



# Presbyterians *Read*



## Third Week of Advent

**Theme: Embracing the Newness Jesus Offers**

*Jesus offers a catalog of newness, of miracles, of wonders, transformations that take people in their fear and failure and disability, and wrap their lives in newness beyond themselves. That is what Jesus does. Everywhere he goes, newness happens (p.39).*

### Prayer

Light a candle and place it at the centre of your discussion circle. To open, invite someone to read the following prayer from p. 49:

*God of joy and hope, you come to us in Jesus as king who overturns all our ordinary understandings of power. Your presence is unexpected and unsettling, but we know you, for we have known your healing and provision. Open our hearts to keep on singing and hoping, that we may live and act without fear.*

Follow the prayer with a few minutes of silent reflection to centre in God's presence. Close the silence with a re-reading of the same prayer followed by an "Amen."

### Overview of Theme

We have been told *what* to expect when God's kingdom comes to this earth: justice, mercy, peace and abundance beyond what we can imagine. Yet, we often expect too little from God. John the Baptist was someone who expected and proclaimed what many would think impossible: a saviour who would usher in a new world order. Even though we know the truth about God's power to send such a saviour, we resist being like John. Instead, we choose to be "realistic" and accept the "endings" in life. This week, Brueggemann invites us to be like John and "bet on the possibility, the newness brought by God" (p. 43). We are not people who are meant to conform to this age, but to turn away from old ways, embrace the newness that Jesus brings, and sing an unexpected but hopeful song.

### Opening Discussion Prompts

As Brueggemann highlights in this week's readings, we are prone to becoming resigned to things "as they are" in our life and ministries instead of believing and moving towards the new life that is possible. Go around the circle and finish the sentence:

I hesitate to "bet on the newness brought by God" in [name one area of your life or ministry] because \_\_\_\_\_.

Going around the circle again, finish the sentence:

The new life that God could bring to *[name the area of life or ministry again]* might look like \_\_\_\_\_.

There are many biblical characters who bet on the impossible promises God has made to them. Name some of these characters and the newness that God brought into their lives out of impossible situations. Or, if anyone has experienced this personally, please share an example from your own lives.

## Biblical Reflection

Read the following passage slowly. If you have time, invite someone else to read it a second time. Reading it twice, especially when using a different translation with a different voice, allows people to hear new things in the passage. After reading the passage, use the questions below to guide your discussion.

### John 1:6–18 (NRSV)

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

## Biblical Reflection Discussion Points

Spend time discussing the metaphors and images John uses to describe Jesus. What do we learn in this passage about who Jesus is and what he brings?

Jesus makes three important proclamations at the beginning of his ministry: the kingdom of heaven is near, repent and follow me (summarized by Brueggemann on pp. 44-45). Rank these kingdom truths from 1 (hardest) to 3 (easiest) based on your ability to live them out in daily life. How would life be different for you and those around you if you prioritized the one you find the most challenging?

John the Baptist puts Jesus before himself. We are told that he relinquishes power ("He who comes after me ranks ahead of me") so that the fullness of Jesus' grace and truth will be known. Like John, we are called to recognize that we are not the creators, or the origins, of the newness that is gifted to us. Our role is "response, receptivity, repentance, good fruit and beginning again" (p. 43). What power do you have in your life? What means of surrendering might God be calling you to this Advent?



## Weekly Spiritual Practice

### BLESSING AND ENCOURAGING

Although John's words about the coming messiah challenged those who heard them, they were also an announcement of a coming blessing. They were a proclamation that God loved creation so much that God was sending his son to allow us to experience the fullness of God's saving grace. This is a blessing that we are called to continue to proclaim. By affirming the God-given gifts and qualities of others, we are speaking God's love and reminding others of their belovedness.

This week, our spiritual practice is blessing others/encouragement—reminding others that they are uniquely blessed, beloved and chosen by God. The following spiritual exercises have been adapted from Calhoun's *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* (pp.199-201) to help you encourage and bless others. Please choose one or both to try this week.

- Write a blessing for someone you know. Begin by thinking about the qualities and gifts of the person. Also think about what is going on in his/her life. Ask God to lead you to a scripture that will encourage him or her. Use the words of scripture and the insights you have about that person to write words to bless them. It can be as short as one or two sentences or as long as a page! Speak this blessing to them or give it to them in written form.
- Choose one day this week to encourage as many people as you can. Don't flatter. Ask God to give you divine eyesight. When appropriate, speak your truthful blessing out loud. When you can't speak it out loud, speak the blessing to God and ask God to bless them. At the end of the day, reflect on what it was like to be one who carried the blessing of God into the day.

### Closing Prayer

Christ our Saviour, who came as the light into this dark world, we ask you to lighten our hearts, souls and bodies with Your light. Make us into people who speak hope into the lives of others by reminding others how beloved they are to You. We come before you now to speak the names of those in our lives who need encouragement.

*[Leave time for people to say the names of people who need encouragement]*

We thank you for the newness that you are bringing into the lives of these people, Lord. Pour into all our hearts the light of Your truth, and let it so shine before others that they may come to know You and live fully the lives you've gifted them. Come, Lord Jesus, Come.

### Intercessory Prayer

This week, there will be time for participants to bring their prayers for those who need encouragement before God. Explain ahead of the prayer that participants can either just say the name of the person out loud or they can be more specific and name the type of encouragement that person needs. It is important to mention that they can also pray for the person silently if they do not want to do so out loud.

