

Companions on the Way



Advent Worship Resources

Daily Reflections: Week 2



Prepare for the Reign of God

Personal Devotions: I suggest that you spend time each morning before the other concerns of your day overtake you. If you of the discipline of formal Morning Prayer then you may wish to incorporate these readings and reflections into worship instead of other readings. Keep it as simple as you can for you are inviting your heart as well as your mind to quieten and open. Less is often more.

Day One: Read Isaiah 11:1-10

How beautiful the image that Isaiah foresees, how tender and merciful the prophesy of how the people of God might live under the leadership of a just and righteous leader. Allow your heart and imagination to respond to the image.

And allow the fear and distress to surface of what it is like to live in this time when we see and hear of leaders around the world slaying not only lions but their own people and destroying the creation. Notice whatever tension, musing or wondering you might have as you seek to hold the vision of what might be and what is.

It is thought that the historical context of this prophecy was the downfall of the Assyrian empire, possibly the exile, and maybe even the young Josiah whose father Amon was assassinated. There were many times when the people of God might have heard these words with bitter sweet longing and we in our time can feel the longing for such a time of justice and mercy and lament the injustice and lack of mercy we see everywhere.

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We followers of Jesus of course see in his earthly ministry many of these qualities. And yet he did not exercise authority and ministry in ordinary human society as leader although some of his followers seem to have wanted him to be a mighty leader. How then do we live in this “in-between time” when we recognise the longed-for but not-yet quality of the kingdom of God that Jesus announced? Is this part of the understanding of what it means to wait for, work towards readiness for, the second coming of Christ, or the fulfilment of creation?

Pray for all that is broken and unjust in our world, in your world, and pray for the imagination (the things that eyes cannot yet see and ears not yet hear) of how, when and in whom the kingdom of God might be emerging. If your imagination needs stimulating you might like to look up on You Tube Leonard Cohen - Hallelujah - Flash Mob (a wonderful image of a broken hallelujah breaking out in the midst of ordinary life). Or if you like your Hallelujah's more traditional then look up Christmas Food Court Flash Mob Hallelujah.

Day Two: Read Psalm 72

One of the many things I love about our forebears in faith, the Hebrew people, is that they understood that a blessed life was expressed in the ordinary and earthy things of a good harvest, healthy livestock, a growing family and a just political system. Allow this psalm to be like rain upon a new mown field, an abundance of food for all including the poor, and the shared peace that flourishes where there is righteousness. Let your imagination and longing detail how you want your life, your communities life, and this world to look and feel. Let the vision of justice and peace grow in you. We spend so much time being sensible and reasonable in what we ask of life, we lower our standards as a community, we are being beaten into believing that destruction of habitat and human diversity is inevitable. Allow the God inspired vision of how life for a whole people and interconnected community of beings can be when there is justice. Recognise, treasure and encourage the vision.

As you go about today look with eyes that have seen a better way of being, listen with ears that strain for echoes of justice and mercy, perceive with a heart open to all including most especially those who are in need of rescue.

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If you enjoy having your imagination tickled with videos then have a look at What a Wonderful World, either the hand puppet version or Playing for Change.

Day Three Read Romans 15:4-13

Allow these words to encourage you and feel whatever hope there is in you to well up from within like a spring fed pool. Reflect on all that gives you hope in your life - your family, your friends, your church community, and the world around you.

And also acknowledge all that works against hope in you and the world as you see it. Hope does not cancel out problems. Indeed if we truly live as the people of hope we will stir up reactions that might be hurtful or in other ways costly to ourselves. Many of those Paul was writing to were hosts in the home churches of Rome and invited in to their homes those who were not observant Jews (especially an issue in the community related to food and purity laws) so there were very real consequences to living out there hope and faith.

The hope that we have is the fruit of our forebear's faith. And our faith is a channel for the hope that others will inherit. We need to embody this hope for others. How do you, or might you, embody hope for your community, family, world?

If it is to your taste you could listen to Make me a Channel of your Peace.

Day Four Read Matthew 3:1-12

Here he is - John the Baptist. He gets so many really good lines! Those of us of a certain age probably cannot help but hear Prepare Ye the Way from Godspell (look up the 1973 video on You Tube). Do you feel a thrill of the good news that is coming?

And how do you respond to the accusation that those who came to hear him speak were a brood of vipers? Are you squirming? It is easy to hear these words while watching the evening news - it is easy enough to recognise the viperishness of others. Do we feel that we might need to wear that description?

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What did John really mean? It is clearly an insult and a way of calling out hypocrisy. It also probably alludes to the image of being of the seed of the serpent or evil forces. And he then contrasts this with being of the seed of Abraham. It is strong language but not without hope and life giving challenge. 'Well, bear fruit worthy of repentance.' And then John describes in the language of agriculture of his day what happens to trees that don't bear fruit, and the parts of the crop (chaff) that are left over.

John is challenging them and us and not writing us off. It is more like a slap across the face (still alarming enough!) in order to awaken us out of whatever daze we and our world might be in.

Day Five: Read all four readings set for the Second Sunday in Advent. I share with you where my reflections have taken me. Where are you being led?

The theme of the second week of Advent seems to me to be all about preparing for the reign of God - throughout the history of the chosen people, back in the first century getting ready for Jesus, now in our hearts, and in our world.

Preparing for the reign of God is both about recognising what God has done in the world, is doing in the world now, and hearing what is required of us as our part in the process. It is therefore both thrilling and daunting, hopeful and challenging, liberating and self surrendering.

In the vision of Isaiah and the psalmist we see how just, merciful and abundant the world might be like under the reign of God and god's faithful servants. These images are hope inspiring and balm to our exhausted and broken hearts and minds. We who have been fed a diet of appalling news, human tragedy and corruption, and environmental degradation can succumb to despair. The prophetic vision of how things might be can revive our spirits within us.

But the readings are also deeply challenging and leave us no wriggle room as we are confronted with the hypocrisy and life limiting choices we have individually and corporately made. Preparation for the coming reign of God is a promise and a rallying cry to step up and to become what and who we are most fully meant to be, for our sake and for the sake of others.

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Part of that process of becoming is I think to allow ourselves to be deeply informed by the vision of God's good intentions and desires for the world. What we attend to informs and influences us so it is important to stay focused on the things that make for life and love.

And I think the agricultural images in the gospel remind us that part of the process is also to give ourselves over to being pruned and sorted, just like any vine, tree or crop. I come from the dry wheatbelt and the thought of pruning anything that was even slightly green always seemed shocking to me. But since I have come to live in a greener world and have roses, fruit trees and vegetables I have learnt to take a deep breath and prune - for the greater flourishing of flower and fruit. I am beginning to grasp how the language of pruning is actually the language of love, growth and fulfilment! Alternating seasons of being built up and then being seriously pruned.

Images of fire rightly frighten us in Australian summer, when Advent falls. But burning the prunings and the chaff and agricultural waste was and is normal land management and need not be seen as final judgement. Likewise most of us now know that language that was interpreted by many to be about eternal fires of damnation were more specifically about the burning rubbish tip on the outskirts of Jerusalem. Certainly a place where the most outcast worked and maybe lived (a little like rubbish tips in many of the world's most overpopulated cities now) and that made a wretched stench. But it was a place of everyday earthly management of what was not wanted by the city population. So to be threatened with fire is certainly not pleasant or easy but it is not necessarily about eternal damnation, rather about the serious aspects of waste management of what was a by-product of human life and agricultural work.

I don't know about your life but mine produces waste that needs taking care of and fire is part of the cleansing process.

So as we prepare for the reign of God in our hearts, communities and world we turn toward the vision of how things might be even yet. And we take a deep breath and give ourselves over to the work of being changed and growing into the people of God's kingdom.

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Advent Group Week Two:

The theme this week seems to be Prepare for the Reign of God. As the awakened people of God we are invited, challenged and provoked into getting ready to welcome the reign of God and to be co workers in the in-pouring and out-working of God's activity in our world.

John the Baptist emerges from the wilderness crying, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, "Prepare the way of the Lord". Which is good news but it does seem to be disturbing - to the people who gathered on the edge of the wilderness to check out John, and to those of us who hear this year by year. News of the nearness of God is always good news but it is often disturbing because it heralds change.

We may not particularly like the way the world is - the corruption and the injustice, the sadness and grief, and all the other problems - but we have learnt how to live within it and even good change threatens our sense of security that we get from understanding the world order. Living in this world and welcoming the reign of God creates tension and dilemma for most of us. Some of us thrive on that challenge and others of us are unnerved by it. Advent encourages us into the ultimately hopeful task of engaging with change, growth and becoming citizens of the kingdom of God.

Discuss:

When you hear the words "Prepare the way of the Lord" are you excited or a bit wary and quite possible weary? And of course it may be a mixture of all of these reactions and others. Share where you are up to this year, this week.

How do you react to the wonderful vision of how God's chosen people might live in justice, mercy and abundance? Do you still hold these hopes for this world, for your corner of it, for your own relationships? Share what you most long for to be different about our world.

How do you, and how might you, keep yourself hopeful and working toward the kingdom? What are the words and images that keep you hopeful, what spiritual practices keep you

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focused on the bigger glorious image of Isaiah's and your vision? (For me a variation of this question is how do I stay hopeful in the light of the evening news?)

And how do we as the people of God (the collective of faithful people rather than the individual persons of faith) live out this vision in such a way that we are leaven in the bread, salt of the earth, encouragers within our community? What difference do we make in our community? Is there a visionary quality to what we do that is different to what other good people do?

More information:

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