

Advent Bible Studies

Re-orienting your Christmas compass



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Centre for **Theology & Ministry**



Introduction

Advent literally means 'arrival' or 'coming' and is the season in the church calendar leading up to Christmas when we remember the coming of Jesus. In our affluent and consumerist Western culture it is easy to be influenced by all those syrupy muzak carols we hear in the shopping malls, or worse, be seduced into spending lots of money on gifts people don't really need supposedly reflecting the generosity of the three wise men or even the original Saint Nicholas.



These four Bible studies, based on this year's lectionary readings (Year C), will help to re-orient your thinking and actions more in line with the hopes and values of the biblical writers. As someone who participates regularly in the sport of orienteering I have learned the hard way that to avoid getting lost it is essential to follow the map provided and trust in your compass. So often it seems easier just to follow other runners or what seem like the natural contours of the land only to find oneself confused and disoriented. So it is good to get back to our map (the Bible) and compass (the guidance of the Holy Spirit) as we prepare for the coming of Jesus.

You're invited then to walk a more dangerous path through this season, one that is more gritty and challenging but more in keeping with the biblical witness. You'll need a Bible, some friends to journey with and an openness to what God might reveal about his purposes for your life and community.

Each study is split into two roughly equal parts, one focusing on an OT text and one on a NT text from the Gospel of Luke. Questions are provided to initiate and guide your discussion. The studies are designed to take approximately one hour but don't feel anxious if you don't cover every question. Overall you will need to allow 90 minutes so there is time for some sharing of your stories, for prayer and for encouraging one another.

Week 1
What are
you doing to
prepare for
Jesus?

Note to leaders: It would be helpful to set up the space each week with some sort of visual reminder of the season. This could be Advent candles, an image that conveys hope and new life or a nativity scene. It would be appropriate to serve a light supper, either as people are gathering or at the conclusion of the study. Also remember to pray, both for God's wisdom in understanding and applying the text but also for each other and the world.

If you follow the tradition of lighting Advent candles you will need five candles (three purple, one pink or rose coloured, and a central white candle called the Christ candle) surrounded by a loose wreath of evergreen (such as eucalypt branches). The candles represent different aspects of God's light coming into the world, while the green wreath signifies God's endless being and mercy and the hope of new life. On this first week we light one of the purple candles that reminds us of *hope* or *prophecy*. You may like to offer a brief prayer as you light the candle.

Setting the scene – radical OT hope

According to scholar Walter Brueggemann, an important role of the OT prophets was to help the people imagine a different future. They were not trying to raise false hopes but rather to refocus the people's attention back to God and his promises. This was sometimes no easy task in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary – like the reality of cities overrun by invading armies or exile. But radical hope dares to believe and trust in God despite the apparent desperation of the situation. Think of the recent disasters in Samoa, Sumatra and the

Philippines and the hope of the people in building a new future in the midst of death and destruction. Or perhaps think of the global groundswell of hope when President Obama was elected. Prophets bring a message of new possibilities.



In the Old Testament, God's people often faced tough circumstances, none more so than when Jerusalem was attacked and destroyed by the powerful Babylonian army with many of the Jewish people sent into exile in Babylon. Even while the Babylonians were besieging the city, the prophet Jeremiah brought a prophecy of unexpected hope, which is recorded in Jeremiah chapter 33. Despite the corruption and unfaithfulness of the people, God promised to restore and heal the city in the future, to once again bring joy and prosperity. Moreover he promised to raise up a righteous Branch for David, a ruler to lead with justice and righteousness. *Read Jeremiah 33:14-16.* Note that the word 'branch' was understood as a messianic title, here and in related passages in Isa 11:1 and Zech 4:11-13.

Questions for reflection and discussion:

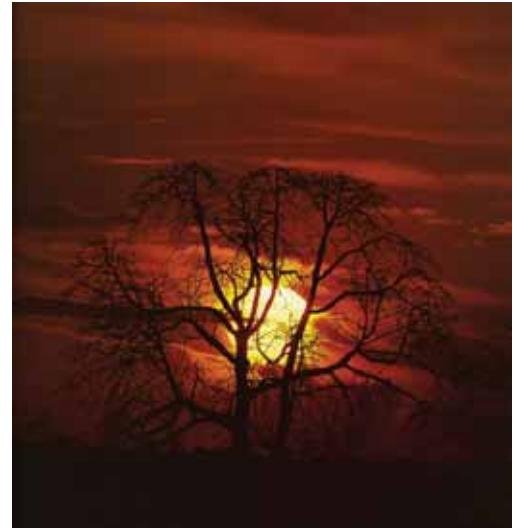
- Recall a situation in the last twelve months when external circumstances appeared bleak. How did God's message of hope come to you in that situation?
- According to Jeremiah 33:19-21, God's promises are as sure as day following night. How can we hold out God's light for one another when faced by darkness and fear?
- The prophets often call the people to practice justice and righteousness. Compare with Micah 6:8. Try to describe in everyday language what these words mean and identify one practical step you can take this week to act justly and righteously.

Hope of Jesus' coming – a second time

Advent is the season for remembering the coming of Jesus. Our second passage focuses on the return of Jesus, an important but rarely preached on subject in our tradition of the church. The Uniting Church *Basis of Union* reminds us, however, that:

The Church...awaits with hope the day of the Lord Jesus Christ on which it will be clear that the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of the Christ, who shall reign for ever and ever. (Para 1)

The Church lives between the time of Christ's death and resurrection and the final consummation of all things which Christ will bring. (Para 3)



The apostle Paul sums up this NT hope in Phil 3:20-4:1 with a reminder that our true citizenship and loyalty lies with God's future kingdom. Jesus teaches at length about this in Luke chapter 21. The setting for this teaching is the Temple in Jerusalem. Jesus initially speaks about the troubles and distress that will befall the world generally and also his disciples before the sacking of Jerusalem (Luke 21:20-24), an event that happened a generation after the death of Jesus in 66 CE. Jesus then speaks about his own return and how to prepare for it. *Read Luke 21:25-36, in a couple of translations if possible.*

Jesus uses his preferred and yet somewhat ambiguous title, the Son of Man, to refer to himself. Here it is a likely reference to the powerful figure in Daniel 7:13-14. He claims that he will return suddenly but very openly, with everyone aware of the event. Each person will stand before him (Luke 21:36), receiving redemption (Luke 21:28) or judgment. A similar scene is described in Revelation 20:11-12.

Rather than inducing fear or anxiety, this message aimed to show who was ultimately in charge of history. The way to prepare for this glorious event is to be alert and prayerful, living faithfully and not being distracted by the worries of life (Luke 21:34-36). Advent is therefore an invitation to us not just to remember the birth of Jesus but also to look forward to his return.

Questions for reflection and discussion:

- This passage may well have been written to those facing or experiencing active persecution for their faith (cf. China today). Our situation is quite different, living in a culture that often views Christian faith as harmless but irrelevant. Why then is Jesus' call for faithful living just as important for us?
- Luke here presents a very different take on the coming of Jesus than we normally consider during Advent. In what ways does this message directly challenge our culture's more typical approach to this time of year?
- How might this hope of Jesus' return affect how we live now in the everyday ongoing aspects of our lives? What is one attitude you can develop or one action you can take to be better prepared and ready?

Week 2 A call to turn back to God

Note to leaders: Welcome those returning for this second study and welcome any newcomers. If using Advent candles you need to relight the first candle (hope) and light a second purple candle that stands for *love*. After praying you might like to encourage people to share briefly how they responded to last week's study in practical ways.

What sort of saviour were God's people waiting for?

As we saw last time, the message of the OT prophets was usually focused on the needs and pressing situation faced by the people. God may indeed raise up a deliverer (as promised in last week's passage from Jeremiah) but the focus of the prophets often falls on how the people themselves are living and their need to repent. This frequently came as a call to love and care for one's neighbour rather than to exploit them. Contemporary examples might be a call to be hospitable to asylum seeker families or foreign students, or to commit to sustainable environmental practices.

The first passage this week is from Malachi, a prophet who lived in the fourth century BCE. For most Protestant Christians, this is the last book in the OT and is thus interpreted as God's final word before the NT.¹ This book is very critical of the Temple priests who were seen as responsible for bringing God's instruction to the people but whose leadership had become corrupt. So God will raise up a different sort of messenger. *Read Malachi 3:1-4.*

Fast forward to the NT and the Gospel of Luke which begins by telling the story of a certain priest named Zechariah who has a vision from God while serving in the Temple at Jerusalem (Luke 1:5-23). His wife Elizabeth subsequently conceives a child – John – and after John is born, Zechariah prophesies that John will be a mighty prophet in the manner of the OT prophets while the unnamed Jesus will be a saviour for the people. *Read Luke 1:67-79.*



Questions for reflection and discussion:

- The process of refining silver or gold involved heating it over a hot flame to remove any impurities. What are some of the reasons we shy away from allowing God to carry out such a process in our lives? How can we spur each other on to take seriously the goal of holy or righteous living?
- Malachi and later John reminded God's people of their calling to follow God's ways of justice and love. What are some of the ways we fail to uphold justice for our neighbour?
- In these two passages from Malachi and Luke, what does 'salvation' look like? What sort of saviour was God promising?

¹ Catholic Bibles – and indeed the Scriptures used by the early Christians – contain several more books written during the inter-testamental period which are usually referred to as the Apocrypha.

Preparing the way of the Lord

In each of the four Gospel accounts, the ministry of Jesus is introduced and preceded by the ministry of John the Baptist. John is seen as the one crying in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord (Isaiah 40:3).

Read Luke 3:1-6.

Luke makes two subtle changes compared to parallel accounts in the other Gospels. Note first how Luke frames the story. The framework for a story is always important and here Luke is at pains to situate his story within the politics of the eastern Roman Empire (Luke 3:1-2). He names the several major leaders who helped shape the course of history in this region.

The second change is how Luke uses the quotation from Isaiah. While all the Gospel writers link John to this figure from Isaiah, only Luke extends the quotation – apparently to emphasise its final line (Luke 3:6).



Questions for reflection and discussion:

- The rulers Luke names are the ‘movers and shakers’ of the era. The contrast with John is thus highlighted. While they live in palaces and command armies, John is a relative nobody living in the backwaters of the wilderness near the Jordan River. What does this suggest about the type of person God delights to work through?
- John’s message is summarised as a baptism of repentance (Luke 3:3), which involved a change in one’s thinking that also affects one’s actions and way of life. What might repentance look like for us as we prepare for the coming of Jesus, especially in a culture that encourages excessive consumerism and over indulging at this time of year?
- Luke’s quotation from Isaiah ends with the promise that all people shall see God’s salvation (Luke 3:6). This theme is emphasised in Part 2 of Luke’s story, the book of Acts, as the gospel message spreads throughout the Roman Empire. What steps might your community take to share in this mission, not just during Advent but throughout the year? Agree on one action your group will commit to in sharing the good news in your context.

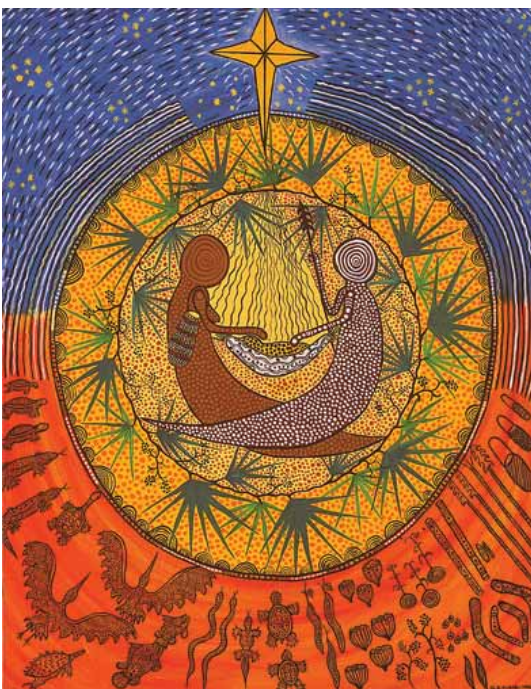
Week 3
John the Baptist's take on Jesus

Note to leaders: Welcome those returning for this third study and welcome any newcomers. If using Advent candles you need to relight the first two candles (hope and love) and light the pink or rose coloured candle that stands for *joy*. You may like to begin by singing a Christmas carol. Briefly recall your learning from last time. For one of the activities you will need some blank paper and pens or textas.

Rejoicing in God's presence and promise of restoration

The OT passage this week comes from the relatively unknown book of Zephaniah the prophet (found towards the back of the OT). Zephaniah was a contemporary of Jeremiah and Habakkuk and prophesied during the years just before the Babylonian conquests of Judah. The book is mostly very dark and depressing with destruction predicted for Judah, Jerusalem and surrounding nations. The last two paragraphs of the book, however, look to a much brighter future for the remnant of God's people after the storm of judgment has passed. *Read Zephaniah 3:14-20.*

This song of joy looks forward to a day when God's people will be restored, including the lame and the outcast (verse 19), and God's presence will be known in their midst (verses 15, 17). Using two contrasting images, this presence will be that of a victorious warrior as well as a tender parent who will rejoice over the people with singing and renew them in his love (verse 17). A similar pair of images occurs in Isaiah 40:10-11.



Questions for reflection and discussion:

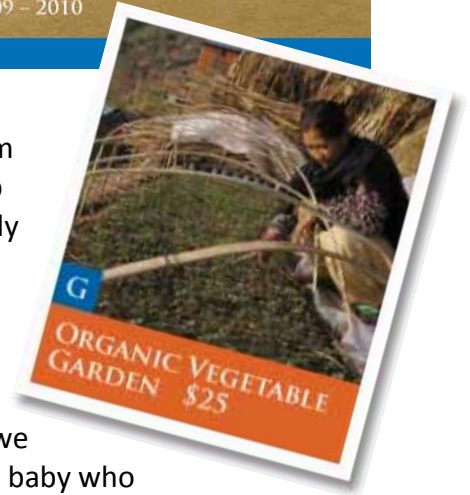
- One of the features of this passage is its emphasis on God's presence among the people. In Matthew's Gospel, the birth of Jesus is seen as fulfilment of this hope, with Jesus called *Emmanuel*, which is Hebrew for 'God with us' (Matt 1:22-23). In what ways do you experience God's presence in your community and in your life?
- The images chosen to describe God in this passage are starkly contrasting. One is quite militaristic (a heroic warrior) and one is intimate (a loving parent). If this passage points forward to Jesus' ministry, in what ways are these images appropriate?
- This is a song of rejoicing that celebrates God's mercy and grace beyond judgment. Write a short poem, draw a picture or offer a prayer that expresses your response to God's grace and mercy in your life and that of your community. Share this with the others in your group.

Preparing in John the Baptist style

The Gospel passage continues the story of John the Baptist preparing the way for Jesus. It gives a sample of his preaching and some insights into his understanding of what repentance looks like in action – turn from selfishness and greed and practice generosity and simplicity. The TEAR Gift catalogue (and other similar catalogues from CBMI, etc) offer us opportunity to put such ideas into practice.



Read Luke 3:7-18. This passage remains firmly stuck in my head from an occasion when the preacher unwrapped a rather large and sharp axe during the sermon and proceeded to walk somewhat menacingly up and down the aisle of the church with it (Luke 3:9). I'm not suggesting that you repeat this visual illustration but it sure made people sit up and take notice! Presumably this was also the aim of John the Baptist.



John's portrayal of Jesus is sharply at odds with many of the carols we sing at this time of year – which present Jesus as the meek and mild baby who doesn't even cry. Instead Jesus is the more powerful one to come (verse 16) who will divide Israel like a farmer winnowing wheat (verse 17). Presumably those who accepted Jesus' message were like the wheat while those who rejected Jesus' message were to be treated like chaff, fit only for the fire.

Questions for reflection and discussion:

- How does John's message appeal to you as a model for contemporary evangelism? Or for contemporary discipleship? What is helpful for us in John's message?
- Jesus is a gift to us – but a dangerous gift! How do John's insights help to prepare us for the coming of Jesus? What are some practical steps you can take along the lines suggested by John?
- John suggests that there are consequences to our choices. Jesus made similar claims (e.g. Luke 6:46-49). Discuss and write down two steps you can take to help each other remain accountable to the radical demands of following Jesus. Revisit them in six weeks time.

Week 4 Peace for the World

Note to leaders: Welcome the people returning for this fourth study as well as any newcomers. If using Advent candles you need to relight the first three candles (hope, love and joy) and light the remaining purple candle that stands for *peace*. Again you may like to begin by singing a Christmas carol. As the busyness of Christmas approaches, take some time just to be still and wait on God's presence.

What does peace look like?

When Jesus was born, a choir of angels sang about peace coming upon those whom God favours (Luke 2:14). Peace has many facets – lack or cessation of conflict and violence; wellbeing and calmness; peace with God, oneself and one's neighbour. Chris Walker, a Uniting Church theologian, picks up these various facets in his new book *Peace like a Diamond*, which is available through mediacom.org.au.



The first reading this week is from the OT prophetic book of Micah. He was a contemporary of Isaiah and had harsh words for the wealthy landowners who robbed poor people of their land and livelihood. Micah prophesied God's judgment against them for their corruption and injustice. During this period the Assyrian army threatened Jerusalem – this happened about 100 years before the Babylonians destroyed the city. Interspersed with

Questions for reflection and discussion:

- Although we may immediately think of Jesus when we hear this passage, the first hearers were more likely to think of a strong military ruler like King David who would bring an end to conflict imposed by enemies like the Assyrians (verses 1-2). This is similar to the type of peace described in the *Pax Romana* offered by the Roman Empire. In many trouble spots around the world this is precisely the sort of peace people are longing for. Pause to pray now that God would bring peace and an end to violence in places like Afghanistan and Iraq, Burma and Fiji.
- The Hebrew concept of peace (*shalom*) is much broader than the ending of military conflict, although it certainly includes this. *Shalom* also implies a sense of wholeness, health, harmony in relationships (with both God and neighbour) and prosperity – including provision of needs and security (verse 4). What might this type of peace look like in your context?
- Several Christmas carols speak about Jesus bringing peace on earth. Given that Jesus did not drive out the Roman armies occupying Israel or end violence, what sort of peace did Jesus bring and to whom?

these violent prophecies of destruction and judgment, Micah brought messages of future hope and prosperity for Judah. *Read Micah 5:1-5a.*

Bethlehem was a small town near Jerusalem that had come to fame as the birthplace of the great King David. In this passage Micah speaks of a future ruler to come from Bethlehem who shall be a shepherd for the people of Israel. This ruler shall be considered great to the ends of the earth and shall bring peace.

Mary's prayer for peace

In the Advent stories that introduce Luke's Gospel, the pathways of John and Jesus are intertwined. John will be a mighty prophet who will prepare the way for Jesus, while Jesus will be the longed for Messiah to bring salvation to Israel and the world. In the passage we will consider, the two expectant mothers meet each other. Through the insight of the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth, mother of John, recognises the significance of Mary's child. *Read Luke 1:39-45.* Mary then responds with a song of praise that rejoices in what God is doing through her and her child. The song is sometimes called the Magnificat. *Read Luke 1:46-55.*



Mary shows remarkable faith and maturity for a young woman. She is able to look beyond her socially awkward status (pregnant but not yet married) to what God is doing and will do through Jesus. She sees this as so certain that she speaks as though it is already accomplished. Our focus will be on verses 51-55.

Questions for reflection and discussion:

- Mary speaks in terms of reversal – the proud, rich and powerful will be brought down and the hungry and lowly lifted up. This is the upside-down kingdom message that Jesus later spoke about (e.g. Luke 6:20-26; 14:7-14, 15-24). As people who may be considered to be among the rich and perhaps powerful in the world, what might this reversal look like for us? (The stories of Zacchaeus in Luke 19 or the early church in Acts 2 may provide some clues).
- It seems clear that Mary's vision of peace will only result when injustice is overthrown. This kingdom manifesto is repeated in Jesus' first public appearance in Nazareth (Luke 4:16-21). The invitation to us then is to work with God to help the poor and oppressed and to overturn injustice, as exemplified in the actions of people like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King. Spend some time in your group to come up with one or two concrete actions you will commit to that will help bring about this peace.

To Conclude

As your group comes to the end of these studies, spend a few minutes sharing what has most surprised or challenged you. How will your walk of discipleship grow? How can you encourage and support one another on the journey?

Before you conclude, pray for one another, for your community and for your neighbours.