



Opening Responses for Advent

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.

Let there be light!

On those living in the shadow of death, a light has dawned.

Let there be light!

The true light has come into the world to dispel the darkness.

Let there be light!

Prayer of Approach

Let us pray:

The people groaned amid the gathering darkness, longing for the 'something' that would change everything, for the dawning of the new day after the long night of exile, for the boiling over of God's life from eternity into time.

The people thirsted and ached for streams of living water, for signs of new life springing up in the deserts of despair, for the change that would free them to be 'at home' with God, but without really knowing what that would mean.

The people preferred their own darkness and shadows to the fire on the earth God's truth brings raining down, but God promised to dwell with them as Emmanuel, Love inhabited humanly, made vulnerable and defenceless.

Silence is kept for a few moments...

God of Advent,
give us the courage to leave our darkness behind
and the faith to draw near to you,
stepping into the light of your truth, love and hope.

We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ,
the radical answer to Israel's longings,
and the wellspring of everlasting life.

Amen

'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

Have you ever met someone unusual, who intrigued you enough to go out of your way to hear what they had to say?

Prayers of Renewal

God of light,
you call us out of the darkness both
of ignorance of your love
and mistrust of your ways.
God of hope, **forgive us and free us.**

God of light,
you call us out of the darkness both
of indifference towards the needs of others
and the undervaluing of ourselves.
God of hope, **forgive us and free us.**

God of light,
you call us out of the darkness both
of unjust ways of ordering the world
and the blind pursuit of self-interest.
God of hope, **forgive us and free us.**

Silence is kept for a few moments...

God of light and hope,
make us ready to meet with you. Amen

Readings Isaiah 40:1 – 11
Mark 1:1 – 8

Sermon

What is involved in getting ready for an important journey? I imagine that different people will have different approaches. Some will begin by writing a list and planning ahead, whilst others might dive straight in and figure things out as they go. Whatever approach we take, few of us would expect to set out without some sort of preparation ready for what lies ahead, even if we cannot be sure precisely what awaits us on the pathway. The same applies when we undertake a spiritual journey, such as that prompted by entering again into the season of Advent, and getting ourselves ready to embrace the wonder of God-in-Christ becoming fully human and dwelling among us. A challenge we face immediately is that the story of the coming of Jesus is really familiar to most of us, not least from school nativities, and it is hence not easy to ready ourselves to hear it as if for the first time. Although it is true that taking Advent seriously as a time of preparation is now a minority pursuit even within many churches, the benefits of taking time out from the busyness of December to go on a spiritual journey are many and various. As the scouts and guides say, be prepared!

I found myself musing upon the subject of 'getting ready' as I looked at the Gospel reading for today which, despite beginning with a bold statement about Jesus of Nazareth, proclaiming him as both Israel's longed for Messiah and God's Son, immediately dives into telling us about the edgy, intriguing and really quite odd character of *John the Baptist*. On the face of it, he might seem eccentric, or even extreme. And yet, there must have been 'something' about him that attracted

others to him. Given his rather odd habits – dressing in itchy camel's hair, eating an admittedly high-protein diet of locusts, washed down with wild honey, and living out in the wildernesses – the good people of Judea could've been forgiven for considering John best avoided! Yet, all four of the Gospels tell us that thousands of folks flocked to him to be baptised in the Jordan, and the Jewish historian Josephus backs them up on this claim. With that in mind, the question is: who was this mysterious John (the older cousin of Jesus), and what was his message all about?

First, let's spend a while thinking about the backdrop to John's story, for which we need to turn to our Old Testament passage. According to the majority of biblical scholars, Isaiah is a complex work that was edited together over a period of time, and which centred around that turbulent chapter in Israel's history that witnessed the destruction of the throne of David, along with the capital city of Jerusalem, and the Temple around which corporate religious life revolved; those people who survived were then marched off into exile in Babylon. However, unlike the early prophet whose work makes up the book's first thirty-nine chapters, the author of what is often known as 'Second Isaiah' is anonymous. What we can definitely say as we read the beginning of their contribution is that Israel had experienced real anxiety about what exile meant for their relationship with God. As Psalm 137 asks, how we do still sing the Lord's song in this strange land?

This poignant question was addressed head-on by the prophet, and what results is the beautiful poem of hope and renewal which is our Old Testament passage. God addresses the divine attendants in an echo of the calling of First Isaiah and instructs them to comfort those people, who had now made the proper recompense for their failures and sins (Isaiah 40:1 – 2). The judgment of old is passing away and God is doing something truly new, by clearing the way for the exiles to return home (Isaiah 40:3 – 5). Humanity might struggle to remain faithful, to be more constant than the grass and flowers that flourish

one day then fade the next, but God's Word endures forever (Isaiah 40:7 – 9). It's on *this* foundation that hope is built, and within the last part of the reading, God's love and care is compared to a shepherd, who is tender and gentle, and holds the sheep close to his heart.

It's from Isaiah – and 40:3 in particular – that we see the emergence of another figure, alongside that of the Messiah who would come to be associated with this vision of peace and closeness with God. It's perhaps a little surprising, given what we've said about him thus far, but the one who would prepare the way and make the paths straight for the Messiah was John the Baptist. His strange clothing and food were deliberately reminiscent of Elijah, the greatest of the Prophets, and as we'll see next week, people were both intrigued and puzzled by John, in roughly equal measure! He represented the culmination of Israel's faith up to that point, yet what was coming after him would be so earth-shattering, and deeply profound in the changes it would bring, that even the lowliest person in the Kingdom of God would be greater than him. That's why John felt unworthy even to untie Jesus' sandals, a task normally reserved for the lowest ranked servant. To quote a U2 song, Love was coming to town, and thus nothing would ever be the same again...

Viewing John through the lens of Isaiah 40, as Mark's Gospel invites us to do, yields a rounded view of what we mean by the love of God, that holds together the edgy and dangerous side with the gentle and the tender (one of the two verses along with Malachi 3:1, quoted by Mark in his punchy prologue, is Isaiah 40:3 – see Mark 1:2 – 3). It's a reminder that encountering God's love afresh in Advent might well be deeply painful for us, as well as deeply joyful. After all, God loves us just as we are, even when (like the people of Israel) we get things wrong. However, God also loves us too much to leave us where we are, and that means embracing John's call to true repentance when we get ourselves ready for the joy and wonder of Christmas. Jesus, the one who comes to us, points us to genuine newness of life.

The Greek for 'repentance' can be translated as 'turning away'; that is, turning our backs upon that which leads to us 'missing the mark', to failing to live up to all God created us to be. However, I reckon it makes rather more sense to think of 'repent' as meaning 'wake up'. Wake up, and take a good look around you. Wake up to the realities of God – to what it means to love God and love others as ourselves, without qualification. Wake up to the difference that *you* could make in the world. By offering a baptism of repentance (something new in Jewish tradition), John was calling Israel to wake up and to be ready for the difference that Jesus makes to our lives, and to the life of the whole world. Love is coming to town and that is a gamechanger, so we had better be alert and ready to embrace it.

As we continue upon our spiritual journeys through this Advent time, shorter as it is this year because of Christmas Day happening to fall on a Monday, may we be prepared to embark on a spiritual journey. We cannot be certain what the road ahead will bring, just as Israel's way forward in both the strange land of exile, and in embracing John the Baptist's challenge, were not certain. However, we can still trust that God's word does indeed endure forever, and if we are prepared to take the risks of waking up to even just a little more of the fullness of the love of God, we will be better prepared to make the difference in the world that only we might make. With everything going on right now and confronting us every time we switch on the news, it is easy to feel overwhelmed and so to become paralysed into inaction. Yet, if we are ready, when the Holy Spirit prompts, to show kindness and care to even just one person, we will have changed the world. Wake up then, friends; get ready and embrace the world-changing love of God that comes to town and means nothing is ever the same. Amen

A Methodist Way of Life

This week's theme is learning more about our faith, through the time of getting ready in this Advent season.

Prayers of Intercession

God of Advent hope,
as we wait expectantly for the coming of Jesus into the world,
as the one whom John the Baptist pointed us towards,
we bring our prayers for others to you.
God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

We pray for all who find themselves caught up in war,
and especially for those who have been bereaved or injured.
God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

We pray for all who are feeling overwhelmed right now,
and struggling to find your comfort and peace in their lives.
God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

We pray for all who fear that you have left the building,
that they might discover anew your love and care.
God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

We pray for all who work in our emergency services,
in the NHS and in social care, as winter pressures build up.
God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

We pray for all those who are aware of their need to change,
that you will bring renewal, hope and transformation.
God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

We pray for all who have lost loved ones in recent months,
and all those who are unwell in mind, body or spirit.
God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

In a time of quiet and stillness,
we bring the people and situations on our hearts to you...
God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

Lord's Prayer

Final Prayer

God of overflowing love,
whose body language cannot help but speak grace,
whose life and light boils over into our broken world,
not rending the heavens, but filling out that world from within;
we thank you that you identify so completely with us
that in Jesus Christ, you became one of us.

We thank you that we don't have to persuade you to care,
or flatter or manipulate you into being interested in us.
For you know our longings and desires and contradictions,
and you change everything through your defenceless love.

Help us to take the time we need this Advent
to be surprised and frightened and astonished
by the wonder of the Word made flesh –
God from God, and Light from Light. **Amen**

Blessing

Journey onward in the light of faith, and shine brightly.
Step forward in the strength of faith, and be bold.
And as you go, remember that you do so
with the blessing of God the Father,
the peace of Jesus the Son
and the power of the Holy Spirit.
Amen