



# Celebrating the Good News

Meditations based on the church calendar

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# FOREWORD

The Church, or Liturgical Year, is the celebration of the good news of salvation in Christ. Following the liturgical calendar, we celebrate – and in a sense relive and partake in – the historical events of Jesus’ life and his words and deeds while he sojourned the earth. The calendar helps us to focus on Jesus’ advent (first and second coming); his words and deeds revealing his identity as the Son of God; his passion, which culminates in the events of the last week as he approached his crucifixion on Good Friday; his resurrection and ascension; the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost and the coming of God’s kingdom. By reflecting on and celebrating these historic events, they become part of our existence, the content of our faith. Through faith, we actually partake in this salvation history.

The church practices and liturgies, the symbolism and experiential celebrations that developed throughout the ages, provide a depth and a wealth to our faith, a rhythm for our spiritual growth. By celebrating it, the Spirit nurtures and strengthens our faith as individuals, but especially in a communal sense as faith communities.

The liturgical year – or church calendar – guides the yearly planning of faith communities. Denominational features, local events, ministries and natural seasons also have to be taken in consideration when planning the church activities. Being part of the life of a society, the calendar of public holidays should also be considered and even celebrated by faith communities – it helps us to dwell on all facets of our life and faith.

The author touches on the most important features of the church year and provides relevant, clear and moving meditations for celebrating each season. She suggests liturgical activities and appropriate scripture readings; she gives the necessary background information to each event as well as a brief message and she concludes every passage with a short prayer. She clearly had her own ministerial context in mind when she wrote the brilliant pieces of meditation.

The booklet is meant for ministers, but also – even to a larger extent – for elders and deacons or members (of all the different churches) seeking to grow spiritually by partaking in the rhythm of the church year.



# 1. Advent and Christmas Day

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**A**dvent is the beginning of the Church Calendar (or Church Year), starting on the fourth Sunday before Christmas and reaching a climax in the celebration on Christmas Day. The word Advent means “coming” or “arrival”. During Advent, we celebrate the first coming of Jesus to this world, when God’s Kingdom “has come near...” in Christ, the Emmanuel (God with us). However, it also reminds us of his promise to return, his second coming. He will return as Judge, but also as the gracious, victorious Lord who will make everything new. Advent is a journey from hope to joy.

During Advent, the colour of the vestments worn by the clergy, and the altar coverings, is purple. This is a colour associated with repentance and preparing oneself for a great celebration. On Christmas day, however, the colour is white and gold, illustrating light, hope and joy.

Many churches have an advent wreath, which includes five candles. On the first Sunday of Advent, one candle is lit, two on the second, three on the third and four on the fourth. On Christmas Day the central candle is lit, together with the other four. This can be done in the beginning of a service, during the collection of thank offerings or as part of a prayer. The light of the candles symbolises the Light that came to the world, the Light which darkness could not extinguish.

Most churches celebrate an Advent Carol Service, often in the evening of the first Advent Sunday. Right through the time of Advent, churches sing joyous Christmas carols and songs about the Lord’s return.

Advent is also a time when children participate in great expectation, often by playing the crib scene. Some churches erect a model of the stable containing Mary, Joseph, the baby Jesus, and sometimes angels, shepherds and other characters.

## 1. First Sunday in Advent – Matthew 24:36-44

*“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come ... So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him” (Matt 24:42, 44).*

In the time of Advent, we celebrate the first coming of Jesus to this world. However, it also reminds us of his promise to return, his second coming. He will return as Judge, but also as the gracious, victorious Lord who will make everything new.

Our gospel reading about Jesus’ second coming has two clear messages: be awake and ready and be faithful. The main thing to remember about Jesus’ second coming is that we will not expect it when it happens. Life and routine will continue until they are suddenly interrupted. Elsewhere Jesus compares his coming to the flood in the time of Noah. That was the last thing people expected – until it happened.

We are to expect chaos in nature and in the nations of the world – wars, famines and earthquakes. That will be the signs that his coming is imminent, and it will surely happen. Then, Jesus will appear in his divine majesty and everyone will see him, no one will be able to avoid the truth.

The major lesson is, don’t spend time and energy trying to work out exactly when it will happen. It’s impossible to know. The most important thing is that we remain faithful and obedient to Jesus. Then we will have nothing to fear, but instead we will rejoice at his coming.

However, we may be able to recognise the season when it will happen. Jesus speaks about a fig tree growing buds at the end of winter. When trees grow leaves and buds, then we know that spring is near. Jesus says, in the same way, when you see events which are prophesied in the Bible beginning to happen, then you know that the end is not far off. Many people today say that they can see these prophecies beginning to be fulfilled.

Jesus lists many things that will happen and says that this generation (or this nation) will not pass away until these things happen. This is difficult, because if he meant that the people listening to him would still be alive at the end, then Jesus was wrong. However, it makes sense to me to translate it as “nation” and to say the Jewish nation will still remain at the end of time. So far, they are still around in spite of attempts by some to destroy them.

## Message

Happy New Year! Today we begin a new church year. It's Advent, when we wear purple and prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ. Of course, it's also four weeks to Christmas, and therefore we think about Jesus' first coming when he was born as a human baby in Bethlehem. But Advent also reminds us of the promise that he will return again as judge, to put right everything that is wrong in the world. And he will come as healer, to restore and heal everything and everybody. This is our hope, our joy. Because we believe in his second coming, our life has meaning even despite the hardships we may be experiencing.

As believers in Jesus, we should prepare ourselves for his coming, especially during the season of Advent and look forward to it with joy and expectation, not with fear. How should we prepare ourselves? By repenting. How can we repent? By believing and obeying God's Word and by accepting the good news of God's love for us, which God proved by sending his Son Jesus Christ as our Saviour.

## Prayer

Lord, we thank you that, despite our circumstances, the promise of your second coming gives us hope. We may know for sure that Jesus will make all things new, heal all brokenness, take away all that separates us from his presence and give us eternal joy! Amen

## 2. Second Sunday in Advent – Malachi 4:1-6; Mark 1:1-8

*“But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays. And you will go out and frolic like well-fed calves released from the stall” (Mal 4:2).*

*“John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And this was his message: ‘After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptise you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit’” (Mark 1:6-8).*

In the book of Malachi, the last in the Old Testament, we hear of how Israel was complaining about God's actions, or lack of action. The people accused

God of tolerating injustice, and then of being unfair in his treatment of people. Malachi 3 records God's reply. God promises that he will send a messenger ahead to prepare for the coming of God himself.

This messenger is a herald, sent to announce God in the same way that a king would send a servant ahead, shouting that the king is coming. Then, God will come, suddenly and unexpectedly. Malachi tells us that God is faithful; when he has promised something that promise will be fulfilled at the right time.

When God comes, he will purify creation, like a fire, which we still use to sterilise. All evil will be burnt away, or washed away like dirt from laundry. We will be purified, as a metalsmith purifies gold and silver. All that is wrong will be removed, until pure gold or silver remains. His coming will be like the sun of righteousness rising, with healing and life in its rays.

He mentions priests in particular. They are responsible for teaching the people, and if the people are not faithful to God, God will hold the priests responsible. He will purify the priests so that they are able to offer sacrifices and lead the people back to God.

## Message

On the second Sunday in Advent, we give thanks to God for the priests and prophets. These people proclaimed God's word faithfully over the centuries and prepared God's people for the coming of Jesus. The prophets continually told the people that the Day of the Lord was coming, a day of blessing but also of judgement.

The messengers sent ahead by God are the prophets and the last and greatest of the prophets was John the Baptist. He was a very strange man, but one who was completely obedient and dedicated to God. As a result, God could use him to prepare the way for Jesus. The Old Testament reading today points to the work of John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Messiah.

God speaks words of comfort to his people who are exiled in Babylon. He tells them that the punishment they earned because of their sins and idolatry is over. God has forgiven them and will restore them again. He promises that he is coming, and tells them to prepare the way. He says to them: build a road, because God is coming to you. They must level the high places and build up the low places, to create a highway for God to travel on. Most of us have changes that we need to make before we are ready to

welcome Jesus as our coming King. It might be sins of addiction that we still nurture, or unwillingness to forgive, or lack of dedication or faith – we can bring all of that in prayer to the Lord. The message from Isaiah is a comfort, but also a challenge. Make yourself ready for the coming of God, he says.

## Prayer

Lord, teach us what we should be doing as we prepare ourselves to celebrate Christ's coming at Christmas, and how we can be signposts and road-builders. Amen

### 3. Third Sunday in Advent (John the Baptist) – Luke 3:1-22

*“John answered them all, ‘I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire’” (Luke 3:16).*

It always amazes me to see how God can take very strange people and use them in his service. We think of Moses, a man God chose as spokesman even though he had a speech defect; or unstable David (a murderer and adulterer, but someone who truly loved God); and timid Jeremiah. Then there was John the Baptist ...

John was God's special gift to an ageing priest named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. John came from a respectable family, but his behaviour and speech was definitely not what the Jewish people expected.

If John the Baptist were to walk in here today, I think we would be shocked. He was a wild man who lived alone out in the desert and wore animal skins. He would have been clean, because he spent all his time in the Jordan River baptizing people, but his hair and beard would have been wild and uncombed.

John ate locusts and wild honey. Some people have argued that John ate a type of fruit called the locust, but he probably did eat large grasshoppers. Incidentally, some Arab people still eat locusts, pulling off their wings and legs and roasting the bodies over an open fire.

John made no effort to be polite to powerful people. He did not care who he upset. When Pharisees and other powerful Jews came to question John, he called them children of snakes. Eventually, his blunt speaking cost John his life when he criticized the wife of King Herod.

John was a man of humility, who had a clear idea of who he was, and what he had come to do. Jesus called him a “burning and shining light”. When the Jews asked him if he was the Messiah, he clearly said no! Who was he? A servant, sent to prepare the way for Jesus, and a signpost to point people to Jesus.

He said that he was not worthy to untie the thongs of Jesus’ sandals. A disciple could be asked to do anything for his rabbi, except untie his shoes. This would be too much of an indignity. But John says that he is not worthy to do this for Jesus.

John says that he baptizes with water, but Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. This indicates that Jesus will give the Holy Spirit generously and will purify and empower us.

## Message

John was sent to prepare people for Jesus’ coming. He invited all who were willing to repent of their sins and be baptized in the river as a sign of that repentance.

This was also a call to humble themselves. A convert to Judaism from another religion had to be baptized. Jews were not normally baptized. John says, “Do not think that God will not hold you accountable for your sins because you are Abraham’s descendants.” Each of us is responsible for our own actions and decisions. God does not judge us on what our grandparents did.

John was a witness. The word is *martus*, which reminds us of the English word “martyr”. Witnessing to Jesus’ presence and reality in our lives is never without cost. For John, it led to rejection and in the end to his death. In all probability, the cost will not be so great for us, but we need to be prepared to speak out where necessary, and challenge attitudes and actions which degrade people and do not honour God.

The people who came to John asked him what was expected of them, and he gave clear advice which related to their specific callings and lives. For example, the tax collectors were told not to overcharge the people.

John was sent to prepare the way for Jesus and to call people to prepare themselves. Advent is a time of preparation for us as well. Let us use this opportunity to prepare our hearts and minds to welcome Jesus as our King.

## Prayer

Lord, we thank you that you sent John the Baptist to prepare the way for the coming of your Son and to call all people to repent and be baptized. We ask that, during this time of Advent, we will be faithful witnesses as he was, and point the way to your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Help us to be able to point away from ourselves. Amen

## 4. Fourth Sunday in Advent – Luke 1:26-38

*“I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May it be to me as you have said” (Luke 1:38).*

This is not the first time we hear about the angel Gabriel in Luke. He is God’s chief messenger and was sent first to Zechariah to announce that John the Baptist was to be born. Zechariah found this difficult to believe, because both he and his wife Elizabeth were old and she was long past child-bearing age. Because of his disbelief, Zechariah was struck dumb until John was born.

Now, we have Gabriel being sent to Mary with an even stranger message. Mary is a young woman, still a virgin, and is told that she is chosen to receive God’s favour and to be the mother of the Messiah and the Son of God. To her credit, she does not respond by questioning the messenger, but accepts God’s will. Mary was betrothed to Joseph. A betrothal usually lasted one year before a couple were actually married. During this time, they did not live together, but if the woman was unfaithful, she was considered guilty of adultery and could be stoned to death.

The two stories featuring Gabriel are similar. The angel appears, and both Zechariah and Mary are understandably afraid. The angel reassures them, and then names the child to be born. Zechariah and Mary both raise objections, and the angel reassures them again. Then they come to accept the message.

However, there is a difference between the attitudes of Zechariah and Mary. Zechariah relies on his own logic and doubts what the angel has to say. Mary is startled, but trusts God’s word and will and responds with wonder. The angel greets her as the “highly favoured one”; the one God has chosen to bear his Son.

She is told that her son will be called Jesus, which means “God is salvation” or “God saves”, the same name as Joshua. She is also told that Jesus will be the Son of God and will be recognized as God’s Son, and that he will rule forever on the throne of his ancestor David. It seems that both Mary and Joseph were descendants of the great King David.

When Mary asks how this is to happen, as she is still a virgin, she is told that the Holy Spirit, the creative power of God, will come upon her and by the Spirit’s power she will be enabled to become a mother. An added reassurance is given – her elderly relative, Elizabeth, who is still childless, will also have a child.

At the end of the story, we are reminded that nothing is impossible with God. If God decides to act, he is able to bring about his plans and purposes in the world, as God did when he sent his Son into the world.

## Message

This time of year is extremely busy for most people. There is a lot of preparation for Christmas: shopping, baking, preparing for guests and end of year celebrations.

When we read today’s gospel, we probably think of traditional Christmas cards, or nativity scenes, with the newly born baby Jesus, his young mother, animals, angels and shepherds. They all had an important part to play in the first Christmas, but we must always remember that the focus of the New Testament birth story is God. God is the one who carries out the major activities involved – God sent the angel Gabriel to Mary, God announced to Mary that she will bear the Messiah and then brings about Jesus’ conception and birth. Luke reminds us of how God must be our focus at this time by including many Old Testament prophecies and songs of praise to God.

God acts as God chooses, in the way that God chooses to act. The virgin birth is a one-off event. God has no reason to do such a thing again, but he chooses to use this method (a miracle) to bring his Son into the world. Motivated by his great love for us mortal beings, God chooses to enter this world by being born as a little, vulnerable baby, born from a woman’s womb. We cannot comprehend this. It is beyond us to imagine this wonder of God, the Almighty, entering our world as a weak little child, becoming like us – for our sake! Our response to this can only be to bow in worship and adoration.

## Prayer

God, we humble ourselves in preparation. You are the acting, the sending God. You sent your Son as the Saviour of the world, because you so loved the world. We are only witnessing servants. Please prepare us to witness about your love. Amen

## 5. Christmas Day – John 1:1-14

*“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).*



John's gospel begins with the eternal Christ in the presence of God the Father before the creation of the world. Jesus chose to become human. He did not have to. He was in a totally fulfilling relationship with God the Father. He became human for the sake of human beings, to bring us into a relationship with God.

Jesus was present and active in the creation and is called the source of light and life, contrasting with darkness, disorder and death, which are the characteristics of the world in rebellion against God.

John's gospel is full of contrasts – light and darkness, death and life, from above and from below. God created a perfect world, which has been spoiled by human sin. Sometimes it seems as if darkness and evil will overcome the world, but the message of John's gospel is that Jesus has overcome this negative power and made it possible for us to come back to God.

Our sin created a gulf between ourselves and God. Only Jesus could bridge this gulf by coming to earth and dying for us. Darkness refused this offer of life and light, but it is not able to put out the light. Even Israel, God's chosen people, who might be expected to welcome their Messiah, rejected him.

John the Baptist is mentioned as the herald sent to prepare the way for Jesus. He was the messenger, sent ahead, to prepare the people for Jesus' coming. He pointed away from himself to the Messiah, Jesus.

The world rejected its creator. However, a few did receive God's message, and to them God gave the right to become God's children. They began a new life, as members of God's family.