



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

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

Canticle – Song of Christ's Glory (Singing the Faith 797)

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 35:1 – 10
Matthew 11:2 – 11

Sermon

There is something about wilderness places that seems to exercise a hold upon the popular imagination. Whether we are thinking about the dry and lifeless deserts of the world, the frozen and unspoilt land of Antarctica, or the challenges of surviving in hostile places like the Rocky Mountains, these environments have a capacity to fascinate, and an attraction to those seeking an escape from increasingly busy and frenetic urban living. Indeed, I do not think it was accidental that in the early centuries of the Church, many contemplative Christians retreated into the desert places, in search of deeper connection with God and an escape from worldly distractions. There is much we can learn from the Desert Fathers and Mothers, even as we might reject the asceticism which often characterised their lifestyles. Wilderness places have an inherent sense of danger and adventure about them and, perhaps because of this, can be sources of both hardships and growth. This was certainly true of God's people Israel following their liberation from oppression in Egypt; their four decades of wilderness wandering saw them view that environment as a space of sanctuary and escape but also as a place of danger, because of the creatures that roamed freely, an absence of readily accessible water and food sources, and the ease with which one could get lost. Yet, this period also saw them learn to trust God, and in God's faithful provision.

Now, just as wildernesses can be physical spaces, we can also talk about 'wilderness places' within ourselves. As somebody living with clinical depression, I know something from my personal experience about what it is like to feel stuck in an internal wilderness. However,

although I would definitely have preferred to learn the same lessons without going through the darkness and grimness of being unwell, I can now look on these periods as times where God *has* been there, in the deafening and disorientating silences with me – even when I was too overwhelmed to notice. Hence, it does not surprise me that, in wanting to talk about renewal and transformation amid harsh and chaotic times, the Prophet Isaiah called on wilderness imagery. Today's Old Testament reading is one of those parts of First Isaiah, which covers chapters one to thirty-nine, that goes against the grain of the great majority of its contents. American biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann notes how Israel's doxologies – songs of praise – run against the data most of the time, as words apparently 'out of place'. Yet, what words these are!

Picture a desert, a vast parched place without vegetation whichever direction you look in and no matter how far you gaze ahead into the distance. Now, imagine that same place blossoming with colour and vibrancy as new plants spring up everywhere. See life-giving waters gushing down like a waterfall of grace to douse those burning sands and quench the thirst of the drought-wrinkled earth (Isaiah 35:1 – 2, 6b – 7). That is the promise of this passage for all creation, but there is more, because sandwiched between this stunning imagery is the renewal of humanity by the saving power of God. Hands, knees and hearts weakened through struggling to survive in the wilderness will be strengthened. Eyes will be opened, and ears unstopped; people unable to speak will shout for joy, and the lame will leap (35:3 – 6a). And if that was not enough, a Highway of Holiness will provide those who walk it with a way out of the wilderness and away from all of its many dangers, so that God's people will be full of gladness and joy, and Zion will resound with triumphant voices (35:8 – 10).

So, as I hope I have succeeded in highlighting, Isaiah 35 is bursting with vividly evocative and rich imagery of transformation, catalysed by the quickening presence of God. However, in a world not lacking

in places and situations we may picture as desolate and dangerous wildernesses, and in which many experience a similar feeling within their own selves, this text begs a profound and troubling question – how will this vision come about? It is same concern underlying John the Baptist’s question to Jesus, asked from a prison cell through his disciples: are you the one we have been waiting for, the one who is to come? (Matthew 11:2 – 3). For centuries, Israel had longed for a something that would change everything, but without really knowing what it would look like. They longed to be at home again – at home within themselves, with one another and with God. A hope emerged that God would send a Messianic figure to quicken the dead places, bring new life in the wilderness of political and spiritual captivity, and to set them free. John the Baptist was not the only one who believed they knew what this meant, but Jesus had other ideas.

The kind of Messiah Jesus was becomes clear in Matthew 11:5 with his proclamation that as the Kingdom of God breaks in, the blind will see, the deaf will hear, the lame will walk, the outcasts will be healed and the dead raised to life, and good news will be proclaimed to the poor. Just as Isaiah’s promise pictures life blossoming in the deserts and waters revitalising the drought-damaged ground, so Jesus puts forward a vision of restored humanity brought out of its wildernesses to embrace abundant living. In Advent, as much as this has become profoundly counter-cultural idea, the Church has traditionally invited us to take time to slow down and to listen to God, to sit in the silence and listen for the voice of one calling out in the wilderness: ‘prepare the way of the Lord’. It is from the chalky deserts of Judea that John forged the Highway of Holiness by calling people to repentance and baptism with water, and it is from the silence and stillness of Advent devotion that we in turn can ready ourselves for the coming of Jesus anew into our hearts. In a world of darkness and uncertainty, all this might well feel like going against the data and sound like a word out of place. However, the Word we are waiting for is the someone who

changes everything, bringing life in external and internal wilderness places, quickening the dead spaces, and setting us free, just as the Prophet Isaiah knew if only we would listen. Let us pray:

O come, O come, Immanuel, and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear:
Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel shall come to you, O Israel.
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 those in wilderness places 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...

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