



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

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

What might it look like to long for God to be present amongst us and what difference do you hope this would make?

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.**

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

Readings Isaiah 64:1 – 9
Mark 13:24 – 37

Sermon

This season of Advent is my favourite period in the Church year, for a variety of reasons. It is a time in which to remind ourselves of how our deepest human longings are addressed by God, not through the clever arguments of philosophers or in the rhetoric of politicians, but in the defencelessness and vulnerability of the divine sharing in our humanity. What theologians term the ‘Doctrine of the Incarnation’ is both a *public declaration* of the Word through and for whom creation came into being and who ‘became flesh’ in the very person of Jesus Christ (John 1:1 – 14), and the *intimate whisper* of lovers’ talk. God’s becoming fully human and fully divine is as much about intimacy as it is about authority. Into the silence of the ‘nothing’ God would make ‘something’, the Word is spoken by God, through the fiery whirlwind of the Holy Spirit, and there is light and life. Words are, as the author Jeanette Winterson puts it, “the parts of silence that can be spoken”, and it is in the silence that we might hear the Word speak anew this Advent season, if we would only take the time to be quiet. Revisiting a story we know so well comes with the temptation to fill the silences with our own words, and that is a tragedy because it means that the Word of God gets drowned out, rather than being heard *as if for the first time*. God answers our deepest longings through becoming one of us, and yet so often we fail to either see or hear.

Today’s extract from the prophetic oracles of Third Isaiah starts with a heartfelt plea for God to unmistakably come alongside people who had spent decades in exile in Babylon, far away from home and the familiar signs of God’s presence with them (64:1). Underpinning the desire for God to rend the heavens asunder is the longing to be free from oppression (64:2 – 3), and the hope of finding redemption after having gone astray from God (64:4 – 7), as the work of God’s hands

and the very people of God (64:8 – 9). In short, they ached for God’s *something* that would change *everything*, but without really knowing what that meant in practice. The imagery used is certainly dramatic; the prophet calls on God to do something spectacular, extraordinary and unmistakable. It makes me think of a huge neon sign in the sky proclaiming that God is real and here. However, when the very face of God is revealed (64:7 – 9), it is not like the scene in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* where God appears in the clouds; instead, divine light and hope in the middle of adversity comes to us in the ordinary, in the everyday birth of a child.

That same Light in the midst of adversity is there in our Gospel text. To put this passage into context, Jesus and his disciples had arrived in Jerusalem for the Festival of Passover, and he was teaching both his friends and the crowds who gathered around him. Someone had remarked upon the many gifts adorning the Temple complex and its costly stonework, which was in the middle of being vastly expanded by Herod the Great (Mark 13:1), prompting Jesus to warn them that not a single stone would be left standing, in likely reference to Rome destroying it in 70 CE. The disciples asked him when the destruction would happen and what the warning signs would be (Mark 13:3–4), launching us headlong into one of the most challenging sections the earliest of the four Gospels to be written down offers us, as it depicts the Second Advent.

Some of the imagery seen in what has become known as the ‘Olivet Apocalypse’ is dramatic and cosmic, taken from prophetic warnings like Isaiah 13:10, and the coming of the Son of Man upon the clouds derives from Daniel 7:13 – 14. Other images are much more readily relatable. In Mark 13:28, for example, Jesus notions towards the fig tree putting out new leaves as a sign that summer is near, revealing the *predictable imminence* of his coming. Conversely, the warnings in 13:32 – 37 to avoid being caught out by the unexpected timing of the Son of Man’s coming highlight the *unpredictable suddenness* of

God's actions. Holding the dual dynamics of *predictable imminence* and *unpredictable suddenness* in a creative tension reminds us that we need to be alert for One who *is* coming, even while not even the Son could say precisely *when* this renewal will happen (13:32).

This brings us back, then, to the expectant waiting period of Advent. When God comes to dwell with us, as Immanuel, when the love and life of God boils over from divine eternity into created time, this does not happen by virtue of God rending the heavens asunder. Instead, when the light and words of God come to us in a unique way, in the very person of Jesus, God does it *humanly*. God respects our world by working within it, by establishing relationships, and by filling it out from within. Most importantly, God takes the risk of defenceless love in order to make all the difference in the world. This means – despite what much religious language and practice might make one believe! – God doesn't need bribing or pestering into caring or into being 'for us'. In the same way that candle flames are not diminished by being passed from one person to another, so God held nothing back when the Word became flesh (John 1:14). Hence, Jesus is God from God, Light from Light. Moreover, Advent is about getting ourselves ready to encounter a God who changes everything by letting go, doing so with a defencelessness which, if we take it seriously, ought to be as deeply frightening as it is deeply joyful...

If this is going to happen, as Rowan Williams (to whom much of the Advent imagery here is indebted) notes, we need to take some time to slow down and see ourselves as reflected in the divine mirror that enables our *honest* seeing. Having witnessed first-hand the ways in which God's people fell short of their calling, Isaiah recognised how putting things right would necessitate being refined within the fire of God's love (Isaiah 1:21 – 31). The same is true for us today because though God loves us just as we are, God also loves us too much to leave us where we are. Thus, Advent challenges us to get ourselves ready to enter into the risky silences in order to hear the story of the

Incarnation *as if for the first time*, and thus to be transformed in that process. Moreover, just as God works humanly so we, as disciples, are called to work humanly as we seek to put God's love into action, opening our eyes to God's extraordinary love in ordinary life.

The deep longing of Israel and Judah for the 'something' that would change everything was fulfilled, in the unplanned and overwhelming coming into the world of Jesus Christ. Likewise, although we cannot know the 'when' or the 'how' of God's speaking the Word anew into our world, we do know just *who* is coming. Jesus is both fully human and fully divine, and contrary to how it might feel when the darkness ensnares us, the light of God can never be extinguished or the Word of God be silenced. For this, thanks be to God. Amen

A Methodist Way of Life

This week's theme is challenging injustice, as we look for God within the ordinary stuff of life, and discover extraordinary love. How would the world look, taste and feel if this love governed how things work?

Prayers of Intercession

Let us pray:

God of Advent hope,
as we wait expectantly for the coming of Jesus into the world
as a vulnerable baby and through defenceless 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 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 are scared to risk giving a little love;
may we set off cascades of grace and reveal your love to all.
God of light, **shine in the darkness.**

We pray for all who are engaged in working towards peace,
especially those doing so in the name of the Prince of Peace.
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'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.**

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**