

Fourth Sunday of Advent – Year B

Sunday 24 December 2023

The Faith Action Programme would like to thank Sally Fraser, student at New College, Edinburgh, for her thoughts on the fourth Sunday of Advent.

Weekly Worship, based on the Revised Common Lectionary, is for everyone – in any capacity – who is involved in creating and leading worship.

It provides liturgical material that can be used for worship in all settings. Our writers are asked to share their approaches to creating and delivering this material to equip leaders with a greater confidence and ability to reflect on their own worship practice and experience and encourage them to consider how this material might be adapted for their own context.

We would encourage continual reflection on the changing patterns of worship and spiritual practice that are emerging from disruption and how this might help identify pathways towards development and worship renewal.

An archive of resources for daily worship can be found on the Sanctuary First website: <https://www.sanctuaryfirst.org.uk/daily-worship>

We may not all be gathered in the same building, but at this time, when we need each other so much, we are invited to worship together, from where we are – knowing that God can hear us all and can blend even distant voices into one song of worship.

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Introduction

It is of course always a challenge when the fourth Sunday in Advent falls on Christmas Eve; it feels very close to Christmas to still be in the 'preparing' and 'making way' phase. But there is an invitation here, to take a quiet moment – before the excitement of Watchnight services or Nativities – and reflect on the deep faith story that runs behind, underneath and through the Christmas Story, which we see today in Samuel and Mary.

My approach, as someone trained in pastoral ministry rather than theology, would be to think – what do people need if they have come to church this morning? I imagine they will have come for rest, peace and nourishment amidst chaos, or solace if they are lonely. This could perhaps then be a peaceful, reflective time rather than an occasion to try and squeeze everyone's favourite carols into the liturgy!

It might be possible to extend this idea into a prolonged period of time in silence or listening to reflective music/looking at a piece of art. In reflecting on how the sacred enters the ordinary at Christmas time, this beautiful recording of an ancient Icelandic hymn (“Heyr, himna smiður”) sung in a German underground station, might be an example of a place to start: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e4dT8FJ2GEO>

Or it might be worth taking time on this occasion to remember those for whom Christmas isn't particularly happy, setting the service aside as a 'Blue Christmas' celebration, perhaps with the opportunities to light candles to honour difficult situations or absent loved ones at this time.

[2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16](#)

Nathan's response to the King will be echoed in Mary's response later in today's readings – his, 'Whatever you have in mind, go ahead and do it, for the Lord is with you', is very similar to Mary's 'let it be done to me'. Yet Nathan will experience a conversion from simple obedience to authority to obedience to God – his life and his priorities will be interrupted, he has a role to play in a bigger story.

[Luke 1:46b-55](#)

It is wonderful to hear Mary's song this close to Christmas, to look right back to the start of the incarnation story, which began with joy and dancing, but also a call to justice and equality. Mary's words are highly politicised and powerful, they are not the response of a

quiet figure from our greetings cards or nativity sets. We are challenged by Mary's desire to *magnify* the Lord, we wonder what part we ourselves might have to play in amplifying God's greatness, and her total confidence in God. It is worth reflecting that Mary's great faith is not just about her belief and trust in God, it is about how much she knows about what God is like, described beautifully here.

Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26

It is easy to see similarities between this psalm and the Magnificat, and there is something beautiful about its timelessness. The Psalmist writes of that which is passed on from age to age, Mary speaks of what goes through the generations, and we assume she would have learnt the Psalmist's words herself, demonstrating this. At Christmas time in particular it is sometimes good to think about traditions, those which we value and those which mean different things to us in different periods of our lives.

Romans 16:25-27

Again, here we see the theme of that which is timeless, passed on throughout ages. There is a reminder that in His birth Jesus is the revelation of an ancient mystery, part of a very long story of a God being in relationship with God's people. It is at once about tradition but also newness, the incarnation after all is a new birth. When we think of the obedience that comes from faith we may once again think about Mary, remembering that at this time faith was about knowing the nature of God, and reflect on her example of obedience.

Luke 1:26-38

There is the sense of an episode in a very long history, again the idea of something both part of and expected for a long time, yet also surprising and new. There is the beautiful reminder that God can do the impossible, brought home in the fellowship and sisterhood of Mary and Elizabeth. At this time of year we might reflect on connections in our lives that bring us joy, seeing that joy as divine in the way this moment of joy and connection between the women was divine. We reflect too on the disruption to Joseph's life: in some traditions Joseph is the patron saint of changed plans, perhaps a comforting idea at Christmas time.

Sermon ideas

It might be good to reflect on the idea of God breaking through, particularly as now Christmas is so often about a lot which is not so much to do with God or Jesus. Mary's life, in its busyness and her own preoccupations, is interrupted by God. Joseph's life is completely turned upside down by God. Yet both say yes to that, they welcome the transformation and they each in their own way say yes to the incarnation, as Nathan and David said yes to God before them. Might Christmas be a time to ask ourselves what we might be asked to say yes to? What needs to be born in us at this time? Might it be the passion for justice in Mary's song, or more her deep desire to magnify and glorify God? Might we be messengers like Nathan, sharers of vision, or community builders like David? Or might our yes be quieter, like that of Joseph, a call to acceptance and humility in the face of things we don't necessarily understand?

There might be a call to welcome the stranger as well as the interruption, and to reflect on the idea that God might be hidden in those who approach or need us. Perhaps those people we know and find challenging, or perhaps those we don't know at all and might be fearful of, those in our own communities who are on the margins and in need.

There are many beautiful poems about interruptions, [The Guesthouse](#) by Rumi is particularly apt at this time of year and is an example of something ancient which feels new and current. And beautifully combining the theme of the incarnation with the dancing of the Magnificat is [Dancing](#) by Godfrey Rust.

Prayers

Call to worship

Loving God,
through all ages You have desired to be in close relationship with us,
draw us into closeness with You today.

In the busyness of the world let us remember
that Yours has always been a story of connection,
that You burst into our world with the Incarnation,
and Your son still bursts into our lives every day.

Help us as a community to recognise Your interventions
and welcome Your interruptions in our lives today and always.

Amen

Intercessions

Perhaps an appropriate response to use would be: **“Eternal God, in Your changing world, hear our prayer.”**

We pray for peace.

In those parts of the world torn apart by war and injustice,
we pray for peace in the hearts of those who have it in their power
to bring change and reconciliation.

And we pray for justice, that as a baby could become a King,
all things are possible through You.

Eternal God, in Your changing world, hear our prayer.

We pray for our fragile and beautiful earth,
that amidst the consumerism of this time
we will grow in love and care for her,
and be a people willing to make sacrifices to care for creation.

Eternal God, in Your changing world, hear our prayer.

We pray for families,
in particular families struggling with rising living costs
and the extra pressures that this season brings.
We pray too for the elderly
and those particularly vulnerable to cold and illness at this time;
and we pray that we will form communities
which nurture and support the vulnerable.

Eternal God, in Your changing world, hear our prayer.

We pray for our church,
that we will always rejoice in Your stories,
and find new ways of telling them and sharing them
with a world so greatly in need of Your message.

Eternal God, in Your changing world, hear our prayer.

Amen

Final prayer and Blessing

Creator God,
we have heard of faithfulness throughout the ages,
and Your desire to enter so personally into the details of our lives.
As we leave this place, let us be confident of Your presence with us,
and commit to trusting You ever more deeply,
today,
this Christmas,
over the coming year
and always.
Amen

May God bless you this week
Strength of the Father
integrity of the Son
vitality of the Holy Spirit
now and always
amen

Musical suggestions

Our [online music resource](#) is on the Church of Scotland website; you can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and download a selection of recordings for use in worship. You will also find playlists for this week and liturgical seasons and themes on the *Weekly Worship* and *Inspire Me* tabs.

You can find further musical suggestions for this week in a range of styles on the [Songs for Sunday blog](#) from Trinity College Glasgow.

A suggested playlist of [songs throughout Advent](#) can be found on the Church of Scotland website.

- CH4 285 – “The angel Gabriel from heaven came” – it is hard to miss the angel Gabriel, and this a good opportunity to sing this popular carol when it’s at its most relevant
- CH4 359 – “He came down that we may have love” – a Christmas song which particularly emphasises the entering in of Jesus unto the world

- CH4 305 – “In the bleak midwinter” – this is the carol which perhaps emphasises our responding to God’s call in our own lives, *what can I give him?”, as well as the sheer vastness of God: “our God, heaven cannot hold him”
- Singing our Faith 269 – “Holy is Your Name” (My soul is filled with joy) – a beautiful rendering of the Magnificat, set to Wild Mountain Thyme, a tune familiar to many in Scotland
- Ancient and Modern 500 – “Centre of My Life” (Keep my safe, O God, I take refuge in you) – a very powerful rendering of the psalm

Reflecting on our worship practice

Since the start of the pandemic in 2020, the way we worship has changed and we need to reflect on the changing or newly established patterns that emerged and continue to emerge as a result of the disruption.

We can facilitate worship for all by exploring imaginative approaches to inclusion, participation and our use of technologies in ways that suit our contexts. This is not an exhaustive list, but some things we could consider are:

- Framing various parts of the worship service in accessible language to help worshippers understand the character and purpose of each part. This is essential for creating worship for all (intergenerational worship) that reflects your community of faith.
- Holding spaces for reflection and encouraging prayer to be articulated in verbal and non-verbal ways, individually and in online breakout rooms.
- In online formats the effective use of the chat function and microphone settings encourages active participation in prayer, e.g. saying the Lord’s Prayer together unmuted, in a moment of ‘holy chaos’.
- If singing in our congregations is restricted, we can worship corporately by using antiphonal psalm readings, creeds and participative prayers.
- Using music and the arts as part of the worship encourages the use of imagination in place of sung or spoken words.
- Use of silence, sensory and kinaesthetic practices allow for experience and expression beyond regular audio and visual mediums.

The following questions might help you develop a habit of reflecting on how we create and deliver content and its effectiveness and impact, and then applying what we learn to develop our practice.

- How inclusive was the worship?
Could the worship delivery and content be described as worship for all/
intergenerational? Was it sensitive to different “Spiritual Styles”?
- How was the balance between passive and active participation?
- How were people empowered to connect with or encounter God?
What helped this? What hindered this?
- How cohesive was the worship?
Did it function well as a whole?
How effective was each of the individual elements in fulfilling its purpose?
- How balanced was the worship?
What themes/topics/doctrines/areas of Christian life were included?
- How did the worship connect with your context/contemporary issues?
Was it relevant in the everyday lives of those attending and in the wider parish/
community?
How well did the worship connect with local and national issues?
How well did the worship connect with world events/issues?
- What have I learned that can help me next time I plan and deliver worship?

Useful links

Up to date information for churches around Covid-19 can be found [here](#)

You can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and download a selection of recordings for use in worship [here](#)

You can find an introduction to spiritual styles online [here](#)

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