

ADVENT 3 - HOPE-FILLED EXPECTATION

Intro Poem

A secret seed is rich with promised fruit,
for seeds are buried when it's time to grow.

This life begins with one seed, tiny, mute,
like treasure in a field, like yeast in dough,
a secret seed is rich with promised fruit.

We wait in darkness, wait in earth, below,
seek out the signs of life in root and shoot:
for seeds are buried when it's time to grow.

A secret seed is rich with promised fruit,
for seeds are buried when it's time to grow.

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[Psalm 126](#)

A song for pilgrims ascending to Jerusalem.

¹ When the Lord brought back his exiles to Jerusalem,
it was like a dream!

² We were filled with laughter,
and we sang for joy.

And the other nations said,

“What amazing things the Lord has done for them.”

³ Yes, the Lord has done amazing things for us!
What joy!

⁴ Restore our fortunes, Lord,
as streams renew the desert.

⁵ Those who plant in tears
will harvest with shouts of joy.

⁶ They weep as they go to plant their seed,
but they sing as they return with the harvest.

Prayer: We All Have Our Longings

ALL: We all have our longings, faithful Lord, and we bring them to you as part of our worship.

LEADER: Abraham and Sarah spent 25 years, longing for their promised son. Moses waited 40 years, longing for his people to enter the Promised Land. David endured 15 years, longing to take his rightful place as king. Esther waited, fasting and praying, for three days before she went before the king.

We all have our longings, faithful Lord, and we bring them to you as part of our worship.

Israel waited 600 years between exile and the coming of the longed-for Messiah. Hebrews tells us: "These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect." [Heb 11:40]

We all have our longings, faithful Lord, and we bring them to you as part of our worship.

Today, some of us are waiting for answers to prayer. Some long for relationships to be mended, or to begin. Some ache for a world of justice where all are treated fairly. Some are hungry for meaning, purpose, and joy in their lives.

We all have our longings, faithful Lord, and we bring them to you as part of our worship.

Let's take a moment of silence now, to bring our personal longings before God. [pause] Let's say together one more time:

We all have our longings, faithful Lord, and we bring them to you as part of our worship. Amen.

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[Matthew 11:2-11](#)

From time to time, I have told you little episodes from the bigger story of how God led me to an Anglican theological college in Bristol when I was exploring what my sense of calling was.

A significant part of that story concerns the fact that in those days we were still in the time of educational grants for further education. My Local Education Authority turned me down for a grant.

I lodged an appeal against that decision. The college gave me a deadline to guarantee to them that I had the funds for my first year.

Forty-eight hours before their deadline expired, I learned that I had lost my appeal.

Forty-eight hours to go, and no money. Of course, I had been saving every month, but on its own it was nothing like enough for tuition and accommodation.

You can imagine that in that situation I started to wonder whether I was called to college after all. I had a collection of all sorts of notes of Bible verses, things trusted friends had said to me, and passages from books that had jumped out at me, which collectively pointed the same way.

But now it was all collapsing. Like I said, forty-eight hours to go and no money.

I'm sure you can see some similarities with the story of John the Baptist here.

He has been so sure of his calling. He has preached his heart out, without fear or favour. He has heralded his cousin Jesus as the Messiah.

But no longer. He's in prison. Soon he will be executed. And so our reading begins,

² When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples ³ to ask him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?'

Note how two things here conspire to lead to John's sense of doubt. One is that he's in prison. The other is that he asks these questions 'When ... he heard about the deeds of the Messiah'. It's as if what he hears Jesus is up to doesn't fit with his ideas of the Messiah's job description.

You wouldn't think that someone with John the Baptist's calling would be so full of doubts, but he is. The negative circumstances push in on him and create doubt.

Does that in any way sound familiar? Are there bad events in your life that have had an effect on your faith? The loss of a job which had seemed so right

for you. An early bereavement. A child going off the rails. A significant injustice. A beloved church leader falling into serious sin. A great dream for your life manifestly not coming to fruition.

If you are struggling in some way like that this Advent, then consider with me what Jesus offers in this passage in response to John the Baptist's dark night of the soul.

Two things. Firstly, *focus on Jesus.*

How does Jesus respond to John's disciples when they come to him with their leader's questions?

⁴ Jesus replied, 'Go back and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵ the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. ⁶ Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.'

Look at what I'm doing, says Jesus. I'm fulfilling prophecy. This is straight from Isaiah 35, which is the Old Testament Lectionary reading paired with this Gospel reading.

Listen to Isaiah:

⁵ Then will the eyes of the blind be opened
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

⁶ Then will the lame leap like a deer,
and the mute tongue shout for joy.

It corresponds closely with what Jesus describes himself doing here, and other parts of what Jesus says here show him fulfilling parts of Isaiah 61.

And if you started singing 'O for a thousand tongues' when I read those words from Isaiah 35, then bonus points for you, because these were part of Charles Wesley's inspiration for that hymn.

Now these were probably not the verses John the Baptist had in mind for his cousin Jesus. He had described his cousin in quite fierce terms at times, and he might have wanted to go just before the healing of the blind, the deaf, the lame, and the mute in Isaiah 35:5-6 to the preceding two verses where the hearers are told not to worry, because their God will come with vengeance.

And John might have expected Jesus to go beyond the part of Isaiah 61 about proclaiming the good news to the poor to subsequent verses that talk about the day of vengeance of our God.

But as we know, Jesus postpones the talk of vengeance to the Last Judgment. It is there in his teaching, but he is clear that his incarnation, which we celebrate at Christmas, is about coming with the offer of salvation.

I don't know, but maybe John could have done with a bit of vengeance as he sat in the dungeon of Herod Antipas. Perhaps it was easy to lapse into that way of thinking given the popular expectation of a military Messiah.

But sometimes what helps us when we are in our metaphorical dungeon is to be able to see a different part of Jesus' character or ministry. Essentially, that's what Jesus does here. Roughly speaking, he says to the disciples of John, look at the evidence and see that I've come to bring the promised salvation. That's what my advent is about.

There is always more to Jesus than we have fully appreciated. The part of Jesus' ministry to which he refers the disciples of John may not be what helps when we are in darkness because a loved one has not been healed. At those times it may be the way Jesus embraced human suffering himself that brings light to our darkness. Or the wonder of the Resurrection may be what brings us hope when we walk in the valley of the shadow of death.

More Jesus is always a good thing. We might want to read the Gospels more fully. We might find that a trusted Christian friend leads us to the aspect of Jesus that we need to lift us during our troubles.

The late Dr W E Sangster, the famous minister at Westminster Central Hall, once wrote that the Gospel is like a many-faceted diamond. We need to find the facet that shines the Good News into our particular situation.

We could adapt that very slightly and say that Jesus too is a many-faceted diamond, and that we simply need to find the facet of his Person and Work that shines his light into our situation.

Secondly, focus on Jesus' estimation of you.

⁷ As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: 'What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind?' ⁸ If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine

clothes are in kings' palaces. ⁹ Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is the one about whom it is written:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.”

¹¹ Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Undoubtedly in Jesus' eyes, John the Baptist was the one prophesied by Malachi to be like Elijah come again as the forerunner to the Messiah, or the messenger in Isaiah who prepares the way. In other words, he was someone who had a profoundly important rôle in God's plans.

Yet matched with that greatness was the humility of his standing, where even the least in the kingdom of God was greater. John was familiar with the humility needed, for as he had said of Jesus, 'He must increase, but I must decrease.'

In other words, John was exactly who he thought he was before his crisis of faith. His call remains. God's estimation of him remains.

How might this apply to us? I don't know the calling of every individual who watches this video. I can't even tell who watches it, only the overall numbers who do so.

But what I can say about all of you is that what hasn't changed even when you had a crisis of faith, even when you doubted the very goodness of God, is that you remain beloved of him. You are still made in his image, carrying special dignity and responsibility for him in the world. You are still one for whom Jesus Christ came, lived, died, and rose again, that the barrier of sin between you and God might be removed and you be usefully employed in the service of his kingdom. You remain one whom your God will never forsake.

Your circumstances may make you question God's love and God's purposes for you. But remember that even Jesus expressed a sense of God-forsakenness on the Cross, and what could be darker than that? Yet his Father brought him through that, using the Cross for good, and vindicating him in the Resurrection. Wait through your night for the dawn that God will bring.

The Christian writer Ann Voskamp [says](#),

Christ-followers do more than believe some things are true, they trust that Someone is here.

She goes on to say,

This is a heart-broken planet, but this is not a forsaken planet. ...

What electrifies all the dark is that Emmanuel is with us, and the current of His love holds the power to transform the darkest parts of our story into light.

His Witness heals all this brokenness.

May that be our hope this Advent and Christmas.

Hymn: God The Word Of Life (Great Day)

God, the Word of life, created all,
sun and moon and galaxies beyond,
giving life to all that lives and breathes,
grace and love supplying every need.
Yet we wait for the day.

*In Christ we hope,
by faith we know
our redemption is close,
but still the earth groans.*

God, our hope, has heard creation call,
pouring out his mercy on the earth,
giving us his one and only Son
rescuing the world he loves so much.
Yet we wait for the day.

The earth will be healed,
creation set free,
in the great day of the Lord.
The whole earth restored,
in beauty and awe,
in the great day of the Lord.

Intercessions - Isaiah 35

LEADER: We proclaim that Jesus, you have come,

ALL: and you will come again, help us work for the justice of your Kingdom.

We look at our world, so desperately in need of you. Deserts spread, harvests fail and people thirst. But you promise: "The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom." [Is 35:1] We bring to you those who suffer with droughts and famines, that you would provide for their needs. And we pray for those who work for environmental justice, who battle for a better stewardship of your creation.

We proclaim that Jesus, you have come,

and you will come again, help us work for the justice of your Kingdom.

We look at our world, so desperately in need of you. Nations act selfishly, injustices deepen and people suffer with anxiety and depression. But you promise to: "Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, 'Be strong, do not fear...'" [Is 35:3-4a] We bring you those who suffer from fear and anxiety, that you would bring healing to their souls. And we pray for those who work to strengthen the fearful, the therapists, social workers, counsellors and pastors.

We proclaim that Jesus, you have come,

and you will come again, help us work for the justice of your Kingdom.

We look at our world, so desperately in need of you. Illness cripples potential, causing pain and suffering. But you promise: "Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy." [Is 35:5-6] We bring you those we know personally who are ill at this time, that you will bring healing to their bodies. And we pray for those who work tirelessly to care for those in physical need: the personal assistants, the nurses, the doctors and the medical missionaries.

We proclaim that Jesus, you have come,

and you will come again, help us work for the justice of your Kingdom.

Lord Jesus, we see in the gospels how you fulfil Isaiah's prophecies, and we hunger for those promises to be complete. As we wait for your return, help us be your hands and feet on earth.

We proclaim that Jesus, you have come,
and you will come again, help us work for the justice of your Kingdom.

In Jesus' name, **Amen.**

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Send Us Out prayer

ALL: Send us out, Lord,

LEADER: to have faith that the waiting seeds will bear fruit.

Send us out, Lord,

to trust you through our disappointments.

Send us out, Lord,

to take joy in the journey, rather than rush towards the destination.

Send us out, Lord,

to live with the tension of the now and the not yet.

Send us out, Lord,

to be patient and stand firm, because your coming is near.

Amen.

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