR SOULS MAGNIFY THE LORD

God made a promise to Mary.

OUR SOULS MAGNIFY THE LORD

God makes a promise to us.

OUR SOULS MAGNIFY THE LORD

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zzDdN-5gmuU&t=13s>