



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

Do you find any aspects of the Christmas story hard to believe, and if so, why is that?

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 9:2 – 7
Luke 1:26 – 38

Sermon

The Christmas story is, if you think about it, something extraordinary and world-changing, that comes about through an ordinary miracle. It is the most incredible example of how God changes things not by rending the heavens asunder, but by acting through human beings. Both of today's lectionary readings put forward some quite amazing claims about God, and about God's interactions with human beings. Our Old Testament text emerged from a period within the history of God's people that was particularly turbulent, with the constant threat of invasion overshadowing them from the dominant regional power, the Assyrians. It's from this time that the longing for a Messiah, from the lineage of David, who would once-and-for-all liberate the people from oppression, emerged. They would be highly exulted, and given titles like Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6). The *historical* contexts of this quote might have been the coronation of Hezekiah to the throne of Judah, and the immediate threat to God's people, but its *theological* context was far greater and magnificent in scope.

Round the time of Jesus's birth, expectations were running high that God's promises in passages like Isaiah 9 would finally be fulfilled as the people sought even a glimpse of the great light at the end of the dark tunnel of oppression by the occupying Roman forces. It was in the midst of this combustible situation that Mary's angelic encounter took place. Despite how terrified she must have felt to be given such extraordinary news, and to be presented with such a choice to make

at the tender age of twelve or thirteen (it was quite typical for Jewish girls to be betrothed at that age), Mary's 'Yes!' to God created room for God's life, freedom, and love to boil over from divine eternity into created time. This is certainly amazing, and really awe-inspiring, but can we place our trust in it, and is it plausible? In other words, is this a Christmas we can believe in?

A lot of the question marks stem from the doctrine of the virgin birth, almost as if ours is the first generation to be concerned about it, and those alive at the time simply did not have a clue! While it's true that our knowledge of genetics and fertility would have completely blown the minds of Luke's first readers, it is highly patronising to imply that Mary and Joseph were clueless as to how reproduction works. They of course knew that virgin births were not meant to be possible; yet, we find independent accounts in Matthew and Luke, both containing that same remarkable claim. In describing Mary, they use the Greek *parthemos*, which means a young girl of marriageable age yet to be married. In the culture of that period, this usually equated with being a virgin, and Mary spells out her status unambiguously in Luke 1:34. I reckon that Dr Paula Gooder is right to say – in her assessment in *Journey to the Manger* – that those convinced the claim is true won't find enough merit in the counterarguments to cause them to change their minds, but nor will sceptics be brought around by Matthew and Luke's accounts, either.

For my part, I reckon that the underlying point here is that God is up to something radically *new*, that results in God's life boiling over into our world in the form of defenceless love. Whilst I wouldn't be willing to go to the stake over it, it's the symbolism and underlying theology which matters most for me. Consequently, the key thing to grasp is just how huge an 'ask' God was making of Mary. Even if the child in her womb *was* Joseph's baby, getting pregnant during the year-long betrothal period would have destroyed her reputation and put her in significant danger, as a woman falling pregnant outside of marriage

could be stoned to death under the law of Moses. Thus, Mary risked rejection from her family, and surrendered the security of home and community, in order to be faithful to God. As such, she undoubtedly showed some remarkable courage, which puts depictions of her as 'meek and mild' to shame. Earlier on, we shared the powerful poem of justice and hope attributed to her shortly after the events of what's often called the Annunciation; it again shows her godly courage.

Thus, we can debate whether to accept the virgin birth in a scientific age until the sheep come home to Bethlehem, but the key point isn't the precise mechanics of the conception of Jesus. Instead, it is that defenceless divine love, and irrepressible freedom, boiled over from divine eternity into our world in human form, meaning that God quite literally risked everything to transform our world from the inside, and that this was made possible because of the courage of a remarkable young woman. Amidst the strangeness of all this and the challenges posed by the genuinely outrageous Christian claim that 'God is with us', *this* is where hope lies. Consequently, in terms of both trust and plausibility, this is a Christmas we *can* believe in. Amen

A Methodist Way of Life

This week's theme is telling of God's love, in the contexts of realism about human nature and the complexities of the world in which God calls us to model love and light.

Prayers of Intercession

God of Advent hope,
as we wait expectantly for the coming of Jesus into the world,
as the bringer of liberation, hope, and the light of love,
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've lost loved ones during this past year,
and all those who are unwell in mind, body or spirit.

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 who are dreading the Christmas period,
especially those who'll reluctantly spend this season alone.

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

We pray for all who see you as untrustworthy and implausible
that they might discover anew your love and care.

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

We pray for all who are scared to say 'yes' to your calling,
that they will be inspired by the remarkable courage of Mary.

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...

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**