



*Sing
a New
Song*



AN ADVENT DEVOTIONAL



Introduction

What is your favourite Christmas carol or song?

Some of us have been waiting all year to hear the first Christmas songs being played over the radio at the grocery store. Certain songs recall memories, create expectations for the days ahead and can even transport us to a place of mystery beyond words. It's like a herald telling us the Christmas season has begun.

Music is integral to the holiday season and an essential part of merrymaking. We sing for enjoyment, to express hope and to praise God. Music is also formative for us. Many of us sang our faith before we could speak it or even fully understand it. Music is an exciting part of the birth of Christ at Christmas, but even before Christmas itself, music can help us prepare for Jesus' coming. We take our place alongside people like Mary and Elizabeth, who pondered the marvellous ways of God while waiting for their children to be born.

Advent comes from the Latin word *adventus*, meaning "coming." For Christians, Advent is the start of the liturgical year. That is important because it signals that our communal faith life begins with both expectation and hope. Our hope and longing are multi-layered as we wait for both the Nativity of Jesus at Christmas and the Parousia when Christ returns. Advent calls us to look for signs of God's presence today and creates a longing for God's full presence in the future. It reminds us of the "now and not yet" quality of all of Christian life.

Tish Harrison Warren writes, "Advent calls us to reflection, repentance, and at times self-denial. With its crowds and festivities, the holiday season moves at warp speed. But Advent asks us to decelerate, be still, and rest. Advent, then, is unavoidably countercultural. It gives us a chance to remember every year that we are called to be a different sort of people."¹

Advent and Christmas are both musically rich seasons. So, it's fitting when Donald Heinz notes that the New Testament set Christ's birth to music because Christ was music: the early church called him God's song.² This Advent study has been prepared to help us sing along with those around Jesus at his birth. Each week of Advent, we will look at one of the four Lukan canticles (Latin for "little song," referring to hymns outside of the book of Psalms): Mary's song (*Magnificat*), Zechariah's song (*Benedictus*),

1 Tish Harrison Warren, *Advent* (InterVarsity Press, 2023).

2 Donald Heinz, *Christmas: Festival of Incarnation* (Fortress Press, 2010).

the Angels' song (*Gloria in Excelsis*) and Simeon's song (*Nunc Dimittis*). These four canticles were part of the early church's regular worship and are still used in many traditions. Finally, on Christmas Eve/Day, Psalm 96 will lead us to a new song.

This resource can be used in creative ways. You can use it in part or whole, each week or just one. You can invite your family, gather with a small group at church or create an Advent study group to discuss and practice it together. This may also be a good opportunity to share it with a neighbour, friend or co-worker as a part of an invitation to Christmas service at your church. For families with very young children, you will have to adjust to an appropriate level of discussion and engagement.

Responses

We respond to the Scriptures in various ways, but the more we engage with our full senses and being, the greater our opportunity to hear God's invitation in this Advent season. Our responses are practices and prompts toward love and good deeds. A variety of suggestions have been included in each study. You can choose to engage with one practice per day or select the ones that speak to you.

Write a Hymn. Each week, you will have the opportunity to write one verse to your own hymn. You will write new lyrics to "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" (Hymn 122).

- ◆ Remember the themes of Advent and write each verse in line with the theme of the week's devotional.
- ◆ Think about who you are writing this hymn for: Is it for you to sing in praise? Your family? Perhaps you'd like to invite your congregation to sing it each week.
- ◆ Musical tips for hymn writing:
 - Keep the chorus: *Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel / shall come to Thee, O Israel.*
 - Write four lines of lyrics for each verse with 9-10 syllables on each line.
 - Rhyming is optional. The original hymn is in an AABB pattern. For example, in verse 1 of the original hymn: A = *Emmanuel* and *Israel*; B = *here* and *appears*
- ◆ Sing your song once finished with each week's verse as a prayer.
- ◆ Consider sharing it with your family, church or community.

Here is an example of a created verse:

*We yearn, we yearn to see your kingdom come
To sing and dance with all creation, one.
For out of darkness comes a great light
Send to us now a Saviour in our plight.*

*Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
has come to thee, O Israel.*

Listen & Sing. A variety of songs have been listed for each study that you can sing along or listen to while reflecting on the theme. The songs range from hymns to contemporary praise songs, from classical pieces to pop songs. Enjoy them through the week and share them with those who could be encouraged by a song. A YouTube playlist, "Songs of the Faithful (Advent Songs)," has been created for easier access to the listed songs. Find the playlist at bit.ly/Advent-Songs

Create. An activity to create, observe and reflect has been suggested for those who enjoy reflecting with their hands and body. Adjust them to your ability.

Pray. Various methods of prayer have been suggested each week. Most take a little planning for timing and space that can make the time with God meaningful.

Serve. We are a sent people by a sent God who came to be with us in Christ. People may be more open during the Advent and Christmas seasons, and we may have more opportunities to share about the Jesus whom we celebrate. It can also be a challenging time for some who are missing loved ones or struggling through personal difficulties. A word of encouragement that God is with us, Emmanuel, can be the greatest gift this season.

And so, we begin journeying with the ancient songwriters in Luke towards the manger! Let us begin with an Advent call to worship.

Come from the distractions of home
with all that has to be done.

Come from the demands of work
where there are so many responsibilities.

Come from the malls and stores
where the talk is only of buying and selling.

Come from social media and television
where the news is bad.

Come to listen to the angels announce that God is doing a new thing.
Come to worship.
Come to offer your gifts.
Come to hear the Good News.

Come Holy Spirit.
Come, Creator of new life,
Come, let us worship.
Come, let us sing new songs.

A word about the author: Angie Song is an ordained minister with The Presbyterian Church in Canada who is currently a ThM student at the Vancouver School of Theology with focused studies on faith formation and the missional church. She comes from 13 years of ministry at Vaughan Community Church, where she served with young adults in missions and discipleship. In this sabbatical season, Angie is grateful to be enjoying the hospitality of St. Andrew's Hall and discovering the beauty of Vancouver.

We give thanks to the Rev. Dr. Emily Bisset for editing this resource. Emily is the minister at Calvin Presbyterian Church in Toronto, ON and teaches preaching at Knox College.



ADVENT 1

Open to Interruptions



Mary's Song: *Magnificat*

Key Verse

My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.

– Luke 1:46-47



Opening Prayer

Merciful and mighty God,
I will bless you at all times;
your praise shall continually be in my mouth.
My soul makes its boast in you;
let the humble hear and be glad.

O magnify the Lord with me,
and let us exalt his name together. Amen.

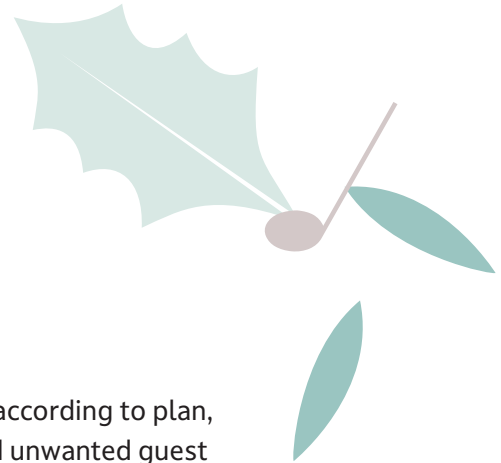
– from Psalm 34

Thoughts to Ponder

When was the last time you were interrupted? How did you deal with it?
How do you welcome interruptions or unwanted guests into your life? Your home? Your church?
Why do you think that is?

Scripture Reading

Luke 1:46-55
For Mary's full story, read Luke 1:26-56



Open to Interruptions

Most of us don't like interruptions. When a project doesn't go according to plan, when others' ideas differ from ours or when an unexpected and unwanted guest pops in, it can be frustrating and disorienting.

In many ways, Advent is disruptive to the Christmas season. While everyone is busy buying gifts, going to parties and making merriment, Advent reminds us that we are called to a different kind of preparation. The Christian tradition has understood the wisdom in preparing for a feast by holding back, reflecting and praying. We don't need to be party poopers to be faithful to the Advent season, but a time of recalibration prepares us for the coming of Christ.

Mary welcomes this inconvenient disruption because she trusts in the God of interruptions and the work God is doing. She has sung the psalms of the Hebrew Scriptures along with the generations before her that have sought God's saving work in their lives, their nation and the whole of creation. Nothing seems to be right in Mary's world: those in power are greedy and selfish; the gap between the rich and the poor is vast and insurmountable; only certain people—who are the right gender or nationality—have the full privileges of citizenship; there is war after war after war—and children are the ones who matter least and suffer most. But God—this strange and

While the culture around us often thinks that the 12 days of Christmas refer to the time before Christmas, it actually takes us four whole weeks to prepare ourselves for the mystery of Christ's incarnation! It is the first season of the liturgical calendar. As the days get shorter and the night comes sooner, we anticipate the coming of the Light of the World. Advent illustrates the prologue of John's Gospel: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." The real 12 days of Christmas begin on Christmas Day and help us celebrate all the way until the Epiphany. Mary, an engaged teenager, was living her routine life when the angel of God visited her and disturbed everything! She was greatly troubled, afraid, puzzled and perhaps in disbelief, wondering why the angel had been sent to her. What the angel said next would turn her life and the whole cosmos upside down, never to be the same again!

merciful God—seems to turn everything about this so-called world order on its head: bringing good news to the poor, letting the oppressed go free, beating the swords into ploughshares, binding up the broken-hearted. Mary sings of these promises in her song of reversals, where the proud are upturned by the low estate, the mighty by those of low degree, and the rich by the hungry. The reign of God interrupts the earth's realities to bring about justice, peace and equity. Mary wants to be part of God's work and trusts that the Holy Spirit, who hovers over her, disrupting her life, will make that possible.

God has a funny habit of turning things upside down. The Gospels show this over and over again as Jesus breaks the rules about healing on the Sabbath, including women among his disciples, raising up children, blessing the poor, and declaring that the last shall be first and the first shall be last. The Magnificat foreshadows all these things. Take a look at the Beatitudes in Luke 6:20-25 or Matthew 5:1-12 and compare them to Mary's Magnificat.

Mary remains available to God: *"May your word to me be fulfilled."* (Luke 1:38). She goes on to praise the Lord in what is now called *The Magnificat*. The literal meaning of *Magnificat* in Latin is 'magnifies,' which is the opening word of the canticle. A magnifying glass makes an object larger for better viewing, showing us wonderful and delightful details we might not see at first. In the same way, the Magnificat shows us a more detailed picture of the magnificent and mysterious ways that God plans to turn the world right-side up through Mary's child.

Questions for Reflection

1. What does Mary's song say about who God is and what God is doing? Try going through and underlining all of God's verbs in Mary's song.
2. How is our world like Mary's world? Where do you see the proud being reversed by the lowly, the mighty by those of low degree, and the rich by the hungry—in your life, community, city or the world? How might God be working there?
3. Where would you like to see God turn things right-side up? How does this lead you to pray?
4. Mary magnified the Lord for all God's goodness and mercy by singing a song. What does it look like for you to magnify God?

Our Response/Advent Practices

Write a Hymn. Each week, you will have the opportunity to write one verse to your own hymn. The new lyrics will be set to the tune of *"O Come, O Come Emmanuel."* For the theme of the first verse, write about some of the reversals or interruptions you have reflected on this week. See the introduction for complete details. To close, sing your song as a prayer and consider sharing it with your family, church or community.

Sing & Listen. Take time this week to sing a hymn or praise song and listen to various pieces reflecting on the theme.

- ◆ Hymn 123: My Soul Gives Glory to My God
- ◆ Magnificat in D major, BWV 243 by J.S. Bach
- ◆ Canticle of the Turning by Rory Cooney
- ◆ 10,000 Reasons by Matt Redman
- ◆ Hymn 124: People in darkness (it has some good reversals or opposites to reflect on)

Magnify & Observe. Use a magnifying glass or the magnifying option in your camera app on your phone to get a close-up image of natural items you see every day—for example, a plant, fruit/vegetable, your hair or a coin. Take notice of the smallest details and reflect on their intricacies and the Maker who made them so. Draw the item with all its components as a prayer and give thanks to God.

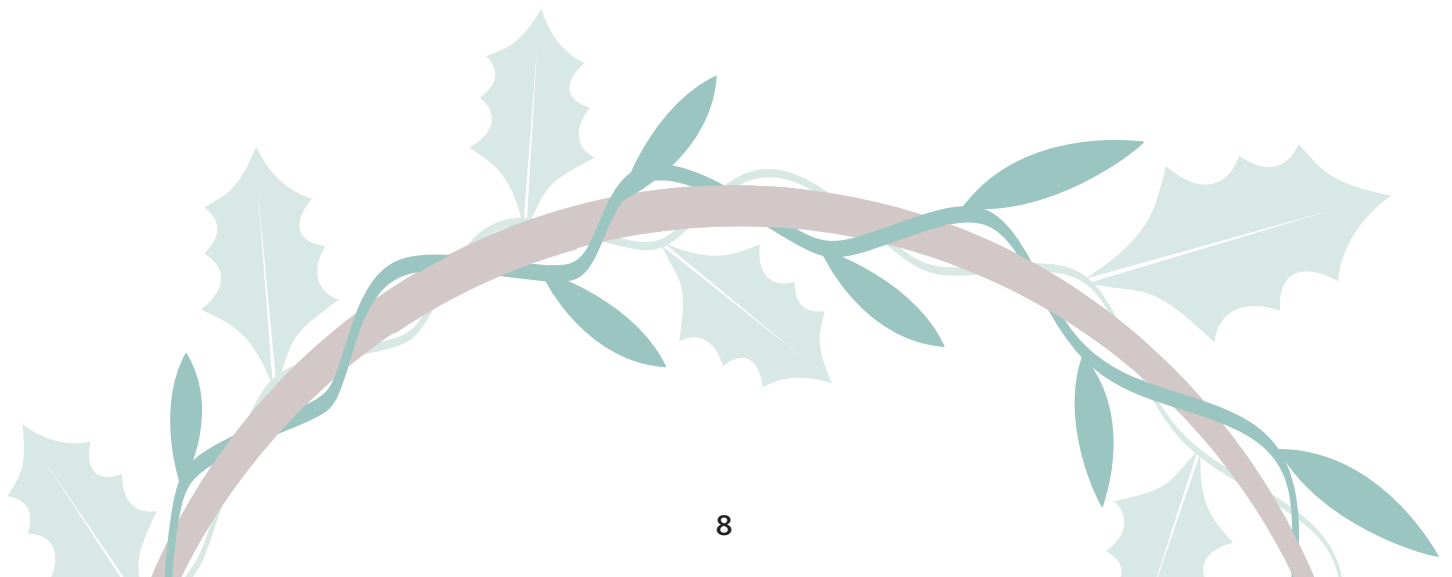
Pray. Read Rumi’s “The Guest House” (you can search for it online). Are you currently experiencing an interruption in your life? How might you see this new thing as an invitation from God? How does this lead you to pray for yourself and others? Take time to respond in prayer.

Serve. Is there someone you can come alongside with a ‘magnifying glass’ to encourage today? A friend, guest or stranger who needs lifting up and a reminder of God’s mercy? Call, message or visit them this week and share your reflections from Mary’s Magnificat.

Closing Prayer

Wake me, O Divine Wisdom, to the wonder of each moment.
Keep me amazed at simple things.
Keep me open to unexpected encounters.
Let me see you in life’s interruptions, and bless those who interrupt me.
Then, guide me to return to the task at hand at the right time.
Amen.

– A Franciscan Prayer





ADVENT 2

Waiting in Silence



Zechariah's Song: *Benedictus*

Key Verse

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

– Luke 1:67

Opening Prayer

Oh God, for you alone my soul waits in silence,
For my hope is from you.

You alone are my rock and my salvation,
my fortress; I shall not be shaken.

On you, Oh God, rests my deliverance and my honour;
my mighty rock, my refuge.

God, I trust you and call on others to trust you,
Pouring out our hearts before you,
For you are a refuge for us.

– from Psalm 62:5-8



Thoughts to Ponder

Do you enjoy silence? How do you feel about waiting? Does it have a negative connotation? Is it something comfortable or disconcerting? What's one thing you've waited a long time for? What makes the waiting difficult?

Scripture Reading

Luke 1:67-79

For Zechariah's full story, read Luke 1:5-25, 57-79



Waiting in Silence

Waiting and silence are things most of us don't like and even avoid. That is especially true when we are waiting for an answer, a resolution, a diagnosis. It is even true when we are waiting for an answer to prayer. We don't like not knowing. We don't like wondering when or if our prayer will be answered. Waiting reminds us that we are not in control. Waiting doesn't come naturally to most of us, even though we teach our children the necessity of it and train our pets to get good at it. We love the exciting lights and merriment of Christmas, but struggle to sit in the 'not yet' of Advent. We like to be busy, and sometimes we have to intentionally create a space of silence or waiting as a spiritual discipline.

A time of silence is a necessary part of the process for a new thing to happen. In his book, *Out of Solitude*, Henri Nouwen writes, "Somewhere we know that without a lonely place our lives are in danger. Somewhere we know that without silence words lose their meaning, that without listening speaking no longer heals, without distance closeness cannot cure. Somewhere we know that without a lonely place our actions quickly become empty gestures."

Zechariah was a priest in the temple of Jerusalem. There were many priests from Aaron's lineage who served in the temple—so many that they were divided into shifts or sections. When each section was on duty, one of the priests was chosen, by drawing lots, to enter into the Holy of Holies of the temple. This inner sanctuary was a sacred place where very few human beings ever entered. It was understood to be God's dwelling place, and it was considered so holy that it was dangerous! Perhaps, when it was Zechariah's turn, he had forgotten just how holy God is, how life-changing an encounter with God can be, and how courageous a person must be to seek such an encounter in the house of worship.

Zechariah was married to a woman named Elizabeth. Both were elderly and had never had children. As Zechariah served in the temple, the angel Gabriel visited him to tell him that Elizabeth would have a child. We often hope to encounter God when we worship, but this was beyond the scope of possibility! He had every reason not to believe this—it was biologically impossible to conceive and bear

How many of us think twice about the risk we are taking when we go to church on a Sunday morning, and how seriously do we consider the possibility that we might just encounter God in God's holy house?

a child at their age, and all the waiting and prayers over the years seemed to lead only to disappointment. Who could blame him for not believing?

When Zechariah doubted Gabriel, he lost the ability to speak. He was gifted an opportunity for silence and waiting, though he may not have seen it as a gift!

Imagine the charades of trying to explain what happened in the temple, the confusion and concern from his community, the bewilderment of finding out his aged wife was pregnant, and the connections he made to the stories of Sarah and Abraham, Rachel and Jacob, Hannah and Elkanah!

When Zechariah confirmed that his newborn son's name was to be John, he was able to speak again. The first thing he did after a 10-month silence was sing. His tune had changed from disbelief to thanksgiving for God's faithfulness. His song praised and blessed God. He rejoiced that we are free to worship God and live in holiness with whole lives. He professed his hope that we can walk in the way of peace. God was making good on promises made long ago in God's redeeming love and mercy to save us.

That was worth the wait!

Questions for Reflection

1. Put yourself in Zechariah's place. What do you think he pondered and experienced during those ten months of silence?
2. In Luke 1:74-75, we read that God wants us to live without fear. It also says that we are called to be holy. What does this mean to you? For your church and community?
3. Zechariah's son is known to us as "John the Baptist." He became a guide to prepare those who wanted to come to God through Jesus. How might you guide those who want to know God through Jesus?
4. What's one promise you've seen fulfilled that you want to thank God for today?

Holy is perhaps the ultimate adjective for God. German theologian Rudolf Otto referred to the holiness of God as the "mysterium tremendum et fascinans" in his book, *The Idea of the Holy*. God is the ultimate mystery—awe-inspiring and fascinating, both overwhelming and captivating. God's holiness is beyond human imagining. There is such potency to God's name and character that when someone comes into contact with this formidable holiness, a lack of words is often one of the results.

Our Response/Advent Practices

Write a Hymn. This week, you will write a second verse of your hymn set to "O Come, O Come Emmanuel." For the theme, think about the challenges and opportunities of silence before the fulfillment of what you are waiting for. Write four lines of lyrics with ten syllables in each line. Add this to your first verse and sing it as a prayer.

Sing & Listen. Take time this week to sing a hymn or praise song and listen to various pieces reflecting the theme. Take time to stop the song halfway through and sit in silence. Take a moment to experience the feeling of incompleteness and reflect on the music and lyrics you are listening to.

- ◆ Hymn 154: Silent Night
- ◆ Hymn 542: Let all mortal flesh keep silence
- ◆ Hymn 752: Blest be the God of Israel (Zechariah's song)
- ◆ Im Advent by Felix Mendelssohn
- ◆ Still by Reuben Morgan
- ◆ Light of the World by Lauren Daigle, Paul Duncan and Paul Mabury
- ◆ God Rest Ye Merry Gentleman by Barenaked Ladies (what do you make of the abrupt silence at the end?)

The Practice of Waiting. While on errands this week, choose to drive in the slowest lane, take a longer route or stand in the longest line at the store to accomplish what you set out to do. Reflect on the experience: What did you observe? What happened in your thoughts/heart/body as you waited? What were the gifts and challenges? Did the slower pace help you see God or others better? What prayer rises up through the experience?

Pray. The Prayer of Examen is a silent recounting of your past day to see how God was present with you. Taking a time of silence in the busy Advent season is a practice of seeing God in the everyday. Find a moment this week to be silent and reflect on the day. Set a timer for 5-10 minutes. Play the last 24 hours back in your mind, scene by scene, like a movie, and look for where God was present with you throughout the day, whether in moments of joy and kindness or moments of sorrow and confusion. Thank God for being present with you in those moments.

Serve. How can you bless someone in your community who is in the midst of waiting this week? Consider visiting the hospital to pray with those waiting at the bedside of a loved one, visiting with a newcomer family waiting to be reunited with other family members, meeting with a friend waiting for a diagnosis, and praying with a parent waiting for their child's healing.

Closing Prayer

Father of all souls born into time,
 Grant us quietness of heart while we remember,
 And in our remembering, give us eyes to see the work of thy Spirit.
 We have lived and laboured,
 Each in our own way to do thy will.
 We have seen the slender thread on which life depends.
 We have been conscious of the iron tissue of time enfolding all things and ourselves,
 And yet, we have seen time split open by the splendor of things eternal.
 Help us in our remembering, therefore, O God,
 To be strong in hope through Jesus Christ our Lord.
 Amen.

– Prayer by Samuel H. Miller³

³ Samuel H. Miller, *What Child Is This? Readings and Prayers for Advent-Christmas* (Fortress Press, 1979).



ADVENT 3

God in the Ordinary



The Angels' Song: *Gloria in Excelsis*

Key Verse

Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those
on whom his favour rests.

– Luke 2:14



Opening Prayer

Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and all that is within me,
bless his holy name.

Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and do not forget all his benefits.

The Lord has established his throne in the heavens,
and his kingdom rules over all.

Bless the Lord, O you his angels,
you mighty ones who do his bidding,
obedient to his spoken word.

Bless the Lord, all his works,
in all places of his dominion.

Bless the Lord, O my soul. Amen.

– from Psalm 103

Thoughts to Ponder

When were you last surprised or shocked amid your ordinary routine?
What made the event so unexpected?

Scripture Reading

Luke 2:13-14

For the shepherds' and angels' full story, read Luke 2:1-15

God in the Ordinary

"Everyone wants a revolution. No one wants to do the dishes."

This sign hangs on the wall of a New Monastic Christian Community house, reminding its members that God is in the everyday things of life. Tish Harrison Warren writes in her book *Liturgy of the Ordinary*, *"The kind of spiritual life and disciplines needed to sustain the Christian life are quiet, repetitive, and ordinary. I often want to skip the boring, daily stuff to get to the thrill of an edgy faith. But it's in the dailiness of the Christian faith—the making the bed, the doing the dishes, the praying for our enemies, the reading the Bible, the quiet, the small—that God's transformation takes root and grows."*⁴

We all want accomplished families, exciting jobs and bustling churches, but God meets us and chooses to meet us exactly where we are—in the ordinariness of our everyday lives. This is the good news of our Incarnate God.

The whole Christmas narrative has 'ordinary' written all over it—that is, until God shows up. The story of the shepherds is no exception. It's another ordinary night at their everyday job in the typical place with their usual sheep. There's a good chance these shepherds were children or young adults watching over the flock. Shepherds of first-century Judea had no real standing or influence in their society. But, the Biblical story turns this on its head. The significant people in this narrative are those who hear and respond to God. They are the ones who are most important. God chose to send the angels to young people, to those without much voice, to share the incredible news of a coming Saviour. The world would soon know what was happening through their telling. Furthermore, when God chose to come into the world, the Divine came as an ordinary, fragile, helpless human baby born in the most humble of circumstances. The scene quickly turned from ordinary and boring to terrifying and awe-inspiring!

Part of the message of Advent is that God can come to any of us anytime, anywhere. The glory that shone all around denotes God's presence, and it's a place of transformation for us.

There are three comings of Christ: Christ, who came as an infant 2000 years ago; Christ, who will come again at the end of time (the Parousia); and Christ, who comes to us daily. Whenever Christ



4 Tish Harrison Warren, *Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life* (InterVarsity Press, 2016).

comes, our lives are infused with new meaning and given a new orientation. In turn, we take up the angels' song, glorifying God and announcing peace on earth as it is in heaven.

Oscar Uzin says this: *“Be alert, be alert, so that you will be able to receive your Lord in your husband, your wife, your parents, your children, your friends, your teachers, but also in all that you read in the daily papers. The Lord is coming, always coming. Be alert to his coming. When you have ears to hear and eyes to see, you will recognize him at any moment of your life. Life is Advent; life is recognizing the coming of the Lord.”*⁵

John Calvin emphasizes the daily nature of God's grace given to us through the Holy Spirit (Christian Institutes, Book 4, Chapter 1). Modern hymn writers Jim and Jean Strathdee express this theology in this way: God, we praise you for your Spirit, Comforter and daily friend; restless searcher, gentle teacher, strength and courage you send (Hymn 436).

Questions for Reflection

1. Why might God have sent messengers to ordinary shepherds in the field to tell of the great things happening?
2. How do you stay open and awake for God's appearances in your ordinary life at home, school, work, and church?
3. What significance does the song of the angels have for your community this Advent season?
4. How would you respond to the sighting of Christ in a manger? Who would be the first person you would tell? Share this good tiding with them today.

Our Response/Advent Practices

Write a Hymn. This week, you will write a third verse of your hymn set to *“O Come, O Come Emmanuel.”* For the theme, think about where you see God in the ordinariness of life and the gratitude for Christ's coming. Write four lines of lyrics with ten syllables in each line. Add this to your first two verses and sing it as a prayer.

Sing & Listen. Take time this week to sing a hymn or praise song and listen to various pieces reflecting the theme.

- ◆ Carol: Angels We Have Heard on High
- ◆ Hymn 689: Simply trusting every day
- ◆ Classical: Gloria In Excelsis Deo by Antonio Vivaldi
- ◆ Praise Song: God of Wonders by Marc Byrd and Steve Hindalong
- ◆ Praise Song: Canticle by Jon Guerra and Taya Gaukrodger
- ◆ Pop Song: Ordinary Miracle by Sarah McLachlan

⁵ As recounted by Henri Nouwen, *Gracias! A Latin American Journal* (Orbis Books, 2002).

Share a Gift. Take a walk in your neighbourhood or a place you visit often in your daily life to notice where God is. Ask the Spirit to open your eyes to the ordinary places of your neighbourhood, the grocery store, a coffee shop, or the library. Try writing down and tucking a copy of the Luke 2:1-14 in your pocket and then take it out in those ordinary places and read it to yourself. Or when doing the ordinary things of the day create a list: where do you see God today?

Daily Office Prayers. Daily Office prayers are intentional times during your day to slow down and be present with Jesus. Choose 2-3 moments or activities in your regular, daily routine that indicate a time to pause and pray. If helpful, set a reminder and find a quiet space. Take a minute to pause and take deep breaths. Read a psalm (Psalm 89:1-8, 130, 97, 126, 85, 72) or sing/listen to a suggested song in the list above. Respond in words or silence, then end with the Lord's Prayer. Practice Daily Office throughout the week to become more present to God's presence with us.

Serve. Create a small and thoughtful Advent gift for the people you encounter often and would like to bless or appreciate. You might think of your mail delivery person, a crossing guard in your neighbourhood, a grocery store clerk or a bus driver. You can create cards, bake a treat or share a talent that you have, reminding them that the loving gift you share comes as Christ comes to us. Choose a time to deliver the gift and share your hope for this Advent season.

The Daily Office is an ancient traditional pattern of prayer. A contemporary version of the Daily Office includes Morning Prayer, Midday Prayer, Evening Prayer (Vespers), and Close of the Day. The PC(USA) even offers a daily app for your smartphone with resources of prayer, psalms and canticles included.

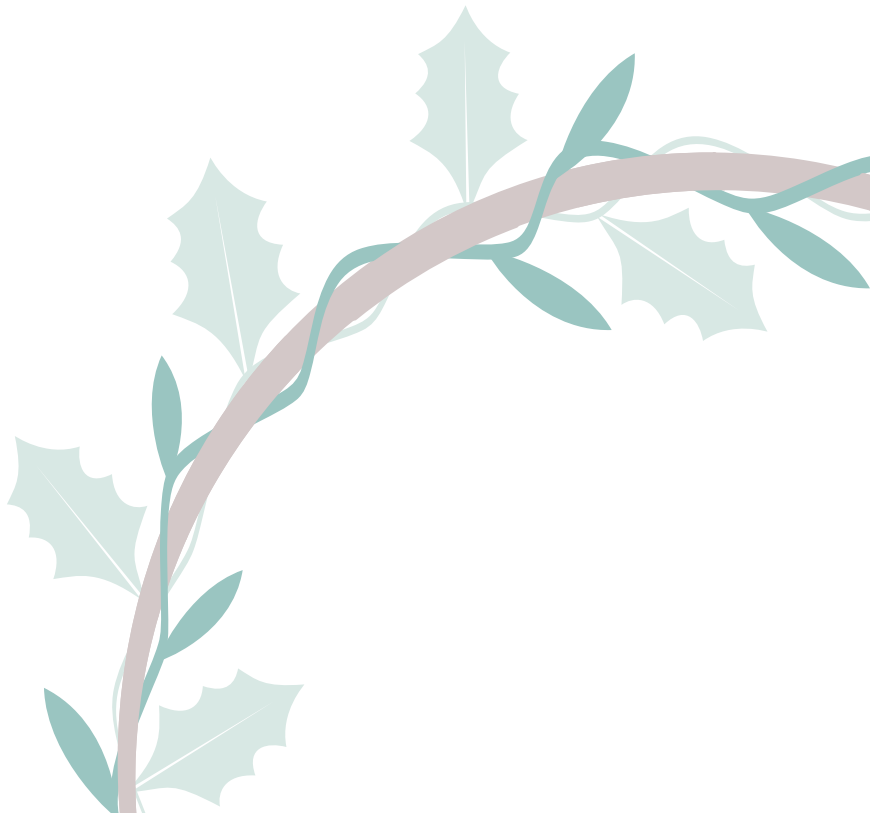
Closing Prayer

God, your advent feet come silently.
Along our noisy streets;
The noise, our ears, the silence
Contain the Christ we FAIL to greet.

God, your advent feet come silently.
Along our noisy streets;
The noise, our ears, the silence
Contain the Christ we FEAR to greet.

God, your advent feet come silently.
Along our noisy streets;
The noise, our ears, the silence
Contain the Christ we LONG to greet.

– E. Body from Aotearoa/New Zealand⁶



⁶ E. Body, *Seeing Christ in Others: An Anthology for Worship, Meditation and Mission* (Canterbury Press, 2012).



ADVENT 4

Worth the Wait



Simeon's Song: *Nunc Dimittis*

Key Verse

Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.

– Luke 2:29



Opening Prayer

How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?
How long will my enemy triumph over me?

Look on me and answer, Lord my God.
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death,
and my enemy will say, "I have overcome him,"
and my foes will rejoice when I fall.

But I trust in your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in your salvation.
I will sing the Lord's praise,
for he has been good to me.

– from Psalm 13

Thoughts to Ponder

When was the last time a long-awaited prayer was answered?
Describe the experience and emotions of its fulfillment.

Scripture Reading

Luke 2:25-32

For Simeon's full story, read 2:28-35



Ending Well

The word 'Advent' comes from the Latin and means 'coming'. It is a season of expectation for what is to come. But have you ever imagined what it will be like when what we've been waiting for finally arrives? When the One we've been expecting knocks at the door?

It takes tremendous strength and trust to hold onto God's promise. Instead of complaining in hopelessness for the long wait, Simeon trusts that the yearning itself is a sign of God's coming work of salvation and watches for its fulfillment. Simone Weil writes in her journal, *"Waiting patiently in expectation is the foundation of spiritual life."*

Simeon was a prophet and an elder of the community, righteous and devout before God. Luke writes that the Holy Spirit rested on him, revealing things to him and guiding him. While others in the Christmas narrative were surprised by the inbreaking of God into their ordinary lives, Simeon was eagerly waiting for God's promise to be fulfilled within his lifetime. He had received personal assurance that he'd see Israel's consolation from all the hardships of occupied life with his own eyes. Yet he didn't sit back and wait those many years for the fulfillment of God's promise. He actively responded to the Spirit's prompting by going out daily and looking for evidence of God's activity. He went to the Temple often, watching, praying, and preparing for God to show up.

Our elders' beautiful and enduring faith is an example and a sign of God's longstanding promise among us. When Simeon finally laid his eyes on the Christ, he had the distinct privilege of laying

Simeon is a great example of someone who experiences "eschatological hope." This theological term is most often associated with German theologian Jürgen Moltmann. It describes how a future hope that God's love and goodness will ultimately prevail transforms our present reality. In other words, that which we hope for (that is "not yet") is also already among us. We see this paradox throughout the Gospels. Jesus says the Kingdom of God is right here, yet every week, we pray the prayer that Jesus taught us, "Your kingdom come..." This "eschatological hope" allows us to live boldly right now—working for justice and peace with confidence because we trust God with our future.

his hand on the Son of God and blessing the next generation! Simeon said to God, “*Now you let your servant depart in peace*” because he had seen the *light of revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of Israel*. Though he would not know how the next 30 years would play out, he didn’t need to. It was enough for Simeon to behold God’s plan actively at work.

Nunc Dimittis are the first words of Simeon’s song in Latin. They literally mean “Now release” or “permission to depart.” This canticle is most often sung at Evening Vesper services or the close of the day.

Questions for Reflection

1. Imagine waking up as Simeon on the day he met Jesus. What could he have been thinking and feeling? How did that change by the close of the day?
2. What does it mean in Simeon’s song that Jesus is “a light of revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of your people Israel”? (v31-32) How has Christ brought light to your life?
3. When has God brought a “Simeon” to confirm something in your life? How did this affect you?
4. Do you have a promise from God that you’re still waiting to see come to fruition? How do you envision its fulfillment?

Our Response/Advent Practices

Write a Hymn. This week, you will write one last verse of your hymn set to “*O Come, O Come Emmanuel*.” For the theme, think about the joy of promises fulfilled and the great joy we will have when Christ returns. Write four lines of lyrics with ten syllables in each line. Add this to your other verses and sing it as a prayer.

Sing & Listen. Take time this week to sing a hymn or praise song and listen to various pieces reflecting the theme.

- ◆ Hymn 116: Hark! A thrilling voice is sounding
- ◆ Choral Music: Nunc Dimittis by Gustav Holst
- ◆ Praise Song: Christ is Enough by Reuben Morgan and Jonas Myrin
- ◆ Praise Song: Everlasting God by Brenton Brown and Ken Riley
- ◆ Pop Song: I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For by U2

Advent Photo Scavenger Hunt. Go out for an excursion, a walk or even a trip around the house and take photos that remind you of the various scenes from the Christmas story. The images can be literal or metaphorical. Consider sharing a slideshow of these photos on Christmas Eve/Day with your family and community.



Visio Divina. Just as Simeon kept his eyes open for cues of the Divine, Visio Divina is a way of praying through visual reflection. Search online for an image of “Simeon in the Temple.” Set a time for prayer and find a quiet space. Observe the entire picture and take notice of where your eyes are drawn. Focus on what drew your eyes and reflect on its significance and how God might be speaking, inviting you deeper. Give voice to your response and thank God for Christ’s coming.

Bless the Next Generation. In wisdom and hope, Simeon blessed the next generation. Is there a person in the next generation that you can bless this week with a visit or phone call, sharing a prayer and words of affirmation or an act of kindness? It might be a family member, someone in your church or a youth organization in your community. Bless a teenager with a handwritten note acknowledging their gifts and encouraging them. Bless a toddler or a child with a book that shares a message of love and kindness. Reflect afterwards on how you saw Christ in the encounter.

Closing Prayer

The shepherds of Bethlehem, to whom the angels appeared, were full of joy;
They heard the message and saw the glory.
But I am more joyful than the shepherd,
because I have heard the gospel from your own lips, and not from angels.
You said to me: ‘Come to me, and I will make your burden light.’
That is why I am more joyful than the shepherds of Bethlehem.

Mary is blessed:
as a baby, you dwelt 40 weeks in her womb.
But I am more blessed than Mary,
Because, all through my life
You have dwelt in my heart, risen Christ.
That is why I am more blessed than Mary, your Mother.

Simeon the prophet rejoiced as he saying,
‘My eyes have seen your salvation.’
I have not seen you, but I have believed in you.
And since you called those happy who believe without seeing,
I have reached the peaks of contentment.

Amen.

– Johnson Gnanabaranam, India⁷



⁷ Johnson Gnanabaranam, *Seeing Christ in Others: An Anthology for Worship, Meditation and Mission* (Canterbury Press, 2012).



Sing a New Song



The Song of Our Faith

Key Verse

Sing God a brand-new song!
Earth and everyone in it, sing!

– Psalm 96:1 (MSG)



Opening Prayer

Lord, we sing a new song today!
For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Amen.

– from Isaiah 9:6

Thoughts to Ponder

What's your favourite new song from this Christmas season? It could be from church or on the radio. Why do you think new songs are essential to our spiritual vocabulary?

Scripture Reading

Read Psalm 96 in The Message translation.



Sing a New Song

Today, we celebrate the birth of our long-awaited Saviour! The Advent season of preparation has ended, and we can lift up a new song of glad tidings and joy for the arrival of what we've been waiting for.

As in the song of Mary, she magnifies and blesses God for God's faithfulness to God's people in the coming of the Messiah through her. God scatters the proud and exalts the humble, brings the mighty low and lifts up the lowly, leaves the rich empty and fills the hungry.

Zechariah's song praises God for delivering Israel from its enemies and remembering the past covenant. God sends John as a prophet and forerunner of Jesus, who will be God's saving act and the Peacemaker for humanity.

The heavens burst forth in song as the angels exclaim to the shepherds: *"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward all."*

And Simeon sings his last song of most profound satisfaction and peace at having witnessed the answer to the world's ancient prayers with his own eyes.

What a reason to sing! We sing in all kinds of situations to express emotions when words fail us. And so the psalmist calls all the nations to sing a *new* song. This new tune breaks forth because of the new, yet ancient, thing God is doing in Jesus Christ—the Lord's reign has been inaugurated, and

The lectionary invites us to use Psalms 96, 97, and 98 in our Christmas celebrations. When Isaac Watts penned the famous and very well-loved hymn "Joy to the World," he wrote it as a paraphrase of Psalm 98. He didn't intend for it to be a Christmas carol at all. The most significant change he made to the psalm, perhaps, was that he changed the tense of the verbs. He took the future verbs and made them present tense. Where the Psalm said, "The Lord is coming..." Watts changed it to, "The Lord is come." Where the Psalm said, "He will come to judge the earth..." Watts changed it to, "He rules the earth with truth and grace." Past, present, and future are embraced by the Christ who was and is and is to be. The past coming leads to a future coming, a future hope becomes a present reality, and we wait in faithful anticipation for what is still to come.

the whole earth is glad! This new hymn comes from renewed lives that have experienced the grace of Emmanuel, God, who is with us.

Through the challenges of dead-ends, pandemics, exceptional loss, swelling fears and growing uncertainty, we can confidently join with the ancient songs of the faithful as we await Christ's coming with great anticipation. Let us sing a new song for our Saviour!

Questions for Reflection

1. Why is 'new' important? See Isaiah 43:18-19.
2. In the Psalm, creation itself joins in the song. Spend some time thinking about the Psalmist's description of praise. How does creation praise God continually? What new thing is God doing in your community? What new thing would you like God to do?

Our Response/Advent Practices

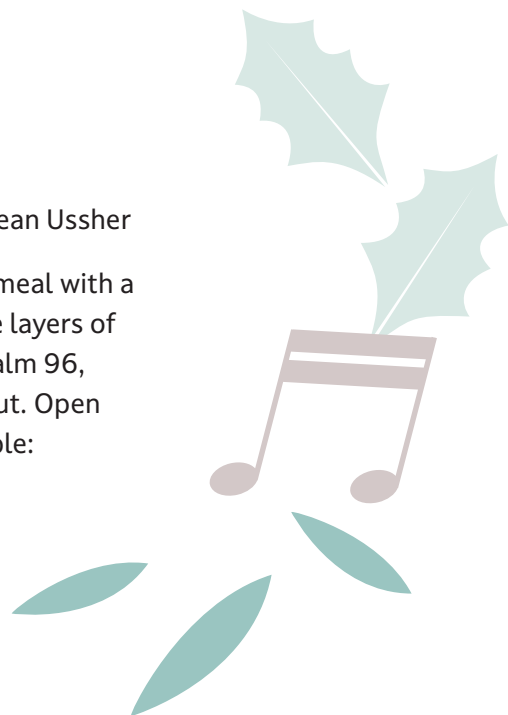
Share Your Song. Find ways to sing your new hymn with others. Teach it to others around the Christmas dinner table and sing it with carols in your neighbourhood. Carolling is an old tradition. You can gather to sing carols for a church member who might need extra care over the holiday or who cannot come out to church. You can also find ways to bring Christmas cheer to those who may have to work on Christmas Day. Share the joy of the God who is with us!

Sing & Listen. Take time this week to sing a hymn or praise song and listen to various pieces reflecting the theme.

- ◆ Hymn 118: Hark, the glad sound!
- ◆ Hymn 146: Angels from the realms of glory
- ◆ Hymn 153: Joy to the world
- ◆ Classical: Cantate Domino by John Rutter
- ◆ Praise Song: Shout to the Lord by Darlene Zschech
- ◆ Praise Song: All Things New by Ben Fielding and Dean Ussher

Pass the Parcel Prayer. Begin your Christmas meal with a creative prayer around the table. Wrap a box with multiple layers of wrapping paper, and in each layer, stick on a portion of Psalm 96, a verse of a favourite carol or a simple prayer to be read out. Open the package layer by layer very carefully! Here is an example:

*God, thank you for _____ this Christmas.
But most of all, thank you for your Son, Jesus.*



Closing Prayer

O Strength and Consolation,
You are the dayspring that we cheer.
Yours is the time appointed;
We hail the advent of your anointed One.
As a woman conceived and bore for you a Son,
We welcome Emmanuel,
For by his birth, our new life has begun.

You are the cause of joy that abounds,
The source of our righteousness,
And the author of hope that dispels shadows of lingering doubt.
With the multitude of the heavenly host,
We praise you, saying,
“Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace among those whom God favours.”
Amen.

– by James G. Kirk⁸

8 James G. Kirk, *When We Gather: A Book of Prayers for Worship* (Geneva Press, 2001).

