

Service for Advent Sunday 2021

Call to worship

Lord God as we begin this season of Advent may we worship expectantly – actively seeking you as we prepare to greet you again, God-made-man, born as one of us so that we see you and know you and be with you.

Amen

Hymn - StF 175: Light of the World

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-MmRGSEG2LM>

Prayers

God of majesty and power
Who spoke and this world was
Who breathed and this world lived
Who counts the hairs upon our head
Who sees our thoughts and reads our hearts
Who loves us more than we deserve
How can we not bring today
Our sacrifice of praise?
For in the child at Bethlehem
Lies the promise of intimacy
With a Saviour who would die even for me
And the promise of an eternity
In which to praise you more each day
God of promise we praise your name, Amen

Forgive us, Lord
We are a wandering people
Who kneel before you now
A people who bring prayers
And requests to your feet
When we have need of you
And nowhere else to turn
Then go our own way
When times are good
And life is easy
Forgive us and draw us close
Teach us your way
That we might follow
Help us to walk in your company
And know your presence
From the moment we awake
Until we lay our heads to rest. Amen

Gracious God, you have done so much for us
And we so little in return
You ask for humility
And we are often a proud people
You ask for willingness
And we are often a stubborn people
You ask for repentance

And we are often a deaf people
You ask for service
And we are often a busy people
Gracious God, you want the best for us
Teach us obedience
Grant us forgiveness
That we, like Mary
Might be your willing servants. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Reading Luke 1:26-45

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+1%3A26-45&version=NIVUK>

Hymn - StF 186: Tell out, my soul

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s6ji4y9Q-K0>

Sermon

Well, it's now the first Sunday in Advent. So now it's time to think about the upcoming Christmas holiday. We'll probably eat and drink too much and watch too much TV. But the Christmas season has a whole lot of other distractions, too, probably more than any other holiday.

We have to worry about shopping (getting just the right gifts for all of the people on our lists). Many of those same gifts will then have to be returned the following week (including clothes that don't fit, and items the person already has or doesn't like). The shopping centres are more crowded this time of year, and the traffic and parking are slow.

If you get a real Christmas tree each year, then you need to decide where to buy it, the size and the type of tree you want, and how much you want to spend. Then you have the trouble of putting it into the car, driving it home, and getting it to stand straight and sturdy in the house. If you have an artificial tree, which we do, you can avoid some of the problems of getting and keeping alive a real one. But then you have to be able to put a fake tree together. With dozens of parts, that wasn't as easy as we thought it would be.

Christmas decorations need to be purchased and taken out of storage. Putting up those decorations takes a lot of time and energy, because it has to be done "just right". There are decorations for the windows, the doors, and the outside shrubbery. And let's not forget decorating the tree, with garland, lights, balls, and all types of other keepsakes we've gathered over the years.

I've saved the biggest material distraction until last, and that's money! We need to be able to pay for all of the other distractions I just mentioned, and a lot of us overspend in trying to buy all of those things that we think we need.

These are many of the distractions which keep people from remembering the Christian meaning of the season.

Today, I want to talk about Mary and Elizabeth's readiness for the birth of the Messiah. In Luke 1, verses 39-40, we see that immediately after the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, telling her that she

would give birth to the Messiah, that Mary "got ready" and "hurried" to visit her cousin Elizabeth. I want to look at what these two women of faith can teach us about our own readiness to celebrate our Messiah's birth, as well as our readiness to see Jesus when He returns at the Second Coming. Mary and Elizabeth have a number of things in common. First, they are cousins, related by family ancestry.

Both women also have unusual and miraculous pregnancies. Although Elizabeth was barren and elderly, in Luke 1 we read that she becomes pregnant, and she will later give birth to John the Baptist. Mary is a young woman from the city of Nazareth, a virgin who is unmarried, yet she also becomes pregnant by the Holy Spirit and will give birth to Jesus the Messiah.

Both women would have endured varying amounts of religious and social ostracism. Elizabeth lived most of her life unable to have children. In her Jewish culture, the problem of a woman being barren was viewed as punishment from God for some grave sin. Mary was a young girl who, although engaged to Joseph but not yet married to him, became pregnant. According to Levitical law, she could have been stoned for the sin of fornication. While this didn't happen to her, no doubt people in her culture gossiped and maligned her for the sin of which they wrongfully judged her, just as people undoubtedly did to Elizabeth for what they mistakenly assumed about her.

Despite what people back then might have thought and said about them, we know from the Bible that both were women of faith. They were ready for what God had planned for them and were willing to be used in whatever way God desired.

This could not be said as quickly for the men in their lives. When an angel himself appeared to Zechariah and told him the news that his wife Elizabeth would have a son named John, Zechariah had doubts and questioned it. He was then made mute, unable to speak, until Elizabeth first showed her faith in what the angel had said by telling people that her son would be named John. Then when Zechariah was asked and wrote the same thing on a piece of paper, only then did his voice return.

When Joseph learned that Mary was pregnant, he initially planned to quietly break the engagement to her. Only after Joseph was told in a dream that Mary had become pregnant by the Holy Spirit, did he then accept the message that Mary had received from the angel Gabriel.

Because the births of John the Baptist and Jesus the Messiah were both foretold in the Old Testament Scriptures, I think we can safely assume that both Elizabeth and Mary knew God's word and trusted in it. They looked ahead to the first coming of Messiah.

While we as 21st century believers should look forward to the Second Coming, we also in December of each year, celebrate the Advent and Christmas seasons. During Advent, we try to go back in our minds and spirits to a time before Jesus' birth. We remind ourselves how He came, born humbly in a stable in Bethlehem. We remember why He came, to ultimately die horribly on a wooden cross to pay the penalty for the sins of the whole world. In this sense, we prepare for His first coming, as Mary and Elizabeth did.

Just as we today have so many social and religious distractions that get in the way of our readiness, so did believers back at the time of Jesus' birth. Their primary distraction was religion. Instead of knowing the Old Testament Scriptures and walking in the spirit of God's word, the religious leaders (the Scribes and Pharisees) had replaced faith and the true spiritual life with religion, a system of man-made laws for the people to follow. They turned true Judaism into legalism, that is, into hundreds of rules and requirements that the people had to observe. Most of these centred around what you could and

couldn't do on the Sabbath.

For instance, if mud were to splash onto your clothes on the Sabbath, you were not allowed to wash it, because that would be work. Instead, you could let the mud dry on the garment, squeeze the muddy area once, and brush the mud away with your hand once. Anything more than that and you were then considered to be doing work on the Sabbath. Another example is, that if you had an upper bunk bed and had forgotten to move the ladder to it before the Sabbath began, you were not allowed to move the ladder during the Sabbath. There were hundreds of these kinds of rules.

Because of this legalistic type of religion, in the gospels we often see how enraged the religious leaders became when Jesus would do something like heal a lame person on the Sabbath. To make a spiritual point that angered the Scribes and Pharisees even more, Jesus would then tell the lame man He just healed to "take up his bed" and to go tell the religious leaders what had happened. Not only would the healing then anger those leaders, but the sight of someone carrying his bed on the Sabbath would directly upset the legalism that the Scribes and Pharisees taught.

Since Jesus the Messiah was born into this kind of a religious environment, many Jews were not ready for Him mentally or spiritually. Religion got in their way.

Christianity today can be a religion that distracts the majority of believers in much the same way. The spiritual life becomes a set of do's and don'ts, such as:

- I go to church on Christmas Eve or morning;
- I don't drink alcohol nor go to Christmas parties like unbelievers do;
- I only listen to "godly" Christmas music and radio stations;
- I won't have a Christmas tree in my house because it's a pagan symbol;
- I don't let my kids believe in Santa Claus.

Now don't misunderstand what I'm saying here. These things may be good if a believer does them out of a true love for God. More often, however, such things are turned into religion. They are rules practiced in a spirit of arrogance. When observed as religion, we see such attitudes and observances expressed in ways such as bragging ("Aren't I a good Christian for doing or not doing such and such...!"), and often in judging ("...and you're not!").

Believers today who observe Christianity as a religion, as basically a list of do's and don'ts, are usually not practicing the true spiritual life as the Bible teaches. They are not consistently studying the word of God. They are not frequently confessing sin, nor having an active prayer life. When Jesus returns a second time, many Christians will be unprepared for Him, just as so many Jews were unprepared the first time He came to a stable in Bethlehem.

But just as Mary and Elizabeth were both prepared for Jesus's first coming, we too can be ready for celebrating the Advent and Christmas season, and for Jesus' second coming. It's just a matter of our free will. We only have to choose to prepare ourselves. How can we prepare for Advent and Christmas? Here are some of the main things that come quickly to my mind:

- We can read some of the Old Testament prophecies about Jesus the Messiah in books such as Isaiah

and Micah;

- We can read about Mary and Elizabeth's preparations, Jesus' birth and John's ministry in the opening chapters of the four gospels;
- We can also read in the gospels about the efforts to stop Messiah's coming, by people such as King Herod and his massacre of Jewish infants;
- We have many opportunities during the Christmas season to share our faith with family and friends;
- There are many people with physical and spiritual needs for whom we can pray;
- We can thank God in prayer for sending Jesus to save us;
- We can teach and remind our children about the real meaning of this season;
- We can participate in many of the Christian-related activities in our church.

There's nothing wrong with enjoying and participating in so many of the secular activities occurring during the Advent and Christmas season. But if we are truly ready mentally and spiritually for celebrating Jesus's first coming, as well as our anticipation of His second, we can enjoy this season for all of the right reasons. We can replace worldly attitudes of worry and despair with those of love, peace, and joy, God's greatest gifts to us in the form of His son, Jesus the Messiah.

Hymn – StF 178: Long ago, prophets knew

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R18QXJUsIX0>

Intercessions for Advent

Heavenly Father, as once again we prepare for Christmas, help us to find time in our busy lives for quiet and thought and prayer, that we may reflect upon the wonder of your love and allow the story of the Saviour's birth to penetrate our hearts and minds. So may our joy be deeper, our worship more real, and our lives worthier of all that you have done for us through the coming of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

We pray for peace:

- Give peace to the world – we think especially at this time of the people who are living in turmoil in so many parts of the world
- Give peace to the victims of war, the refugees, the widowed and the orphans.
- Give peace to family and friends; to those who have quarrelled and need to be reconciled.
- Give peace in our own divided hearts.

We know that without justice there can be no peace. Let peace come when all people are respected, regardless of race and religion. Let peace come when trading weapons of mass destruction is a crime. Let peace come when the earth's resources are used wisely for the common good. Let peace come when money is used to serve and not enslave the world. Let peace come through the transformation of our lives that we may do justice, love and kindness and walk humbly with our God.

Your Son came as the Prince of Peace and brought a message of Peace for all people. Help us to be Peacemakers in our own homes, at our work or wherever we meet people, so that the peace and goodwill of Christmas can find a place in the hearts of all people.

*Lord in your mercy
Hear our prayer*

We pray for our leaders:

Give strength and wisdom to our leaders in this country and to those of other countries around the world. We face so many difficulties over the pandemic, climate change war and refugees, help them all to act in humility and love towards one another putting the needs of the world before selfish interests.

*Lord in your mercy
Hear our prayer*

We pray for people in need:

We pray for homeless people and for refugees who have no country to call their own. Let your blessing be with those who work to help the homeless this Christmas and give to all of us the determination to help where we can. We pray especially for Christian organisations who help the homeless especially at this time of the year.

We pray for people who cannot find useful work, who are unemployed, who have been made redundant.

We pray for people who are lonely, those who are lonely because they have lost a partner, those who are lonely because no-one seems to care, those who are lonely because of handicap or illness. Let your presence be with those who are alone at this season of friendship, and may we take your friendship to those whom we know will be alone this Christmas.

*Lord in your mercy
Hear our prayer*

We pray for those who are ill:

We pray for friends and family who are ill at this time and remember them in the quietness of our hearts. We bring them to you in the confidence that you love them and know their every need and that your healing power is still the same today. Bless all that is being done for their recovery and answer our prayers as you see best.

Jesus Christ is the light of the world, a light which no darkness can quench. We remember friends and family who have died as we name them in our hearts at this time

Help us to experience the comfort of the Holy Spirit within us, and the fellowship of the church family around us until we are reunited once more in your heavenly kingdom.

You turn our darkness into light in your light shall we see light.

*Lord in your mercy
Hear our prayer*

We pray for the neighbourhood:

Thankyou Lord for the resilient spirit of our neighbourhood, and the way that people, with your help, rise above the challenges they face. We pray for the community – may the various races and religions continue to live together in peace and respect. May there be less crime, less worship of money and worldly goods, more caring, and more helping others. May our church help you bring about a spiritual revival in our local area.

*Lord in your mercy
Hear our prayer*

We pray for the church:

- For the Christian family who will be celebrating this festival in so many different ways, and for those who dare not celebrate openly.
- For Christians in countries where there is persecution.
- For Christians in our own country, with whom we will share our celebrations
- For our Church family.

Grant that all who come into our church this Christmas time may be enabled to renew their relationship with you. Help us all to be glad of your presence, and to rejoice at the coming of Jesus.

May your blessing be upon all who worship with us, give us grace to live as faithful members of your family, that we may learn each day afresh to love and serve you.

*Lord in your mercy
Hear our prayer*

Amen

Hymn – StF 167: Colours of Day

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d4_gLm4s0x8

Blessing

God of hope, who brought love into this world,
be the love that dwells between us.
God of hope, who brought peace into this world,
be the peace that dwells between us.
God of hope, who brought joy into this world,
be the joy that dwells between us.
God of hope, the rock we stand upon,
be the centre, the focus of our lives
always, and particularly this Advent time.
Amen.