



Advent 2

Opening Words

Preparations underway, shifting focus each
new day,
Amidst the darkness looking for the light,
For the truth among the mess.
O hush the noise,
Let's hear the angels sing.

Looking for the messengers who bring the
light,
Isaiah – prophet and ancient poet
And John who came to point the way.
O hush the noise,
Let's hear the angels sing.

Angels, messengers of today,
Truth tellers for this present age,
Those who now show us the way.
O hush the noise,
Let's hear the angels sing.

Hymn – Singing the Faith 171 Hark the Glad Sound
Hark, the glad Sound! the Saviour comes!
The Saviour promised long!
Let every heart prepare a throne,
And every voice a Song.

He comes the broken heart to bind,
The bleeding soul to cure,
And with the treasures of his grace
to enrich the humble poor.

He comes the prisoners to release,
In Satan's bondage held;
The gates of brass before him burst,
The iron fetters yield.

Our glad hosannas, Prince of Peac,
Your welcome shall proclaim,
And heaven's eternal arches ring
With your beloved name.

Prayers

Oh Immanuel, God with us, truly in this Advent season we celebrate that you are not hidden in some faraway cloud, but you chose to be with us in the blur and mystery of our lives. In the midst of lists and rush, you are with us as a song that echoes in our minds, as the light of a candle, as a card from a friend. They are signs of your presence. We turn to you this season and pray that you would birth joy and healing, blessing and hope in us. Let something wonderful begin in us — something surprising and holy. May your hand be upon us. Let your love fill us. Let your joy overwhelm us. Let our longing for you be met on a coming holy night. Immanuel with us once again. Amen.

Take a few moments of quiet to bring your confession to God.

Remember that God is more ready to forgive us, than we are to ask for his forgiveness. Hear God's words of grace – 'Your sins are forgiven'
Amen

Reading – Malachi 3 v 1-4

"I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the Lord Almighty.

² But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. ³ He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the Lord will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, ⁴ and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the Lord, as in days gone by, as in former years.

Hymn – Singing the Faith 162 The Prophet's voice

The prophet's voice comes down the years
To teach and to inspire
To show the nature of our God
In words and deeds of fire;
Not to disclose some rigid plan
That God has set in stone,
But to renew the promises
The saints have always known

The prophet's voice speaks of the past-
the actions that reveal
The way god used the people then
The broken world to heal;
And then translates the things gone by
In ways that we find new
So we can judge the world we know
By standards ever true.

The prophet's voice holds up a glass
In which to see our day;
Events which span the globe around
And thigs we do and say.
It calls us to repent and turn
From things that tear life down,
To choose the path that Jesus chose
And share his work and crown.

Alan Hinton

Reading – Luke 3 v 1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene— ² during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³ He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁴ As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:

“A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
'Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.

⁵ Every valley shall be filled in,
every mountain and hill made low.

The crooked roads shall become straight,
the rough ways smooth.

⁶ And all people will see God's salvation.”

Hymn – Singing the Faith 182 On Jordan's Bank

On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry
announces that the Lord is nigh.
Awake and hearken, for he brings
glad tidings of the King of kings!

Then cleansed be every life from sin:
make straight the way for God within,
and let us all our hearts prepare
for Christ to come and enter there.

For you are our salvation, Lord
our refuge and our great reward;
Without your grace we waste away
like flowers that wither and decay.

To heal the sick stretch out your hand,
And bid the fallen sinner stand;
Shine forth and let your light restore
Earth's own true loveliness once more.

To God the Son all glory be
whose advent sets his people free

whom with the Father we adore,
and Holy Spirit, evermore.

Reflections

What a message! Have you ever had a significant message to pass on to someone else? Maybe news of the birth of a baby? A marriage? A new job? Maybe that message was on behalf of someone else – ‘please tell... my news’

Maybe that message wasn't so good – maybe having to share some bad news with someone about a death, or loss of job or illness. Maybe in the work place, having to share difficult news with colleagues such as redundancy.

Depending on the content of the message, depends on how we might feel about sharing the message. Sharing messages of joy is so much more preferable than sharing messages that are difficult or challenging for people to hear.

Think about how these prophets felt with the message they were sharing!

Here is Malachi – Malachi isn't a name as such, but literally means ‘my messenger.’ Writing in the second temple period after the return from the exile, this Malachi was concerned that people should live in the right way. He speaks of the messenger who will come to prepare the way, and then the Lord himself will appear, but then he has to give the hard message –

‘Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? He will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. I remember my grandma washing everything with soap and scrubbing away with the bar of laundry soap to get garments clean. No stain would survive the vim and vigour with which she scrubbed!

Then Malachi goes on to say – This one who is to come will be a refiner, a purifier of silver – have you ever cleaned silver? I have – it is hard work to get a great effect, to remove all the marks and stains.

Malachi – this messenger is about refining and purifying, getting things, getting people clean again!

Of course, Malachi wasn't the only one to have this kind of message! The Old Testament prophets cover around 1/3 of the Old Testament in the Bible and they all have a similar message – get clean, get ready, sort yourselves out because God himself is coming and you don't know when – so you need to be ready!

These prophets received a vision for a new way - the People of God had wandered so far from God, the old ways of trying to follow the Jewish law just wasn't working! People were finding it too complicated because the Jews had made it too complicated! There weren't just 10 commandments – the Jewish leaders had created around 3,000 commands, based on those 10! No wonder people had stopped living God's way – they didn't know what to do to live God's way because it was so complicated!

A light bulb would be a good symbol for today – it usually represents a new idea! If you are familiar with emoji's – little symbols that can be used in messaging people. If you have an idea you want to share with someone, you might put a light bulb at the start of the message! To indicate that you have a great, new idea!

Malachi – this messenger makes it clear that all this refinement is a necessary process to prepare people for the coming of God.

Then we have John -

...I am sending my messenger...

...the word of God came to John son of Zechariah...

This is the only New Testament example of the ‘word of God’ coming to an individual, which combined with the title ‘son of Zechariah’ mirrors the style of introduction of Jeremiah and Hosea, two other Old Testament prophets. This indicates a desire to portray John as a contemporary prophet in the Old Testament style.

...in the wilderness.

The wilderness was a place of expectation for the coming age, referring back to the time spent wandering in the wilderness, bringing hope of a new exodus from slavery. It is also an apt place for a political and religious revolution, away from the sight of both the rulers and high priests mentioned earlier in the passage. It is a place with less noise. A place where people are more likely to listen, away from the distractions of other things.

John is sent to 'Prepare the way of the Lord'. In Mark, John the Baptist is introduced with a quotation included in Isaiah 40:3-4. In Luke's version, our Gospel passage for today, the quotation is extended to include a bit more from Isaiah, which widens to the scope of the one who is to come bringing salvation to 'all flesh.'

Preparing the way involves removing barriers – preparing the way on a walk in the countryside might mean someone going ahead and removing things that might be in the way of those who are coming along afterwards. In the wilderness, that is even more needed – making an inhospitable landscape fertile and habitable once more. Here, even valleys and mountains are going to be removed so there will be nothing that can get in the way of people hearing the voice of the one who is coming with a really important message.

How might we, as modern-day prophets, remove barriers for people to connect with God? A Methodist Way of Life uses the metaphorical language of 'making easy entry points' for new people to get on the train, the journey of faith. What might this look like for us as we serve in our community? I wonder if you see yourself as a prophet – a prophet, like this messenger, Malachi in the Old Testament and John the Baptist didn't have all the answers, but they tried to support people, to help them find the one who was coming who did have the answers. Sometimes, we perhaps think we don't have the answers to all the questions that people might ask – we don't have to! We welcome them, we make it easy for them to ask their questions and support them in their search for those answers.

Perhaps today, this second Advent Sunday, is the day to ask ourselves – how am I pointing people to Jesus? That's what the prophets did. Later on John actually says to people – I'm not the one, the one with the answers, I'm the one to point you to him. And I wonder as you think about that who has been a prophet in your life, pointing the way towards Jesus for you? I can think of my grandma's – both of them, Godly women, who in word and actions were prophets to me – pointing me to Jesus. My youth leaders, all did that for me. Who are those for whom you are grateful for doing that for you?

A string of lights – Perhaps look at a picture of a string of lights. We can use them as an illustration. We have received the message of Christ's coming. The prophets have reminded us that he is coming – they have pointed us to him. At the end of this time of worship, we will take that good news with us and spread the light out into the communities in which we live; one message shining in lots of places like the one string of many lights.

Pray that each of us will spread a little light this week, a kind word, a smile, one small act of kindness, maybe offering forgiveness for a long held hurt, maybe making an apology to that person you just haven't got round to apologising to. Let's pray that this Advent our communities will know that Christmas is a time of hope, founded on the message of the one we celebrate at Christmas. As we look at the lights, let's pray we will reflect the light of Christ in the world this week.

Reflect on the words of the - Prayer of St Francis
Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;

where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.
O divine Master,
grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Hymn Singing the Faith 407 – Hear the Call of the Kingdom

Hear the call of the kingdom,
lift your eyes to the King,
Let His song rise within you
as a fragrant offering,
Of how God, rich in mercy,
came in Christ to redeem
All who trust in His unfailing grace.

*King of heaven,
we will answer the call,
We will follow,
bringing hope to the world,
Filled with passion,
filled with power to proclaim
Salvation in Jesus' name.*

Hear the call of the Kingdom
to be children of light,
With the mercy of heaven,
the humility of Christ.
Walking justly before Him,
loving all that is right
That the life of Christ may shine through us.

Hear the call of the Kingdom
to reach out to the lost,
With the Father's compassion
in the wonder of the cross,
Bringing peace and forgiveness,
and a hope yet to come;
Let the nations put their trust in Him.
King of heaven ...

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Questions for you to reflect on

When have you been told something difficult about yourself by someone you trust, something that you knew was true but didn't want to admit?

- Who has been a prophet in your life, pointing the way towards Jesus?
- What's your song? What do you contribute to the songs of the prophets

Prayers of Intercession

Lord of all glory,
hear our prayer.

Our God speaks tenderly to his people and cares for them as a shepherd cares for his sheep. Let us therefore bring to him our thanks and our prayers for our own needs and the needs of others. Lord our God, in this Advent season we pray for your church throughout the world. We pray that she will indeed be a herald of good tidings, speaking in a strong voice of your glory revealed in Jesus Christ.

Lord of all glory,
hear our prayer.

Lord our God, we pray for all the nations of the world and their leaders. We pray that in all the uneven, rough and unjust places of the world the way may be prepared for you to bring equality, healing and justice to all your people.

We pray particularly today for the people of the Holy Land where Jesus, your word made flesh, came to live alongside us. Let your Prince of Peace bring a new spirit of reconciliation among those who have brought division, suspicion and danger into the streets of Bethlehem and Jerusalem.

Lord of all glory,
hear our prayer.

Lord our God, we pray for the communities in which we live, work and worship. We pray that with your help we will reveal your glory in the way we live and serve you.

If we become over-busy, stressed or tired speak tenderly to us, gather us in your arms and bring us back to a place where we can rest and re-focus on the one great truth of Advent and Christmas: that you have come to us in humility and with patience so that we may see your glory and salvation in our lives.

Lord of all glory,
hear our prayer.

Lord our God, we pray for all those in particular need who are weak and vulnerable. We pray that they will be touched by your gentle tenderness bringing them comfort and strength. We pray for:
(name those for whom you want to pray)

And in our own hearts, in a moment of quiet, we bring to you our concerns for the needs of those we know and love.

(silence) Let your loving and gentle kindness surround them all.

Lord of all glory,
hear our prayer.

Lord our God, we remember before you the lives of those who are now with you in your eternal Kingdom where one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day.

Lord our God and heavenly Father, we bring our prayers to you, trusting in your great faithfulness and compassion. As we look forward to celebrating once again the birth of your Son, Jesus Christ, help us also to look forward to the time of his coming again and to prepare ourselves for that day when your kingdom will at last be established on earth. Amen

Hymn – Singing the Faith 708 O God of Hope

O God of hope, your prophets spoke
of days when war would cease:
when, taught to see each person's worth,
and faithful stewards of the earth,
we all would live in peace.

Earth's fragile web of life demands
our reverence and our care,
lest in our folly, sloth and greed,
deaf both to you and others' need,
we lay our planet bare.

We pray that our divided world
may hear their words anew:
then lift for good the curse of war,
let bread, with justice, bless the poor,
and turn in hope to you.

Earth's rich resources give us power
to build or to destroy:
your Spirit urges us to turn
from selfish, fear-bound ways, and learn
God's selfless trust and joy.

The Prince of Peace is calling us
to shun the way of strife:
he brings us healing through his pain;
our shattered hope is born again
through his victorious life.

Prayer of blessing

The angels are still singing.
Prophets are still speaking.
Hush the noise, hear them sing, repeat the song.
And the blessing of God,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
be yours/ours, now and always. Amen