



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 12:2 – 6
 Luke 3:7 – 18

Sermon

When I was first training to become a preacher, one of the tips given to me by my then mentor was that having an opening line that hooks the congregation right from the off is central to a good sermon. Over time, I have experimented with a variety of different approaches, but I can honestly say that I have never started a sermon by calling my listeners a brood of vipers! Yet, that's exactly what John the Baptist, the older cousin and forerunner of Jesus, is depicted as doing here. In last week's passage from Luke's Gospel, we heard all about John preparing the way of the Lord, and offering a baptism of repentance in the wilderness by the River Jordan. Significant numbers of people went to him to be baptised, and this text reads just like a three-point sermon, preached in response to that gathered crowd. It seems that John's feisty opening gambit didn't put them off, and in fact it served to add weight and urgency to what follows. The opening section tells us that, contrary to how things were generally understood, salvation would not be based upon religious, cultural or ethnic heritage. It was instead something requiring active commitment, resulting in bearing good fruit (Luke 3:7 – 9). This would have been deeply shocking for his listeners, who understood themselves as inheriting the blessing given to Abraham, and so their response is quite remarkable.

It would have been easy for those crowds to walk off at this juncture, without hearing the rest of what John had to say. Certainly, we know

that judgments were made by the Temple authorities, whose power was being undermined by this nobody, based in the wilderness. Yet, instead of leaving, three groups asked how they should respond to his eschatological warnings. The first was the crowd gathered about John, presumably comprised of ordinary folk who weren't especially well-off. They were instructed to share what little they had with each other (3:10 – 11). Tax collectors were generally regarded as corrupt collaborators, who not only enforced hated Roman taxation, but had a reputation for creaming off extra for themselves, and thus profiting from the oppression of their own people. John ordered them to stop all these sharp practices, and only collect what was due (3:12 – 13). Latterly, mercenary soldiers, who served Roman interests and were known for violence and abusing their power, were instructed to stop using threats and blackmail to extract funds, and to be satisfied with their wages (3:14). Now, given the starkness of how John's sermon began, these ethical exhortations may seem rather tame. However, they point to *all* people being able to bear good fruits of repentance, even those caught up in an oppressive system (3:6 – 8).

In other words, the second section of his 'three-point preach' served to put practical meat on the bones of the call to repentance and thus to radical transformation. Its final point concerns the identity of John himself. Messianic expectation was great, and indeed many had put their hope in resistance movements and violent overthrow of Rome. Some wondered if John was the figure they hoped for, perceived by many people as a military leader in the mould of King David, Israel's greatest ruler. He addressed the questioning in the heart of the folks in the crowds by making it clear that his role was as a signpost, who was there to prepare them for One who would baptise not with water but with fire and the Holy Spirit (3:15 – 16). Whatever else this might involve, judgement would definitely be central (3:17), and so getting ready and being prepared was Israel's urgent task. Those unsettling images of fires and trees serve to underline this fact.

This brings us back to the ethical core of the sermon. Today's Isaiah reading contains a pair of short songs, beginning with the individual singer of 12:1 – 2 clinging onto the power of God amid the threat to Jerusalem from the Assyrians, and finishing with the corporate hope expressed by those who have come together to drink from the water of salvation (12:3 – 6). Together, they paint a picture of how trusting in God is the foundation of true hope, in the middle of circumstances beyond one's control. For John the Baptist, and several generations of prophets before him, responding to this hope placed real practical demands on the people. After all, hope isn't an abstract concept but a verb; it is something we do. Consequently, sharing resources with others in times of hardship, ethical behaviour at work and exercising power for the common good instead of individual gain are examples of *doing hope*. John understood that preparing for the coming of the Greater One means turning away from attitudes and actions that do not reflect the love of God and the value of all people. It has impacts across all of our lives, and is at the heart of what Advent is about.

Today's Gospel reading ends by noting that John the Baptist looked to spread the good news of God doing something radically new with Israel (3:18). For us, properly preparing ourselves for the coming of Jesus into the world necessarily involves self-examination. What do we need to change, so that we might be ready to welcome him anew and go onto make the difference that only we can make? Advent is, contrary to the impression we might sometimes get from both wider celebrations in December and the teaching of the Church, about far more than getting ready to welcome a cute baby in a crib. Too often, we have preferred to keep Jesus tightly wrapped up in that manger, rather than engaging with the adult Jesus baptising with fire and the Holy Spirit. It is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God, but perhaps our desire to make Christian faith 'palatable' in a largely secular society has led us to shy away from proclaiming that reality. So, to return to where we began, maybe preachers of my generation

need to learn from John's willingness to use shocking language and ideas to convey the urgency of our calling. Friends, may we be folks who *do hope* with the same passion as John the Baptist, in order to spread God's powerful vision of love and transformation, and for the sake of a world that desperately needs radical repentance. Amen

Prayers of Intercession

God of Advent hope,
as we wait expectantly for the coming of Jesus into the world,
as the one embodying your vision of justice and gladness,
we bring our prayers for others to you.

God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

We pray for all who are pushed to the margins of our society,
and those at the sharp end of the injustices of our day.

God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

We pray for all living under oppressive regimes,
that they will hear, believe, and see your good news in action.

God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

We pray for all who are broken hearted right now,
especially the bereaved and all struggling with other losses.

God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

We pray for all who feel trapped and held captive,
as a result of the situations or hardships they face right now.

God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

We pray for all those who in prison or who work in prisons,
and for all who find themselves being victims of crime.

God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

We pray for all at the sharp end of economic injustices,
and for equality in God's eyes to be reflected in our society.

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