

Sunday - 20th December 2020 Advent 4

If you can, have a candle (or four) ready to light with the Advent prayer.

Advent Candle Prayer

[light four candles and then pray...]

Turning towards each other
in this holy season of Advent,
we light the Fourth candle,
trusting that you, O God, will always bring
your covenant of love to completion.
God, among us, in hope and expectation,
in fulfilment and flourishing. **Amen.**

Opening Prayer

Even if we cannot physically gather: God is with us
Even if Christmas celebrations are different: God is with us
Even if we might not be able to hug family and friends: God is with us
Even if we cannot sing carols in church buildings: God is with us
Even if Christmas cheer is harder this year: God is with us
Emmanuel, God with us,
we come before you in worship and praise.
We remember that you are ever faithful, eternally loving,
and mysteriously present... Always! **Amen**

Hymn: Tell out my soul (StF 186)

Sing/Read/pray/proclaim the words or listen

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eqwoqRo9N6E>

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.

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.

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.

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 (b. 1926)

Reading: Luke 1: 26-38

A reflection for the 4th Sunday in Advent

These days people don't get nearly so bothered about young single mums, but in Mary's day it was such a disgrace she would likely have been thrown out of her family and the community. Then imagine how much worse that she claim that the baby be conceived in her by God – that was blasphemy! She could have been ostracised, even stoned to death.

Yet she decided to say “yes” to God: “I am the Lord’s servant. May your word to me be fulfilled.”

The virgin birth is a key belief for the Christian faith. Without it, Jesus becomes just a man among men, other religious leaders. If we don't believe Mary became pregnant by the Holy Spirit, we cannot truly say that God entered our world and gave himself for us; without the virgin birth, Christ and our Christianity is discredited and the whole thing falls apart. No doubt it comes from a wider difficulty with believing in the miraculous, for the virgin birth is a miracle. But if we don't believe in miracles then what kind of God do we have, for He can no longer be Creator of life where there was no life etc. And without the miraculous where is the resurrection?! Our faith is not blind, but it is faith. We don't have to be able to explain everything for it to make sense.

But God is a god of the miraculous, and God did create the world and life where there was none, and so He can surely create life in a virgin's womb. And this is a big part of the wonder of Christmas, that it is true and it did happen... and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, Emmanuel, God with us; for as the angel said to Mary:

‘nothing is impossible with God!’

Mary is a major hero of faith in all of this, a true example of obedience to God no matter what the risk. Because Mary said “yes” to God’s will, Jesus was born and we can truly say that God is not out there somewhere, distant and aloof. He has come to us in the most lowly way as the baby of poor teenage peasant girl, lived our life and known our struggles; He comes along side to comfort, strengthen and guide, and by faith through the same Holy Spirit, give us new life in relationship with Him.

And our response can be many things:

As the life of God’s son was born in Mary, it may be that we need to seek new life in the Spirit, being born again of the Spirit as Jesus put in John 3;

Perhaps you’re at a point in your life when you don’t understand what God is doing but there is something that you know you need to say “yes” to God about; maybe it seems too hard, too much to ask, even for God! Let Mary’s example and the word today encourage you... Do it! Say “yes Lord!”; maybe you think or feel that way about how things are in your church and the Circuit...

TRUST HIM, whether you know where it will lead or not, reminded by the angel that:

“Nothing is impossible with God”.

Certainly, the wonder of God’s grace and miraculous self-giving must move us to worship him and proclaim to all around as Mary did: “My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.”

Prayers of intercession

God of light and love,
you entered our world bringing hope and healing to the nations. The world today needs to hear your message of healing and reconciliation. We remember the nations of the world where there is enmity, distrust of one another, and bloodshed. May your message of peace be made real.

We remember those who have no home to call their own, those living on the streets or in refugee camps. May your message of justice for all be heeded.

We remember those whose lives have been affected by Covid-19: through the death of loved ones, long-term health difficulties, loss of income. May your message of hope be heard.

We remember those who live in poverty, those who live in fear, those who are anxious, those for whom Christmas means isolation and loneliness.

Encourage and equip us to be your messengers, offering words and deeds that bring comfort and relief in the name of Christ. **Amen**

The Lord's Prayer:

Our Father...

O little town of Bethlehem (STF 213)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QAU5Xg-o-eM>

O little town of Bethlehem,
How still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
The everlasting Light;
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight.

O morning stars, together
Proclaim the holy birth,
And praises sing to God the King,
And peace to men on earth;
For Christ is born of Mary,
And gathered all above,
While mortals sleep, the angels keep
Their watch of wondering love.

How silently, how silently
The wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of His heaven.
No ear may hear His coming;
But in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive Him, still
The dear Christ enters in.

O holy Child of Bethlehem,
Descend to us, we pray;
Cast out our sin, and enter in;
Be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels
The great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us,
Our Lord Immanuel!

Phillips Brooks (1835-1893)

Blessing

'May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit'.
(Romans 15: 13)



We are encouraged to share our story (and other people's stories) of walking with God in this extraordinary year.

How might you share how God has been with you this week?

*worship resources by Revd Deborah Cornish, Connexion
Message & format, Rev Phil Snelson
Northampton Methodist Circuit*

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and other elements of the worship today –
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