



# **A Journey Through Advent**

**Peterhead New  
Parish Church  
2024**



## **A Journey Through Advent 2024**

**Come wander with me into the journey of Advent. If you are able, I would encourage you to read Luke chapters one and two. The New International version is my chosen text, but you might want to consult a few different bibles to see the variation in word choices.**

**Our Christian faith is a journey not from point A to point B but steps in a relationship with our living Lord.**

**The Advent season invites us to meander, to wander, to journey closer to the Lord and to consider his great love for us by sending into our world Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us.**

**This devotional is not meant to be an academic exercise but a living document for interaction and dialogue as you journey.**

**Consider taking this journey with a friend, a prayer partner, or a small group. It is always richer to share within the body of Christ what we are learning from the Lord.**

**These words are my meandering reflections on the depth and width of meaning there is to be gleaned from the Nativity story found in Luke chapter one.**

**I would love to hear your thoughts and ideas as well!**

**To God be the glory**

**Rev. Julia**

## **First week of Advent**

1<sup>st</sup> December, Luke 1:5-7

**<sup>5</sup> In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. <sup>6</sup> Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. <sup>7</sup> But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.**

Advent begins with a reminder that God can do the impossible. John the Baptist was born to parents that were way beyond parenting age and who had been childless all their lives. Childlessness in ancient Israel would have caused Elizabeth and Zechariah great pain and perhaps even isolation. Children were believed to be of greater value than wealth or land. Zechariah was a part of the priestly division and served the Lord with his life and his vocation. He would have carried a shame with him because though he and Elizabeth were called 'righteous' and they had done nothing to cause their childlessness, culture would have assumed that there was some sin in their life that caused their situation. Imagine the grief and loss this couple must have felt watching everyone raise children and not having any of their own. Some of us may find ourselves in that very situation. Even though society has changed we too might carry a profound sense of loss or pain. Others of us can identify with the loss and grief of Elizabeth and Zechariah but in different ways. We too have gone through loss in our lives. Loss of jobs, hopes and dreams, health and loved ones can leave their mark on us. Wherever we find ourselves today as we journey through Advent, be prepared for healing and hope. God meets us in our struggles and provides us with new paths and beginnings. While the Lord may not change our situation, he surely has the power to fulfil the promise from Joel 2:25 'I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten'. Anticipate and give thanks that the Lord is living and is active in our lives! Prepare to be surprised.

2<sup>nd</sup> December, Luke 1:8-10

**<sup>8</sup> Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, <sup>9</sup> he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. <sup>10</sup> And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.**

This is Zechariah's big chance! He is about to serve in the Temple, and this might only happen once in a lifetime. The scriptures tell us Zechariah was chosen by 'lot' but was it really by chance? Many things happen in our lives that we might believe are random. Yet as Christians we believe that our God is sovereign and that he is not a distant observer but touches our lives, hears our prayers, and works for our good. Now that also begs the question-does God cause the dreadful things that happen as well? This is a tough question to wrestle with and our faith would be meaningless if we did not tussle with it. However, scripture seems to repeatedly suggest that while God allows the difficult situations of the world to unfold, he does not cause the pain and sorrow, but rather walks these paths with us just as he walked with Jesus through the Garden of Gethsemane, the rejection of friends and the pain of the cross. Yes, we do face consequences for our own choices, we do struggle with illness and brokenness and the sin of others in this world but the Lord walks beside us, comforting us and compelling us to find joy amid suffering. God winks at us through the beauty of others caring for us, the shining of his love into our sorrowing hearts, the hopeful opportunities that suddenly present themselves and so many more 'God Moments' that just cannot be explained. Zechariah was chosen because God intended to bless him in these moments in ways that were beyond comprehension. I wonder did Zechariah realise the blessing he had been given. Did he see how the Lord was showing his favour upon him? Do we see the blessings God brings our way? So often blessing come in small ways and are easy to miss. Did you see beauty in the sun rise this morning or that lovely cup of tea or coffee you enjoyed? Each day is a new opportunity to find God at work in our lives. This Advent why not challenge yourself to count daily blessings small and large as you progress throughout the season? How many will be discovered if we slow down and consider our circumstances, not as random 'lots' but as love sent from heaven?

3rd December, Luke 1:11-12

**<sup>11</sup> Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. <sup>12</sup> When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear.**

Zechariah a man who had followed God and served him all his life was gripped with fear at a manifestation of God's power. He prayed but perhaps he was not prepared for God to act. How often do we pray expecting God to respond? When we talk with the Lord and share our hearts with him, he does speak back to us. Sometimes a word of comfort or a reassurance of his love is whispered in our ears. Perhaps we feel impressed to look at a piece of scripture that is just what we need to read at that moment. Other times we might be seeking an answer or direction and feel God cautioning us to go a different way. We might see God open doors or find them closing. But be assured when we pray God does hear and respond. He is with us just as clearly as the angel was standing next to Zechariah. If we comprehended God's closeness to us, it might be startling as well. When we recognise that the God of the universe is in a relationship with me and you it is awe-inspiring!

This Advent season allow God to open your eyes to see how close he is to you. Allow God to show you his love in new ways and remind you that your prayers are always heard. You are the apple of his eye! Why not take a few minutes now and ask the Lord to show you his presence, ask him to remove your blinders so that you can experience the many ways he is speaking to you each day.

When you see God at work, take a moment to share it with someone else! It is an encouragement to know how God is working in each of our lives.

4<sup>th</sup> December, Luke 1:13-17

**<sup>13</sup> But the angel said to him: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. <sup>14</sup> He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, <sup>15</sup> for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. <sup>16</sup> He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. <sup>17</sup> And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”**

Zechariah heard what he never thought was possible that Elizabeth and he would have a son! They had longed hoped and prayed but as their age advanced the possibility seemed increasingly unlikely. This hoped for child would be no ordinary son, but he would be like Elijah, powerful and Spirit filled. John would be used to turn the hearts of their people back to the Lord. John would be a forerunner of the Messiah, preparing the ground for the one who would save them from all their brokenness. This message contained much for Zechariah to digest! He was likely overjoyed that they would finally be similar to everyone else. They would have a legacy, and their honour would be upheld in their community. They had lived so long in shame that this new status would be hard to comprehend. But Zechariah likely also heard the great responsibility that came with raising this son. The joy and delight would be tremendous but the arduous work of raising him to embrace this calling would be a challenge as well. Has God ever brought joy into your life that also came with responsibility and a challenge? It may sometimes feel like a burden to walk in the ways of the Lord but when we do so great delight follows! Sometimes we shy away from these challenges because of fear, or we give up on talking to God because we are not happy with the places we have found ourselves. People often say, ‘be careful what you wish for.’ Zechariah and Elizabeth longed for and prayed for a child that would be their future and their hope. But when they received these promises the road before them was certainly not easy. Ask the Lord to help you face the challenges and joys ahead of you and recognise the ways God equips where he calls.

5<sup>th</sup> December, Luke 1:18-20

**18 Zechariah asked the angel, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.”**

**19 The angel said to him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. 20 And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.”**

Wow! This is no easy text to read. Zechariah rightly grapples with the news that he and Elizabeth will have a son. The impossibility of it is overwhelming to him and he cannot comprehend how it will happen. Gabriel has a word of rebuke for Zechariah because he did not believe God could do the impossible. That may seem harsh, but I wonder if it was more of a sign to others rather than a punishment for Zechariah or even an opportunity for preparation? The time of silence would have been a gift to Zechariah as well since his life was about to take on a whole new direction. He and Elizabeth were used to living alone. They had no experience of their own children and no comprehension of the disruption a newborn would create in their household. Perhaps this silence was an opportunity to consider the amazing works of the Lord in a way that Zechariah would not have time to do later. We all move through seasons of our lives. When we are young everything seems possible! As we age, we learn our limitations and if marriage and children come along, we also learn of the weight of responsibilities. Zechariah and Elizabeth were about to transition into a new stage of their lives well beyond what either of them could imagine. Sometimes we limit ourselves and think we are beyond adventures with God and new beginnings. Yet here are Elizabeth and Zechariah about to start a crazy journey into parenthood at an advanced age! Nothing is impossible when we trust in God!

What might the Lord be saying to you in this season of your life? Take time to be silent and follow in Zechariah’s footsteps of listening to God. What new possibilities are before you?

Preparing your heart in silent meditation and taking a listening posture with the Lord, would be good preparation for a God sized adventure!



6th December, Luke 1:21-22

**<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. <sup>22</sup> When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.**

What we see as difficult might be the very situation that shows someone else God's love. Zechariah was suddenly in a horrible situation. He had seen an angel and heard an amazing truth that was about to happen to him and Elizabeth. Yet Zechariah could not share the awe he felt in the usual way. He wanted to use words but could not speak. He had to learn new skills to communicate the adventure that was ahead. As far as we know Zechariah had never been limited in his speech before but certainly, we are aware that some people do struggle with this ability (due to hearing loss or disabilities they were born with or accidents that have occurred, etc). God was giving Zechariah an opportunity to experience the world from a distinct perspective where communication was not always as easy as it had once been. Seeing the world through another lens can help us to develop compassion and care for others. Seeing the world a different way brings out skills we never thought we possessed. Zechariah's son was destined to be an amazing communicator to his people. He would share God's ways with them and lead them to repentance, making the way for Jesus to share the kingdom of God with them. Perhaps Zechariah was now in the training ground to develop a skill set that would help him with Elizabeth to raise John in a way that connected with many people.

Consider your life and wonder what ways might God take the challenges he is leading you through and use them for his glory? Trusting God when things are out of our control (which is always) deepens our faith and speaks to others in ways we cannot do in ordinary times. What are some areas of your life God is asking you to trust him with? During this week take some time to imagine lifting those burdens to the Lord. You may need to do this repeatedly, until relief comes.

When you find that release, give thanks to the Lord that he can bear your worries, and you can know true peace.

7th December, Luke 1:23-25

**<sup>23</sup> When his time of service was completed, he returned home. <sup>24</sup> After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. <sup>25</sup> “The Lord has done this for me,” she said. “In these days he has shown his favour and taken away my disgrace among the people.”**

Elizabeth would have carried more than double Zechariah's shame. Among her people she would have been the one blamed for not providing her husband with a child. People believed children were an inheritance from the Lord. They were more valuable than land or money. Their importance lasted through the generations. Until this miracle Elizabeth and Zechariah had no generations to consider. Elizabeth was surely overwhelmed with guilt and pain (even though it was not her responsibility for their barrenness). People would have talked; women would have excluded her from their conversations and life would have been incredibly challenging for her. Elizabeth now knew that life would be different. She had a life growing inside of her. She was likely fearful, excited, overwhelmed and joyous all rolled into one and topped with pregnancy hormones. What a crazy mixed-up time it would have been! In hiding herself Elizabeth would have had time to take in what was changing in her body and in her life. Was she fearful of what the women would think? How might they mock her and not believe her? Did Elizabeth cry herself to sleep worrying what kind of mother she would be at her age? Was she perhaps fearful something would be wrong with her child at birth or perhaps that she would die in the birthing process? Elizabeth acknowledges that God was the source of this miracle and that her shame among her own people had been lifted.

What ways has God surprised you with grace in your life? Have there been wounds from your past that have shamed you and prevented you from embracing the love God gives you? Perhaps there are some folks you need to forgive. Elizabeth surely needed to give up her bitterness to embrace her new life for without that opportunity carrying her new responsibilities would have been hard. The women who wrongly hurt her would have been the ones she turned to for help in raising John. Forgiveness and grace are a process that takes time. Take some time during Advent to allow the Lord to show you his grace and forgiveness for yourself and for others.

## **2<sup>nd</sup> Week of Advent**

8th December, Luke 1:26-29

**<sup>26</sup> In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you."**

**<sup>29</sup> Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.**

One can only imagine Mary's surprise as the angel visited her. The word troubled implies agitation or being perplexed and confused. How many of us long to hear a word from God but when it comes it truly frightens us. Who was Mary? We know little about her before she takes on this immense role of birthing and raising Jesus. Verse 28 tells us that Mary has been shown favour or grace from the Lord. Knowing that grace is at the root of this word changes the dynamics. Grace implies it is offered as a gift not because of anything Mary has done but simply because God has chosen to show it. We are shown grace when we are forgiven not because of anything we have done but because of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Perhaps Mary is simply an ordinary girl who happens to be the one God chooses to be a vessel for the extraordinary.

I wonder what life would be like if we looked for the Lord in the ordinary rather than the supernatural. What if we found him as we sat at the coffee shop or took the dog for a walk, or dropped our child off at school or met up with our community group or visited a friend in the hospital?

What if Mary being chosen is truly Jesus entering into the ordinariness of our everyday lives?

Perhaps this Advent you might invite Jesus into your everyday life and ask him to take your ordinary world and do the extraordinary through it?

9th December, Luke 1:30-33

**<sup>30</sup> But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favour with God. <sup>31</sup> You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, <sup>33</sup> and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”**

Once again, the angel speaks of God’s grace. Mary is taken by surprise is surely fearful. What does it mean that this messenger has come to her to speak of God’s mercy? I can imagine her jaw hanging open as the message becomes increasingly surprising. As Mary listens the tall order of who this Jesus will become pales any ideas, she has about facing an ordinary situation. God sometimes asks us to do hard things that we never imagined in all our ponderings. To take a modern phrase, I am sure Mary was ‘blown away’ by all that Jesus was said to become. He would be on the throne of their most important King David. He would reign forever unlike David who brought about his own downfall.

When has God asked you to be a part of the impossible?

Have you kept track of the ways he has spoken the unimaginable into your life? We forget so easily the many ways that God works in our lives. Not many of us have had an earth-shattering experience like Mary and yet we have all had moments when God has broken into our complacency and shined his light into our everyday lives. I remember times where God showed up when I least expected it. It was a subtle God wink, a reminder that the Lord was at work even when I could not see his fingerprints.

Looking back over your life where has God come to you in the challenges, in the ordinary, in the everyday and how have you responded?

This Advent make space in your heart to see and embrace God however and whenever the Lord comes to you.

10th December, Luke 1:34-37

**<sup>34</sup> “How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”**

**<sup>35</sup> The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called<sup>[b]</sup> the Son of God. <sup>36</sup> Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. <sup>37</sup> For no word from God will ever fail.”**

This is where the journey Mary takes with God becomes even more shocking. Like most unmarried women of her time, she could have been stoned to death had she any ideas of having sex before marriage and become pregnant. We can argue over whether ‘virgin’ means young woman or a person who has not had sex but in this case, we might assume they are one in the same. Mary is pledged to marry Joseph, they have not yet completed their marriage pledges, which in ancient Jewish tradition is quite complex and lengthy. They are not yet living as husband and wife. Mary says she has not been known, a euphemism for sexual intercourse. Clearly what is being told to her is an impossibility. The angel/messenger tells her that her cousin is pregnant, and this is also a miracle. He wants to remind her that God can do the impossible and tells her nothing God utters, nothing God says, will fail to occur.

God’s plans will not fail.

Perhaps you are looking at your life today thinking you have lost your way, that God’s plans for you have failed. Be assured that God is still in control and that he has good and meaningful plans for each of us. Sometimes our lives take twists and turns and perhaps God may be silent amid such changes. Yet we can trust his faithfulness, we can trust the Lord to do the unimaginable in our lives.

This Advent where are you in your faith and life with the Lord? Have you grown weary in the everyday and are there times you fail to see how the puzzle of your life fits together?

Be assured you are not alone. Mary surely did not know the way forward and yet God still had amazing plans for her.

11<sup>th</sup> December, Luke 1:38

**<sup>38</sup> “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then the angel left her.**

What if Mary had been unwilling to serve God? What if she had allowed her fears and uncertainties override her faith? Sure, God could have found another person to be the mother of Jesus, but it would not have been Mary. Mary would have missed all the blessings God had in store for her. Yes, what was before her was scary and her young life was forever changed but how was it improved? How did trusting God enable Mary to become the woman he had always intended her to be? Before you turn down an opportunity or brush off an extra responsibility it would be wise to take time to consider is this one of those times where God is asking you to step up and out of your comfort zone? Surely Mary had no idea what was in store for her and neither do we when we volunteer for something God is pressing on our heart, but we will certainly miss the Lord’s blessings if we are always afraid to take a risk.

What are some risks you have taken in the past for God?

What are some things that are holding you back from risking in the future?

Perhaps take some time this Advent to remember the ways God has asked you to step out into the unknown and record how that experience turned out for you. Share your story with someone else.

Pray that God might increase your willingness to not have all the answers, but to keep moving forward into the unknown.

Sometimes we will not know the reasons why we ended up facing certain challenges until we ask the Lord in eternity, and even then, we may no longer care. Ask God for boldness to trust him even when you risk facing challenges and do not understand all that will come. Ask the Lord to stretch and shape you into the person he has intended.

12<sup>th</sup> December, Luke 1:39-45

**<sup>39</sup> At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, <sup>40</sup> where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup> When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. <sup>42</sup> In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! <sup>43</sup> But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? <sup>44</sup> As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup> Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfil his promises to her!"**

Having friends in our journey of life makes all the difference. We want to take risks for God but sometimes when we are in the midst of those choices it can be very lonely. Mary had much to ponder. She was pregnant in no ordinary way. Her life was in danger because if Joseph chose to tell the elders he was not the child's father, she could be stoned to death. I am sure she did not know how to face him and how to explain these strange events that had occurred. She found herself at her cousin's house who was in no ordinary situation herself. Elizabeth was pregnant with a child at an advanced age. Her and Zechariah had not been able to have children all their lives. The hope and the promise they had longed for was coming to fruition. God had answered the prayers they had likely stopped praying and had remembered their sorrow. It must have been a great confirmation of God's amazing power to see Elizabeth in such a situation. Elizabeth was overjoyed to see Mary and John 'the Baptist' leapt in Elizabeth's womb upon hearing Mary greet them. Mary had a friend to hold her hand through part of the journey. God was with her but so was Elizabeth. Being first time mothers of such different ages and experiences I am sure they had long chats. Together they could laugh, cry and wonder. God sends us wonderful people to share our journeys with as well. We might have others coming around for support in our times of need or perhaps we are the one that God is calling to support someone else.

Are there friends or acquaintances that God might be asking you to get to know a bit better? Take the time to invite someone out for a cuppa or to send them a note reminding them of God's love and your care during this Advent season.

13<sup>th</sup> December, Luke 1:46-56

**46 And Mary said: “My soul glorifies the Lord  
47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
48 for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.  
From now on all generations will call me blessed,  
49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me—  
    holy is his name.  
50 His mercy extends to those who fear him,  
    from generation to generation.  
51 He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;  
    he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.  
52 He has brought down rulers from their thrones  
    but has lifted up the humble.  
53 He has filled the hungry with good things  
    but has sent the rich away empty.  
54 He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful  
55 to Abraham and his descendants forever,  
    just as he promised our ancestors.”  
56 Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then  
returned home.**

Mary did not know what was ahead for her, but she did realise what she was facing was unprecedented. She was humbled by what was happening around about her and she recognised her stature beside God’s greatness. Mary had no power in this life, but she knew that God had all power. God had shown himself faithful through the years in relationship with her people. He had set them free from the Egyptians and provided for them in lean times. God cared for the hungry and for the hurting. He longed to lift up his people Israel. Mary’s song was not likely one she sung off the top of her head but developed as she spent time pondering what God was doing in her life and in the world. She spent three months with Elizabeth and had plenty of time to consider her situation and God’s part in it.

Perhaps we would do well to take some time this Advent to ask God for space to ponder our lives. What is God saying to us now? How has God acted in the past in our lives and in the lives of those we love? How might God provide us courage to face the new year ahead as we recharge our batteries during these long winter nights? Maybe consider buying a journal or take out a notebook and record your thoughts and prayers, share them with a friend as Mary likely shared her thoughts with Elizabeth.



14<sup>th</sup> December, Luke 1:57-61

**<sup>57</sup> When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. <sup>58</sup> Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.**

**<sup>59</sup> On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, <sup>60</sup> but his mother spoke up and said, “No! He is to be called John.”**

**<sup>61</sup> They said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who has that name.”**

Imagine the joy that Elizabeth felt as her long awaited and prayed for baby finally entered this world. I am sure there was much physical and emotional pain, but the overarching feeling would have been an elation that the Lord had shown their family mercy. Her neighbours and friends joined in the celebration. Have you learned that when you cry the people of God cry with you and when you celebrate the people of God are there beside you, dancing for joy? As family we are called to carry one another's burdens and to walk beside one another through the difficulties of life. The momentous day of public acknowledgement came when Zechariah would normally name the child. But Elizabeth speaks up and calls out his name based on what the angel had told her to call him. Names in the ancient world carried great meaning. The Hebrew version of John means God is gracious. Surely God has been gracious to Elizabeth and Zechariah allowing them to birth a child in their mature years.

What has God done in your life that has caused you to be in awe? How have you seen him provide for you or do the miraculous...miracles can be tiny everyday occurrences or large explosive events. Either way miracles always point to God and his power. Miracles are to sign post the greatness of our God and his desire to be active in the world and in our lives.

Look around for God at work and ask the Lord to show you, his presence. Find ways to share what you see God doing in your life (even small everyday victories). Do take the time today to tell someone how God has blessed you and how he has opened your heart and mind to his glory!

### **3<sup>rd</sup> Week of Advent**

15<sup>th</sup> December, Luke 1:62-66

**<sup>62</sup> Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. <sup>63</sup> He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John." <sup>64</sup> Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. <sup>65</sup> All the neighbours were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. <sup>66</sup> Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, "What then is this child going to be?" For the Lord's hand was with him.**

Here was Zechariah the one who had a tough time believing God would do what the messenger said. He had not been able to talk since bringing the offering before the Lord. Yet over that time of silence, he had learned to appreciate God in the midst of his life. He did not perhaps understand it but now the prayers of his heart had come to fruition. Perhaps all through Elizabeth's pregnancy he worried that it would not come to be, something would go wrong. So, on this day when his child was presented, he did not argue with his wife but rather agreed. He submitted any ideas he might have had about what was his rightful duty to name his son and trusted Elizabeth who had faith in what the angel said from the beginning. Zechariah began to praise God and the problem with his speech was healed. To be without a voice for any length of time would be disturbing. There are many around us who have lost their voices literally or figuratively. They do not feel that their lives are as valuable as others, perhaps they have been made to feel they are invisible or that their input is not needed. We might miss them because we are so busy with our lives. But on this day Zechariah could not be missed, he was finding his voice, expressing his gratefulness to God and celebrating that his long-held shame (which in that day would have been imposed on him and Elizabeth for not having had children) had been lifted from his shoulders. Take a moment to look around you. Who in your life seems to have little power? Who might be afraid to express themselves or who seems to backdown when others take over? Make room for them to share their hopes and dreams with you. Maybe you have lost your voice. Write down your ideas and views on the world around you and share them with someone else today!

16<sup>th</sup> December, Luke 1:67-75

**67 His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:**

**68 “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,  
because he has come to his people and redeemed them.**

**69 He has raised up a horn<sup>[c]</sup> of salvation for us  
in the house of his servant David**

**70 (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),**

**71 salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate  
us—<sup>72</sup> to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy  
covenant, <sup>73</sup> the oath he swore to our father Abraham:**

**<sup>74</sup> to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,  
and to enable us to serve him without fear**

**<sup>75</sup> in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.**

Zechariah did not hold back! He sang a song of praise to his God! He was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke words of life to the people as God's messenger. God would bring about good things for the people of Israel. God had seen their pain and would save them from their enemies. Zechariah was recounting his history and the ways God had been faithful to him and to his ancestors. The concept of redemption was not new, but it was about to take on a new meaning with Jesus at the centre of that redemption of God's people. Zechariah had been silent for months, almost a year and now suddenly he had much to say. This miracle was not because Zechariah was special but because God had the people's attention. He wanted to make sure they saw and knew that God was doing something new, that this child would make way for the Messiah that would come. We must share what we know of God with those around us. Think of the time you spend during the Christmas season buying presents, wrapping them, attending parties, decorating the house and tree. Alternatively ask yourself how much time did you spend telling others about a child who grew to be a man who is Saviour of the world, God in the flesh? There are little ways every day to incorporate the joy we have in Jesus at this time of year. Give presents or cards that do not communicate opulence but rather the message of Jesus' love. Wear a brooch, tie or a special scarf or clothing item that points to the one up above. Make the item a conversation starter and allow your talk to be seasoned with God's' love for everyone around you.

You can be like Zechariah, do not be afraid to use your voice to praise God and his goodness!

17<sup>th</sup> December, Luke 1:76-80

**76 And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;  
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,**

**77 to give his people the knowledge of salvation  
through the forgiveness of their sins,**

**78 because of the tender mercy of our God,  
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven**

**79 to shine on those living in darkness  
and in the shadow of death,**

**to guide our feet into the path of peace.”**

**80 And the child grew and became strong in spirit<sup>[d]</sup>; and he lived in  
the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel.**

John was destined for greatness, but that plan would not be easy. Elizabeth and Zechariah surely shared with John of his gracious conception and naming. They surely told him of what they knew of Mary's pregnancy. John would be among others but different. He would walk among the people, but he would not live like them. We might feel John's life was quite extreme and foreign to us. For he was likely a Nazarite and lived a life dedicated to serving God. He lived in the desert and ate what food he could find. He called the people to repent and be baptised. His job was to make way...to point to the Messiah and then get out of the way. He spoke truth boldly; he made enemies among the religious people and was eventually beheaded for his outspokenness. Who would imagine the plans God had for him would take him into such a den of vipers. John was willing to be the one to go into dark places and share the truth. We likely will not be called to eat locusts and wear camel's hair like John did, but are we perhaps being called to shake things up? The world focuses on all the glamour of Christmas with little of its pain. They forget the baby Jesus grew to be a man that turned the world upside down, loving the unlovable and touching people others had forgotten and shunned. John was not afraid to tell the whole story, are we just as bold?

Will we share the truth of God's love, not just sharing the warm fuzzies but sharing the depth of God's pain as well?

Will we share how God wants us to fight for justice and mercy for others and live differently than the rest of the world? What might you need to consider changing in your life that is perhaps too influenced by television and media or the larger culture? How can you like John be willing to go against the flow and point to the one that is King of Kings and Lord of all?

18<sup>th</sup> December, Luke 2:1-3

**2 In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. <sup>2</sup> (This was the first census that took place while<sup>[a]</sup> Quirinius was governor of Syria.) <sup>3</sup> And everyone went to their own town to register.**

Luke wants to make sure that we know the birth of Jesus took place at a particular time and season. Luke wants us to be assured that Jesus was fully human and fully God, he lived and walked this earth...his birth was not a fairy story. The prophet Micah writes that a great ruler and shepherd would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2, 4). Mary and Joseph lived in Nazareth and the census is what took them to Bethlehem. Both of them were connected to the line of David, one of the first King's of Israel, not counting Saul who was the first King who sought his own glory rather than God's. David was the King who loved God with all his heart...a shepherd boy who ended up failing on so many levels...an adulterer, a murderer, a narcissist who abused his power in so many ways. How does this shady character make it into God's story? For all his mistakes he was humble, he knew his sin was ever before him. He knew he messed up repeatedly, but he was not willing to forsake God or give up his faith. Indeed, Mary and Joseph had a mighty heritage, and Jesus was raised in the shadow of knowing his connection to both humbleness and greatness. We must remember that Jesus did not come to be a cute baby, to fill a nativity scene, or be the subject of numerous plays in our schools. Jesus came because we needed saving and that was true from the beginning. From the time sin entered the world there was nothing we could do to save ourselves.

The true beauty and gift of Christmas is though we are steeped in sin God still loves us and gives us new beginnings.

During this Advent time of waiting make quiet space to look at your life, to talk to God about where you have been and where you are going. Consider the Saviour and his willingness to set aside his power and majesty while on earth so that he could make a way for you to have eternity! Keep a journal of your thoughts, share them with your children. What a great tradition to consider beginning during this last week of Christmas!

19<sup>th</sup> December, Luke 2:4-7

**<sup>4</sup> So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. <sup>5</sup> He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup> While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, <sup>7</sup> and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.**

Was it the plan for Mary to give birth while they were in the road? Could they have imagined the many pilgrims that would be travelling to the census? Had they hoped to stay with relatives but there was no room for them? What conversations did they have on the long road between Nazareth and Bethlehem? Did they travel on their own or were there other relatives travelling with them? Did they share their story over and over about how God was doing something wonderful in their lives and indeed in the world? The journeys we go on in life are full of adventure with the Lord, but they are often not easy. God allows us to go down twisting and winding paths so that we might be stretched beyond our comfort zone. Surely this census could have happened later after Jesus was born but instead it was a journey they had to make when they were fragile and vulnerable.

Were there times in your life where you felt fragile and were not sure if you could make it another step? During this beautiful season of the year those of us who have been burdened with grief may feel it is hard to express our feelings. We may want to celebrate but not understand why our thoughts are so dark. We may try to be joyous but the struggle to find hope in the darkness can seem ending.

Remember to reach out to those you know and love who are grieving and walk with them on this journey. Words of hope and comfort are easier to find than perhaps the greater challenge of spending time with someone. Try being present for another, show up and show love. Listen and let them borrow your hope if they need it. If you are feeling alone ask God to send you someone to show you his light in the darkness. Know you are not alone even if you cry when it seems as though the rest of the world sings.

20<sup>th</sup> December, Luke 2:8-9

**<sup>8</sup> And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. <sup>9</sup> An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.**

What unlikely folks for the Lord's messengers to seek out...the dirty and smelly shepherds. They worked outside all day and slept with the sheep. They kept their flocks safe and put salve on their wounds. They were the hard-working people that no one saw, protecting the lambs that were born and used for sacrifices, providing meat, milk and clothing for the people. Our scripture tells us they were terrified and were in shock that the angels appeared to them. It was not what they were expecting! When does God's glory sneak up on you? How often are you busy minding your own business thinking your life is mundane and suddenly you realise there is a wonderful opportunity before you! The shepherds could not push away what was happening, it was in their face. The spectacular show in the sky was large and others would have likely saw the light from far away. What a blessing they could not discount God choosing them to be the bearers of good news. Often, we think we are not special enough for God to use us. We wonder how we might make any difference in the world. Well, we will see the shepherds made an impact as they were the first ones to be told of Jesus the Saviour's birth. They did not let the grass grow under their feet as they went to check out what the angels had come to tell them!

Do not wait to follow God and to be his representative in the world!

We do not need to be wise in the world standards for God to see our beauty and use us for his good!

This Christmas week ask God how he might use you to make an impact in this challenging world, how you might bring love to those who do not feel seen or how you might take his message off the hillside on which you are hiding!

21<sup>st</sup> December, Luke 2:10-12

**<sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. <sup>11</sup> Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. <sup>12</sup> This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”**

Everyone had longed to hear and had been waiting to hear of a Messiah that would come and save them! The Messiah was meant to save the people from all those who oppressed the Israelites. They longed to have God swoop down and fix the mess they had made of life. They had expected a powerful Messiah one that would stop the other nations from controlling them. Yet this is the sign they were told was coming--- a baby in rags lying in a feeding trough. How can you get much more powerless than an impoverished baby that has no rights and little voice beyond some babbling? Yet it was in this powerless state that Jesus came to show that the first shall be last and the last shall be first.

The shepherds must have wondered how a child in their lowly position could be a sign that anything was going to change in the world that they knew. Yet it was in this unexpected way that Jesus entered our world. Some might scoff thinking Jesus was a helpless, hopeless child, born of insignificant people, dwelling among the animals. Without the angel's announcement and the shepherds telling what they saw and heard who would have suspected that this fragile babe had more strength and power in his little fingernail than all the leaders of the world had in their lifetime. God comes to us in surprising ways that we cannot begin to fathom. Perhaps we often miss God's presence because we fail to see Him around us in the everyday places. We look for God in the glitz and glamour but do not hear his gentle whisper to us on the breeze. We look for loud, big, bright and bold signs and yet God is in the quiet, tiny, dim, fragile places that we often fail to see.

Look for God among the hurting, in places where there is suffering.  
Look for the Lord among the lowly where there is great humbleness.  
Look for God in the everyday for the Lord walks beside you.

The God-man who died for our sins and that of the world, was once a tiny embryo and yet he held the weight of the world on his shoulders.



## **4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent**

22<sup>nd</sup> December, Luke 2:13-14

**<sup>13</sup> Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,**

**<sup>14</sup> “Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.”**

All of nature praises God's name! As Jesus wound down the Mount of Olives overlooking the city of Jerusalem and his followers threw Palm branches and their cloaks in praise, the Pharisees did not understand. They told Jesus to rebuke his disciples, but Jesus said it was not possible <sup>40</sup> “I tell you,” he replied, “if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.” (Luke 19:40, NIV).

We were made to praise God and to glorify his name! The angels praised God recognising that this child (God and human) was going to bring peace on earth and would captivate the world. Jesus is still worthy of our praise. His love reaches to the heavens and his goodness and grace is beyond anything we can fathom. It is not surprising that the heavenly beings/angels could not contain their praise at his birth!

Love led Jesus to put aside his power that he might fully embody a powerless human being. Jesus knows how we feel and how we are made because he walks the same streets we trod. Jesus paid the ultimate cost of separation from the Father until the world's sin debt could be paid in full. How often will a person pay for someone else what they themselves owe? Maybe once or twice or a few times but not a million times over. Jesus' love and forgiveness keeps on going.

The angels praised the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus humbling himself to live among us. Emmanuel is with us.

Where do you see God's presence in your daily life? Take time during these last few days of Advent to find Jesus in the humble, fragile, broken places of this world. Praise him for his goodness and his love!

23<sup>rd</sup> December, Luke 2:15

**<sup>15</sup> When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”**

The shepherds must have been left with mouths wide open. How could they take in all the angels shared? There was no choice, they had to see for themselves. They had to race to Bethlehem to find this child and to see the Messiah, the one who would save their people and all the world. Sometimes when you tour the holy land in Israel you might have the opportunity to see what is known as the shepherd’s fields, now in the West Bank a place that is scarred with violence and brokenness. The people of this land continue to battle one another. God continues to cry at the disarray and chaos. In the face of wanting more power, more land, gaping divisions exist that have not yet been healed. Jesus came to bring peace and yet the explosions of violence in this tiny land have never been so great. Jesus continues to long for peace and promises for those who turn to him they will be forgiven and set free. Lust for power, revenge, and confusion over the rights we falsely claim lead to this never-ending cycle. The only true balm the only certain healing, is to embrace the one who the angels sang over and the shepherds ran to glimpse! Have you run to find Jesus? In this midst of a dark world, he is light. Amid uncertainty, he is the sure rock. In the angry fight for power Jesus is the one who lays down everything so that he might offer eternity to his people. As you enter into the shepherd’s fields do you hear the angels singing? Do you sense the presence of the divine? Are you willing to give up everything so that you too might be held by the one who draws nearer to you every minute, longing to make you, his child? Do not let another Christmas pass without God’s hope and loved wrapped around you. His gift is our freedom! His sacrifice is our ultimate gain!

24<sup>th</sup> December, Luke 2:16-18

**<sup>16</sup> So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup> When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, <sup>18</sup> and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.**

Today as you walk this Christmas journey you are rounding the corner and the cave where Mary and Joseph slept with animals and bore Jesus is coming into sight. It is not as you had imagined. The place is smelly, dirty, and unseemly. The food of the animals is all over the feeding trough where Jesus lays. The pretty wooden structure that looks like a perfect cutout of a barn is a figment of your western mind. The cold, dank, drafty cave is the reality of Middle Eastern life. This was no quiet, quaint beautiful night, rather it was a noisy, rank place teeming with people who had come for the census. There was no place...but Jesus came among those who have no place. Jesus dwelled with people and dwells with us today. The shepherds took in the sights and sounds. They could not hold in their excitement...Jesus had come for them! The Messiah was not for the powerful but for the everyday person. The Messiah was a baby...can you hear the shepherds laugh? How could they be glimpsing God's plan? This little one could not even communicate beyond the cries he squawked, could only share his needs for food and safety and yet his human cries spoke volumes. They must tell everyone that Emmanuel-God with us has come! There was hope in the darkness, light on the hill, lifted for all to see in the image of a wee babe. When you think of the babe in the manger what comes to mind? Do you see the sanitised western ideal of the nativity in your mind or are you willing to meet a young couple, terrified and penniless, travellers who found a place to stay for the moment? That moment was like none other, the world turned, and nothing would ever be the same. From that dark cave there were crevices of light peeking through, beams of healing for a world in need. Can you see the light Jesus brings? Will you invite Jesus into your dark places? Will you allow God to meet you anew in a war-torn country, in Bethlehem, violence abounding, but still today carrying a message of peace. Spend time this night preparing your heart to give thanks for the gift Jesus brings of authentic love and forgiveness breaking into the façade where most of us live.

25<sup>th</sup> December-Christmas Day

**<sup>19</sup> But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. <sup>20</sup> The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.**

We have made the full journey and yet we have not come to the end but the beginning. There is so much to tell of Jesus and his growth, how as a toddler he played with gold, frankincense, and myrrh. How those gifts made it to him is quite a miracle, a star guiding the way. The signs God shows us are often not billboard size as we would like, but they are common elements all around us shining a bit differently. A star shining brightly led the way to a King. Jesus learned how to talk, walk, dress himself, eat solid food. He learned languages and the scriptures. He went to the synagogue and the Temple and learned to debate as his ancestors had done. Jesus found out what it was like to be a son, sibling, cousin, friend and so much more. Jesus discovered the religious authorities who did not seem to love God wholeheartedly. Jesus wept with the grieving and laughed at weddings. He joked with his family and feasted at parties. The challenges came, temptations were present, attempts on his life were made when he was almost thrown over a cliff and miracles pointed to the power of God. People were healed and people came to faith. Crowds turned out and his closest friends huddled round. And oh, so much more, Mary had a front row seat to it all. She treasured all she heard and experienced. She watched and she waited. She clipped his hair and cut his nails. She walked beside him and made sure he was safe. She held his hand until one day he walked on his own. He walked all the way to the cross and did not look back. Jesus knew the sacrifice before him and was willing to endure the pain and the separation that he might bring peace upon this earth, peace to me and to you. What do you need this day? What gifts do you long for? Do you know that Jesus can meet your greatest needs? Turn to him he is calling you. Treasure what you have learned on this journey through advent, record it for the dry spells sure to come. Rekindle your love for the holy, reengage with the awe you once felt at hearing the Christmas story, do not give up until you also long to tell everyone of His great love!

May your celebration of the Saviour's birth be joyous, peace-filled and continue the entire year through!!!