

Worship for 4th Sunday in Advent (complete text. A video version is also online)
Keep safe. Keep caring. Keep praying.

Hello and welcome to worship with the South Warwickshire Methodist Circuit. My name is Michael, I am the Children and Families Missioner for Dale Street and Kenilworth Methodist Churches and this is our online service for the 4th Sunday in Advent!

It's a joy today to be able to welcome Revd Elizabeth Clark the National Rural Officer for the Methodist and United Reformed Churches based at Stoneleigh Park here in south Warwickshire. I'm also grateful to Revd. Jeongsook Kim and Mr Nigel Saxton for bringing us our readings today. If you would like to take part, then please get in touch with the Circuit Office on swc.katetennyson@gmail.com

THE PREPARATION

Call to worship

So, as we prepare for worship, I will light four candles to symbolise the journey we have been on these last few weeks and our eagerness to welcome the Christ child in just a few days time.

Lord Jesus, we come to this moment, this 4th Sunday of Advent 2020 – What a year we have shared, the Lent that seemed to go on for ever, the Pentecost still locked away out of sight, a glimmer of hope over the summer, only to fall back into an Autumn lockdown and now with just days to go till Christmas we pause, we give thanks that there is real hope now, as scientists seem to have found a way through this pandemic. We remember how you Lord came to earth in the middle of a lockdown – be it one much different to ours - and we marvel at your love for each of us.

We approach Christmas with a mixture of feelings – some happy some sad, but hopefully our first song will be one that fills us all with joy – It's the well known classic – O come all ye faithful with a modern twist from the National Methodist Choir and the Birmingham based Jazz Community Church

Hymn: StF 212 – O come all ye faithful

1. **O come, all ye faithful,
joyful and triumphant,
O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem;
come and behold him,
born the King of angels:**

*O come, let us adore him,
O come let us adore him,
O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord!*

2. **True God of true God,
Light of light eternal,
lo, he abhors not the Virgin's womb;
Son of the Father,
begotten, not created:**

*O come, let us adore him,
O come let us adore him,
O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord!*

3. **See how the shepherds,
summoned to his cradle,
leaving their flocks, draw nigh to gaze;
we too will thither
bend our joyful footsteps:**

*O come, let us adore him,
O come let us adore him,
O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord!*

4. Lo, star-led chieftains,
Magi, Christ adoring,
Offer him incense, gold and myrrh;
we to the Christ-child
bring our hearts' oblations:

*O come, let us adore him,
O come let us adore him,
O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord!*

5. Sing, choirs of angels,
sing in exultation,
sing all ye citizens of heaven above:
'Glory to God,
in the highest:'

*O come, let us adore him,
O come let us adore him,
O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord!*

Latin, 19th Century, possibly by
John Francis Wade (c1711 – 1786) and others

Opening Prayers

Lockdown baby – you came to a troubled world – a world of confusion and panic – you grew up amidst tragedy and injustice – your parents were refugees – fleeing for their lives

Be with us Lord Jesus

Lockdown Baby – you were born into poverty, to a young mum, you lived as a foreigner, raised by parents just about managing, you were wrapped in swaddling cloths and laid in a manger – a stable was your birth place because nobody was willing to make room for you.

Be with us Lord Jesus

Lockdown Baby - Angels rejoiced as you were born, they were so excited that they had to spread the good news – they searched to find someone to tell the good news to. We have good news – but yet so often we won't even tell it to our neighbours for fear they may consider us

odd

Be with us Lord Jesus

Lockdown Baby – the wise sought you – they were confident in their knowledge that you were special – they used their intellect to pursue you – they studied and they found out more so when they came face to face with you – they knew who you were. Help us to put our intellect towards finding out about you so that when we see you, we too will recognise you.

Be with us Lord Jesus

Lockdown Baby – Herod saw you as a threat – he was so focused on holding strong to his power that he failed to see the absurdity in his actions – help us to see when we also misuse our power – when we hurt people with our words and actions, when we are ungrateful for all the blessings we receive and when we kill people with unkindness.

Be with us Lord Jesus

Lord Jesus – lockdown baby, travelling preacher, man on the cross, risen saviour, he who is to come again, accept our prayers and in your tender love forgive us for times we have failed you and let ourselves down. May we now hear your reassuring voice telling us – our sins are forgiven

Amen

Now as we remain in a prayerful state of mind, I invite you to listen with me to a song called Breath of God. In this song the writer tries to imagine how Mary must have felt as she was anticipating Jesus' birth – this sets the scene for our readings and reflection which today focus on Mary

Hymn: Breath of Heaven (Mary's Song)

I have traveled many moonless nights
Cold and weary with a babe inside

And I wonder what I've done
Holy father you have come
And chosen me now to carry your son

I am waiting in a silent prayer
I am frightened by the load I bear
In a world as cold as stone
Must I walk this path alone?
Be with me now
Be with me now

Breath of heaven
Hold me together
Be forever near me
Breath of heaven
Breath of heaven
Lighten my darkness
Pour over me your holiness
For you are holy
Breath of heaven

Do you wonder as you watch my face
If a wiser one should have had my place
But I offer all I am
For the mercy of your plan
Help me be strong
Help me be
Help me

Breath of heaven
Hold me together
Be forever near me
Breath of heaven
Breath of heaven
Lighten my darkness
Pour over me your holiness
For you are holy

Breath of heaven
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Amy Lee Grant / Chris Eaton
Lyrics © Songtrust Ave, Music Services, Inc

THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD

Gospel Reading 11 *Luke 1:26-38 (NLT)*

The Birth of Jesus Foretold

²⁶In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, ²⁷to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. ²⁸Gabriel appeared to her and said, "Greetings, favoured woman! The Lord is with you!"

²⁹Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. ³⁰"Don't be afraid, Mary," the angel told her, "for you have found favour with God! ³¹You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!"

³⁴Mary asked the angel, "But how can this happen? I am a virgin."

³⁵The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God.

³⁶What's more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she has conceived a son and is now in her sixth month. ³⁷For the word of God will never fail."

³⁸Mary responded, "I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true." And then the angel left her.

*Gospel Reading 2 The Canticle of Mary – Luke
1:46-55 (NRSVA)*

Mary's Song of Praise

⁴⁶And Mary said,
'My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
⁴⁸for he has looked with favour on the lowliness
of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call
me blessed;

⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for
me,

and holy is his name.

⁵⁰His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of
their hearts.

⁵²He has brought down the powerful from their
thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,

⁵⁵according to the promise he made to our
ancestors,

to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

Sermon

What we crave as a society at present is good news. There has been so much upheaval, grief, and loss, when will we see some light? The COVID vaccine is of course a game changer but it's going to take time and what sort of normal do we want now anyway? It's good then to stop and savour the beginning of the nativity story

back before, the tea towel clad shepherds and cardboard crowned kings come on the scene.

Here we see Mary given news that turns her world upside down. By saying yes to God, she puts herself outside of society, risks losing her husband to be, and possibly her life. What does Mary do, does she cower in a corner? No, she goes to see her cousin and when Elizabeth embraces her, Mary breaks into song and what a song.

To those of us for whom the Magnificat is a piece set to renaissance music, it can appear staid, beautiful perhaps but somehow not real. This is to misunderstand what it really is. In its original context it would be the sort of song you could clap your hands to, or stamp on the ground. To quote Tom Wright, "It's the gospel before the gospel", a fierce bright shout of triumph thirty weeks before Bethlehem, thirty years before Calvary and Easter. It goes with a swing and a clap and a stamp. It's all about God, and it's all about revolution. And it's all because of Jesus, Jesus who has only just been conceived, but who has made Elizabeth's baby leap for joy in her womb and has made Mary giddy with excitement and hope and triumph.

To an outsider Mary didn't have much cause for celebration, as I have mentioned being pregnant before marriage was shameful and she would be excluded from respectable society. She and Joseph weren't wealthy so in human terms the future looked bleak. Yet Mary is able to sing this wonderful song of praise to God. The Magnificat has a place in the heart of church liturgy it has been recited down the centuries. It has been likened to a ticking bomb waiting its moment to explode in the power of the Spirit and unleash God's revolution afresh for each generation.

At its heart is the reversal that is the hallmark of the kingdom of God. Right from this point it is clear the God is confounding expectations, Messiah will be born to an ordinary couple, poor even, he will be seen first by shepherds, seen in those days as outsiders not respectable. When Jesus begins to preach, he will try to dispel the picture people have of the triumphant Messiah, he will tell stories of small insignificant things, such as mustard seeds, coins and sheep as signs of the Kingdom. He will mix with women and sinners and publicans, those whom the respectable shun.

Although he will enter Jerusalem in procession it will be on a donkey not a war-horse, and his greatest victory will be on a cross, not a battlefield. His resurrection will be attested to by women and ill-educated male disciples, and those same people will begin a movement that exists to this very day. Such is the way the Kingdom will grow, through and in those with little power or influence, those on the margins. This is the outworking of Magnificat, the way God's kingdom breaks in.

What does this story and song say to us today? It is not about counting our blessings and singing some songs that make us feel better. When I read the quote, I mentioned earlier, about the Magnificat being a bomb nestling in the heart of church liturgy waiting to explode I was really excited.

How will it explode for us today, what will it challenge us to do? COVID has reminded us of many things; how unequal our society is, where many still struggle to put food on the table and keep a roof over their heads. How we don't value those who do so much to keep our society going. It challenges us to learn to work together across the world in order to defeat this virus.

Mary's song lists the actions of God as being in the past tense, so convinced was she that God would do as God promised she sang as if it had come true. Are we prepared to join the revolution, to work for the changes we long to see, to shout loudly about the wrongs in our society? The lesson from Mary is that we don't have to be strong and powerful to serve God, we simply have to say yes and trust, God will do the rest.

Where might we be singing a Magnificat in the days ahead, so that in us, through us, and if need be despite us God's kingdom will come? Who knows, but of one thing I am sure the journey will be exciting and full of hope. It will bring Good news

Hymn: StF 186 – Tell out my soul the greatness of the Lord

- 1. Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!
Unnumbered blessings, give my spirit voice;
tender to me the promise of his word;
in God my Saviour shall my heart rejoice.**
- 2. Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his name!
Make known his might, the deeds his arm
has done;
his mercy sure, from age to age the same;
his holy name – the Lord, the Mighty One.**
- 3. Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his might!
Powers and dominions lay their glory by;
proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to
flight,
the hungry fed, the humble lifted high.**
- 4. Tell out, my soul, the glories of his word!
Firm is his promise, and his mercy sure.
Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord
to children's children and for evermore.**

Timothy Dudley-Smith (b1926)

Based on the *Magnificat*

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THE RESPONSE

Prayers of thanksgiving

Tell out my soul in deed, what a wonderful way to enter into our prayers of thanksgiving as we reflect on all we have heard today.

Let us pray now using a prayer based on Mary's prayer:

My soul glorifies you Lord, and my spirit rejoices in you my Saviour, for you have been mindful of me - your humble servant.

Mighty One, you have done great things for me - holy is your name. Your mercy extends to those who love you from generation to generation. You have performed mighty deeds you have brought down rulers from their thrones and lifted up the humble.

You have filled the hungry with good things and sent the proud away empty. You have helped your servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as you promised our ancestors."

Song – I wonder as I wander out under the sky

1. I wonder as I wander out under the sky,
How Jesus the Saviour did come for to die.
For poor or'n'ry people like you and like I...
I wonder as I wander out under the sky.
2. When Mary birthed Jesus 'twas in a cow's stall,
Came wise men and farmers and shepherds and all.
And high from God's heaven a star's light did fall,
And the worry of ages it then did recall.

3. If Jesus had wanted for anything,
A star in the sky, a bird on the wing,
Or all of God's angels in heaven to sing,
He surely could have had it, for he was the King.

4. I wonder as I wander out under the sky,
How Jesus the Saviour did come for to die.
For poor or'n'ry people like you and like I...
I wonder as I wander out under the sky.

John Jacob Niles (1892-1980)

I Wonder as I Wander lyrics © Emi Blackwood Music Inc.,
Maybe I Can Music, Le Chant Du Monde, Le Chante Du Monde Soc.

Prayers of intercession

We continue in prayer as we reflect on the needs of our world and its people:

For the planet, so fragile and in need of care – for those raising awareness of climate change, for those informing decisions and those tasked with implementing change. For our brothers and sisters around the world who feel the effect of drought and famine so much more than us.

For the continued fight against Covid 19 both in this country and around the world – for those who question it, for those who fear civil rights violations, for the medical workers both in our local hospitals and around the world dealing with the diseases tragic consequences, for those who have lost their lives this year and for those who have lost love ones. For those suffering the long term consequences of long Covid and those who have been traumatised by this experience especially our children and young people.

For our nation and its relationship with Europe – for peace and prosperity – may all who want to work find good and sustainable employment that utilises their skills and interests. May relations between people of all tribes and tongue living in

this country be upheld and that we live in harmony and peace. May our immigrant workers and asylum seekers find love and acceptance and may the marginalised and excluded feel a sense of belonging and pride

For our elderly, frail and those impaired by disability – may they be comforted by the news of the new vaccines and an end to this pandemic that has made it hard for them to do the things they were once able to do. May this Christmas time be a time when they can safely celebrate and feel you near.

Jesus – born in a stable – a homeless child born into poverty, we remember all the many children spending this Christmas homeless, living in makeshift accommodation – hostels, converted hotels and over crowded flats. It is so unjust that some, like Herard 2,000 years ago, will be in large palaces whilst others are homeless. May your justice reign – may your kingdom come – may all find peace this Christmas time.

Lord Jesus – we welcome you this Christmas time, speak to us now in this time of silent reflection....

Silence

And now let's join together in the words of the Lord's Prayer

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,**

**the power, and the glory,
for ever and ever.**

Amen.

You will forgive me I hope if for our last song before our blessings I get the big organ out and sing with gusto a wonderful Christmas carol – Hark the Herald Angels Sing!!

THE DISMISSAL

Hymn: StF 202 – Hark the herald-angels sing

- 1. Hark! The herald-angels sing
glory to the new-born King,
peace on earth and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled.
Joyful, all ye nations, rise,
join the triumph of the skies;
with the angelic host proclaim:
'Christ is born in Bethlehem.'**

*Hark! The herald-angels sing
glory to the new-born King.*
- 2. Christ, by highest heaven adored,
Christ, the everlasting Lord,
late in time behold him come,
offspring of a virgin's womb.
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see!
Hail, the incarnate Deity!
Please as man with men to dwell,
Jesus our Immanuel:**

*Hark! The herald-angels sing
glory to the new-born King.*
- 3. Hail, the heaven-born Prince of Peace!
Hail, the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings,
risen with healing in his wings.
Mild he lays his glory by,
born that man no more may die,
born to raise the sons of earth,
born to give them second birth:**

***Hark! The herald-angels sing
glory to the new-born King.***

Charles Wesley (1707 – 1788)

The Offering & prayer

I hope you enjoyed that as much as I did? So as we draw this service to a close, let's first recognise before God the gifts, talents and financial gifts that are given in love for the life, service and witness of this the South Warwickshire Methodist Circuit and offer to God all that we are and all our hopes and desires. Lord God – use us – mould us – shape us – may we be your servants for ever more – Amen

Prayer & blessing

And finally – a prayer of blessing

Lockdown Baby – unlock in our hearts a sense of joy – a sense of hope and a sense of peace because throughout the hardship and the sorrow the truth is – God is with us and the best is yet to come

So go in peace to love and serve your God – the one who came as a baby to give us joy – a hope for the world

Amen

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Hymn Words:

StF 212 – O come all ye faithful

Latin, 19th Century, possibly by

John Francis Wade (c1711 – 1786) *and others*

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Hymn: Breath of Heaven (Mary's Song)

Amy Lee Grant / Chris Eaton

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I wonder as I wander out under the sky

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StF 186 – Tell out my soul the greatness of the Lord

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