

## **Fourth Sunday of Advent – Year A**

### **Fourth Sunday of Advent – 18 December 2022**

The Faith Nurture Forum would like to thank Carolyn Merry, Director of Place for Hope, for her thoughts on the fourth Sunday of Advent.

Weekly Worship, based on the Revised Common Lectionary, is for everyone – in any capacity – who is involved in creating and leading worship.

It provides liturgical material that can be used for worship in all settings. Our writers are asked to share their approaches to creating and delivering this material to equip leaders with a greater confidence and ability to reflect on their own worship practice and experience and encourage them to consider how this material might be adapted for their own context.

We would encourage continual reflection on the changing patterns of worship and spiritual practice that are emerging from disruption and how this might help identify pathways towards development and worship renewal.

We may not all be gathered in the same building, but at this time, when we need each other so much, we are invited to worship together, from where we are – knowing that God can hear us all and can blend even distant voices into one song of worship.

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Isaiah 7:10-16.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Psalm 80: 1-7, 17-19 .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Romans 1:1-7 .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Matthew 1:18-25 .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Sermon ideas .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Prayers .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Alternative Material.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Musical suggestions .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Reflecting on our worship practice .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Useful links .....</b>	<b>14</b>

## Introduction

Creating a larger, more loving story: God with Us.

In times of conflict and change, there are always stories – the narrative of our own perspective, truths and meanings giving rise to personal history stories, perspective stories on what has happened during the time of conflict and change, and stories of meaning for each involved. Stories are critical within times of conflict and change – not just to be spoken, but to be heard, not just to be heard but to be understood, not just to be understood, but to be experienced through a lens of self-reflection, humility and love.

Since 2009 [Place for Hope](#) has been accompanying and equipping people and faith communities so that all might reach their potential to be peacemakers who can navigate conflict, change and difference well. We want every community to be a place for hope and reconciliation, where all are able to:

- notice brokenness and division
- nurture relationships and community
- navigate conflict with graciousness
- nourish wholeness in themselves and their communities

Place for Hope supports people and communities of faith to move from stories of fear to those of hope, from stories of broken relationships and division to stories of relationships re-imagined and reconciled. Through mediation, coaching and training Place for Hope seeks to support them to find a larger, more loving story for themselves and others.

All of today's readings speak to me of how God created the ultimate larger, more loving story for us all – whatever circumstance we may find ourselves in, God is with us. From the promise to the actual incarnation of peace and reconciliation in Jesus ... all our readings today point to the need for and impact of Jesus in reconciling us to ourselves, to God, to others. The 'God with Us' presence of Jesus has always been needed and is needed more than ever in our world today – peace and reconciliation amidst the fear, violence, division, and greed that increasingly defines our times.

## [Isaiah 7:10-16](#)

In this reading, Isaiah is sent by God to calm Ahaz down, to let him know he should not be afraid. And then God emphasises why Ahaz should not be afraid, by giving him a sign of

hope (after Ahaz refuses to ask for one) – a promise really, of the birth of a child who will be called Immanuel (God is with us).

This prophecy/promise of Jesus in the context of this reading is set in Ahaz's story of war and fear... of two warrior kings joining together and threatening war against Ahaz and Judah. Into this fearful and violent context, God walks in and reassures Ahaz not to be worrying about the two kings but instead re-focuses him on the behaviour within his own kingdom of Judah. In times of conflict and change, the stories we often focus on involve the other – of the threat they pose to us, whether emotionally, to our reputations, to our wellbeing, to the things we most treasure or identify with, or indeed to our own lives. One of the critical components of transforming conflict is for those involved not only to understand the other but to also to reflect on the ways they have engaged and possibly contributed to the escalation of the conflict.

I have worked in many places of war and extreme violence, some of which have hit the global news (like Ukraine has this year), and others which were essentially forgotten places and people (the equivalent of today's Myanmar, Yemen, Egypt and Nicaragua, just to name a few) and one of the most important things for people in those contexts was not to feel forgotten or alone, that the 'international community' was watching, cared and might act.

And so, God sends Isaiah to Ahaz with a promise that contains such a hope; providing the long view for Ahaz to focus on – God being with humanity in the prophecy of Jesus. The promise of God with us can be taken into all contexts of conflict and fear – in our personal lives, ministries, as well as into local and global issues. Indeed, knowing that 'God is with Us' can be the ground on which we more confidently walk into conflict. God provides a larger, more loving story for Ahaz – and just the promise of it gives peace.

As we approach Christmas this year, there are so many issues that make us and those in our communities fearful and anxious. The story of this promise to Ahaz can speak into our fears just as powerfully today and challenge us to reflect – what difference does the presence of God being with us make to our stories?

### **[Psalm 80: 1-7, 17-19](#)**

Our psalm today, which many commentators think was written during the exile, is in three distinct parts, all ending with the Psalmist pleading: "Restore us, O God, let your face shine, that we may be saved."

In the first part, the Psalmist evokes the familiar image of the Shepherd who, as in days past, would come and save them ... from tears, from the scorn of neighbours and from their enemies. In these verses we hear not only the longing of those in exile at the time of this psalm but also the hearts of all who have been brought low – through circumstances in which exclusion, maltreatment, discrimination, etc., has made them feel separated from the presence of God. Indeed, the middle verses of this psalm (not read today) show us how easy it is to look at our circumstances and believe that God has caused or allowed such things to happen to us – a belief that makes us feel even further separated from God.

And yet, hope lies in the final verses: “But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself.” The right hand that the Psalmist may have had in mind at the time of writing could well have been their present King, but now would be recognised as Jesus Christ at the right hand of God. Like the Isaiah reading, the plea for Jesus springs from the pain and separation the Psalmist is feeling – for themselves and their people. The repetition of the third “restore us, O Lord God of Hosts, let your face shine, that we may be saved” is in a way a statement of faith for the Psalmist – that the presence of the eternal Christ will not only be with them in their present awful circumstances but will reconcile them to themselves, to God and to others.

*“If we are absolutely grounded in the absolute love of God that protects us from nothing even as it sustains us in all things, then we can face all things with courage and tenderness and touch the hurting places in others and in ourselves with love.” (James Finley)*

## **Romans 1:1-7**

Paul opens his letter to a Church that he does not know personally and one that is set in the heart of empire. Paul’s introductions then, establishing who he was, are not unexpected – but who he introduces himself to be is different from what may have been expected from him prior to his experience of Jesus on the road to Damascus. Paul does not let them know that he is indeed a Roman citizen or his religious credentials, or of other worldly honours, but rather only speaks of being a servant/slave to Jesus Christ.

He speaks in verses 2 and 3 of the promise of the Christ through the scriptures and the fulfilment of that prophecy in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. He informs them that the promise of Jesus was not a sudden gesture of God – and in fact, that God has always been with us in one way or another through the eternal Christ. And then in verse 5 Paul points to the two gifts of Jesus that he and all believers receive – the gift of grace and the task of sharing the good news of Jesus with all people. Through the lens of peace-making this verse speaks to me of the power of stories. God continuously breaks into our

stories and gives us a new one to share – a larger, more loving story – and sharing that story is now the precious responsibility of every one of us.

Indeed in verse 7, Paul ends his introduction by emphasising how the presence of Jesus can transform the lives of believers, with grace and peace – even for those in the heart of empire. That good news story can be the larger, more loving story for each of us ... and needs more than ever to be the story in our broken world.

### **Matthew 1:18-25**

And so, on this last Sunday before Christmas we come to the fulfilment of the prophecy we heard in the Isaiah reading – “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel”, which means, ‘God is with us.’ (v23)

For Matthew’s readers the details of the story of Jesus’ birth were vitally important – showing them that Jesus was indeed the Emmanuel spoken of in prophecy.

It is hard to see through fresh eyes the drama of the story Matthew retells – it is a story so familiar to us. However, when we pause and put ourselves in the position of Joseph and the inner conflict that followed him into his sleep, then we can imagine how torn he must have been on discovering that Mary was pregnant at the time of their betrothal: when they would not have yet had sexual relations; the societal pressures and expectations of what he needed to do in such circumstances; and his love and care of Mary and the baby – grappling all the while with what Mary has explained to him about how the baby was conceived.

In verse 20 though, an angel of God uses the word of the prophecy to reassure Joseph and to allow him to feel a peace in his inner conflict and to change his course of action, from quietly divorcing Mary, to making Mary his wife.

Again, what impresses me in this passage is that even before Jesus is born, the story of the fulfilment of that prophecy of God with us, brings a reconciliation to Joseph’s conflicted mind, between him and Mary, and I imagine, between Joseph and God.

How many times do we, when facing inner dilemmas and conflicts, need to look to Jesus and grasp His promises and trust Him. When Place for Hope accompanies or trains those leading or journeying through change, we explore the inner transition process that all of us undergo to help emotionally and mentally re-orientate ourselves to external changes. In the middle of the transition process, between letting go of what was and entering the new beginning, we often struggle with the uncomfortable feeling of the ‘in-between’ – it is in

that place that we most need to trust that God is with us and that we are held in God's hands.

## Sermon ideas

As discussed in the introduction, the predominant theme that emerged for me in these readings in this last Sunday before Christmas is one of God creating a larger, more loving story. That story is the reconciling presence of the eternal Christ – and that reconciling presence can speak into any story that we may have experienced, or be experiencing, or be afraid of experiencing.

In times of conflict and division, we experience many emotions, and these will often surface in the telling of our stories. They can include fear, confusion, anxiety, doubt, anger, disappointment, helplessness, frustration, sadness, despair, being overwhelmed, lonely or impatient. Bringing God's larger, more loving story into these stories and emotions allows us to better understand our own stories, and those of others .... it cuts across the pain, divisions and suspicions that may have occurred and whilst acknowledging them as valid and meaningful (God is with us, sharing our emotions), helps us to look up, outward and beyond our individual stories to something much bigger and better. We are beloved children of God and so is everyone and everything else – and God is with us all.

That is not just good news, but brilliant news. It is also challenging news – if we truly believe in the transformative presence of God in our lives then we cannot only tend to our own individual stories. We are connected to everyone and to all creation, and so their stories are our stories and we must tend to them as well.

How do we move from our individual stories to that larger, more loving one that encompasses our interconnectedness and need for reconciliation on so many levels? Our readings today point to some ways that may be helpful:

- Be alert to signs of hope. It is easy to be cynical in the current times, to be overwhelmed by the violence and fear that abounds. Seeking and seeing the many signs of hope in our world will not only sustain us, but will encourage us that in our small ways we all have the ability to make things better.
- We need to be courageous. Our stories are familiar, comfortable (even the uncomfortable, painful ones), they help define us. Looking to the stories of others may challenge and change our own stories and that might make us uncomfortable at best, fearful, angry and threatened at worst. We can draw courage from people of faith who

have been transformed by the presence of God – those in today’s bible passages, those from history, but also those we know in our current times and lives. Although they may have struggled in hearing and understanding different stories, ultimately the larger, more loving story they emerged with was worth the risk.

- To even entertain that there is a larger, more loving story for ourselves, for those we are in conflict with, for our broken world, I increasingly believe we need to be rooted in God’s love. That may sound backwards, given that the larger, more loving story helps us root ourselves ever deeper in God’s love for us and all, but what I mean is that we need to choose – to choose to act out of love in situations of conflict (inner, interpersonal or social), rather than react out of fear. When we react out of fear, we generally either flee from conflict or escalate it. When we act out of love – for ourselves and for others (even when we are afraid), we hold space and possibility for transformation. Transformation in our identity, transformation in our relationships and transformation to deeper community (locally and globally).

Ultimately, this larger, more loving story of God – of God with us – can bring peace and reconciliation wherever we are in our stories – in our fears, in the midst of violence, in the turbulence in our inner and outer contexts. In those circumstances, Jesus brings us a profound sense of peace and also a deep reconciliation within ourselves, with God and with one another.

In today’s world we need to experience the presence of Christ more than ever – in the context of economic crisis, environmental emergency, war, nuclear threat, the pandemic, widespread changes to our daily and communal life, including in our churches. The promise of God with us that we are reminded of every Christmas, becomes not only more important but foundational to our health and wellbeing.

As we await the Christ-child this Christmas, we already know the presence of Jesus – God with us. And in God’s presence, may despair turn to hope, may violence turn to healing, may fear turn to love. May we let the Prince of Peace meet us where we are and bring us His peace that passes all understanding ... and enable us to live a larger, more loving story. Enable us all to live a larger, more loving story towards a radical, transformed, God-coloured world.



## Prayers

### Gathering Prayer/Call to Worship

A love that never ceases,  
**A creativity that designed the universe,**

A hope that cannot be quenched,  
**A pursuit of reconciliation no matter the cost:**

These are the things that are of God,  
**Then let us worship God.**

*Beth Merrill Neel*

### Confession/Repentance

*This is not a traditional prayer of confession but is a prayer that well fits our themes and is one that recommits those praying it towards a change of behaviour*

Dear Lord,  
Help me to place my life – all of my life – before You as an offering.  
Let me be a living sacrifice,  
knowing that it's the most worshipful way I can live my life.  
I realise, though, that the tendency of living sacrifices is to crawl off the altar.  
Keep me there, Lord. On that altar. Keep me totally surrendered to You.  
May that sacrifice provide daily nourishment to the body of Christ,  
Giving a blessing in place of a curse,  
Forgiveness in place of revenge,  
Peace in place of strife.  
And may those small, sacrificial acts of worship change me from the inside out. Amen

*E. Peterson*

### Thanksgiving/Gratitude

Creator God,  
Eternal Christ,  
Reconciling Spirit  
We gave thanks for the myriad of ways in which You are present with us.  
In times of joy, wholeness, love and hope.  
As well as in times of fear, despair, longing, and brokenness.

We give thanks for what Your presence brings to our lives.

For the peace, grace, hope and reconciliation that can occur,  
when we act out of Your larger, more loving story  
and not out of the fears inherent in our current circumstances.

Thank You, Creator God,  
Eternal Christ,  
Reconciling Spirit  
for the transformative power of Emmanuel, God with Us.  
Amen

### **Prayers for Others/Intercession**

*O God with us*

We pray today for all in our congregation and community who are ill, who are afraid, who are in despair.

May the promises of Jesus, His peace and reconciliation – be experienced in every life.

Lord in Your mercy,  
**Hear our Prayer**

*O God with us*

We pray for all in leadership – in our Church, in our country and across the world.

May our leaders keep their eyes on Jesus and increase in compassion, wisdom and love.

May they use their power for the good of all, particularly those on the margins for whom Jesus had a special love

and for the wellbeing and restoration of this planet.

Lord in Your mercy,  
**Hear our Prayer**

*O God with us*

We pray for our world, so in need of the peace, healing and reconciliation that Your presence brings.

May we each have the courage to be people of hope this Christmas –  
may we walk into conflict, may we walk into fear, may we walk into despair ....

and bring Your spirit of peace, hope and love.

Lord in Your mercy,  
**Hear our Prayer**

### **Blessing/Closing Prayer**

May God bless you with a restless discomfort ... about easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may seek truth boldly and love deeply within your heart.

May God bless you with holy anger ... at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may tirelessly work for justice, freedom, and peace among all people.

May God bless you with the gift of tears ... to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, or the loss of all that they cherish, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and transform their pain into joy.

May God bless you with enough foolishness ... to believe that you really can make a difference in this world, so that we are able, with God's grace, to do what others claim cannot be done. Amen

*Version by Reverend René August*

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

### **Alternative Material**

The alternative worship material throughout Advent has been produced by the Joint Public Issues Team and offers a range of downloadable resources for the season, including liturgies, prayers, podcasts, images and videos.

Visit their website here: <https://jpit.uk/advent>

### **Musical suggestions**

Our [online music resource](#) is on the Church of Scotland website; you can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and download a selection of recordings for use in worship. You will also find playlists for this week and liturgical seasons and themes on the *Weekly Worship* and *Inspire Me* tabs.

You can find further musical suggestions for this week in a range of styles on the [Songs for Sunday blog](#) from Trinity College Glasgow.

Along with any particular Christmas music you may have selected for this 4th Sunday of Advent, the suggested items below may help incorporate some of the themes outlined above.

- CH4 62 – “Sing a new song to the Lord” – Psalm 98 (tune, Onslow Square)
- CH4 253 – “Inspired by love and anger”
- CH4 273 – “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”
- CH4 528 – “Make me a channel of your peace”
- CH4 721 – “We lay our broken world at your feet”
- “Be Still for the presence of the Lord” (David Evans)  
You Tube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZugvUQ4m90U>  
Encourage all whilst singing this song to think about a situation of conflict that they are concerned about (it may be one they are personally involved in or one they are aware of) – just think on the conflict and those involved and place them before God and ask that his presence makes a difference to the people and situation).
- “Amazing Grace (My chains are gone)”  
You Tube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3MZgXXUW08Q>
- A suggested playlist of songs for Advent can be found online here:  
<https://music.churchofscotland.org.uk/inspire-me/playlist/advent>

## Reflecting on our worship practice

Since the start of the pandemic in 2020, the way we worship has changed and we need to reflect on the changing or newly established patterns that emerged and continue to emerge as a result of the disruption.

We can facilitate worship for all by exploring imaginative approaches to inclusion, participation and our use of technologies in ways that suit our contexts. This is not an exhaustive list, but some things we could consider are:

- Framing various parts of the worship service in accessible language to help worshippers understand the character and purpose of each part. This is essential for creating worship for all (intergenerational worship) that reflects your community of faith.
- Holding spaces for reflection and encouraging prayer to be articulated in verbal and non-verbal ways, individually and in online breakout rooms.
- In online formats the effective use of the chat function and microphone settings encourages active participation in prayer, e.g. saying the Lord's Prayer together unmuted, in a moment of 'holy chaos'.
- While singing in our congregations is still restricted, we can worship corporately by using antiphonal psalm readings, creeds and participative prayers.
- Using music and the arts as part of the worship encourages the use of imagination in place of sung or spoken words.
- Use of silence, sensory and kinaesthetic practices allow for experience and expression beyond regular audio and visual mediums.

The following questions might help you develop a habit of reflecting on how we create and deliver content and its effectiveness and impact, and then applying what we learn to develop our practice.

- How inclusive was the worship?  
Could the worship delivery and content be described as worship for all/  
intergenerational? Was it sensitive to different "Spiritual Styles"?
- How was the balance between passive and active participation?
- How were people empowered to connect with or encounter God?  
What helped this? What hindered this?
- How cohesive was the worship?  
Did it function well as a whole?  
How effective was each of the individual elements in fulfilling its purpose?
- How balanced was the worship?  
What themes/topics/doctrines/areas of Christian life were included?
- How did the worship connect with your context/contemporary issues?  
Was it relevant in the everyday lives of those attending and in the wider parish/  
community?  
How well did the worship connect with local and national issues?  
How well did the worship connect with world events/issues?

- What have I learned that can help me next time I plan and deliver worship?

## Useful links

Up to date information for churches around Covid-19 can be found [here](#)

You can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and download a selection of recordings for use in worship [here](#)

You can find an introduction to spiritual styles online [here](#)

You are free to download, project, print and circulate multiple copies of any of this material for use in worship services, bible studies, parish magazines, etc., but reproduction for commercial purposes is not permitted.

Please note that the views expressed in these materials are those of the individual writer and not necessarily the official view of the Church of Scotland, which can be laid down only by the General Assembly.