

Third Sunday of Advent – Year A

Third Sunday of Advent – 11 December 2022

The Faith Nurture Forum would like to thank members of the Church of Scotland's Disability Inclusion Working Group for their thoughts on the third 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.

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Introduction

This week's worship material has been approached from the perspective of the Church of Scotland Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) group. It was prepared by members of the EDI's Disability Inclusion Working Group, with a focus on the Church's disability concerns.

What does it mean to be profoundly disabled, beautiful, and fully in God's image, without having to change anything? That is the question we would like people to reflect on. Issues around disability can be framed negatively as things that we want to get rid of, to heal, or to avoid. What is often overlooked is the fact that in the Bible, God uses people with disabilities at pivotal points in God's plan of redemption. Moses had a stutter (Exodus 4) and tried to use that as an excuse not to do what God wanted him to do. God responded to Moses's reluctance not by healing him of his stutter, but by telling him to do what he was told!

The apostle Paul talks about the thorn in his flesh. We don't know what that was. Some think it was back problems, others think it was vision problems following his blinding on the road to Damascus. Others think it might have been someone in his congregation! Whatever it was, Paul asked for healing. God answered, but perhaps not in the way that Paul wanted. Presumably, Paul wasn't lacking in faith – quite the opposite, his faith was transformed by God's not doing what Paul asked. He discovered that God comes to us in weakness and vulnerability and that what we might consider to be weakness was strength in the eyes of God.

So it seems that having a disability does not stop you from having a calling and a vocation to serve Jesus just as you are. Perhaps this is why Paul describes the body of Christ, not as a place where everyone looks the same, thinks the same and behaves in the same manner, but rather, what marks the body of Christ is diversity. We can't all be heads or feet, or arms or legs. We are all different. It is only when we come together in all our difference and diversity that we can see, feel and touch the body of Jesus. When it comes to thinking about disability, we are not called to ask the question: How can we care for 'these people'?, instead, the important question is: How can we enable all of God's people, including those who live with disabilities, to find and fulfil their vocation and calling? As we worship together let us contemplate the implications of this for all of us as we strive to be the body of Christ and to serve Jesus faithfully, together.

When looking at the lectionary passages, we have included some background information as well as some personal reflections. Biblical commentaries, such as Africa Bible Commentary,

have come in handy, as well as different versions of the Bible in articulating disability-sensitive readings for this Sunday's worship.

Isaiah 35:1-10

As a Sunday focused on disability, it is tempting to concentrate on verses 3, 5-6, where Isaiah categorically addresses the weak hands, feeble knees, eyes of the blind, ears of the deaf, the lame and the tongue of the speechless. We may not understand the emphasis in naming different types of disabilities or their greater implications, but we can agree on the all-inclusive healing emphasis that Isaiah sets out before God's people.

This chapter stands out as a breath of fresh air following the creational and environmental devastation in Chapter 34, and the threats of war and conflict in Chapter 36. It is a clear depiction of a swift movement from despair to hope. Instead of misery and pain, the prophet brings encouragement and affirmation of God's sovereignty in the lives of God's people (vv1-2). Instead of destruction and death, the prophet proclaims God's healing of the whole earth – humans and nature (vv3-7). The prophet stays true to the theme of his book, with a focus on “the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God” (v2b), as the One who brings salvation to the people in the midst of conflicts and godlessness (v10).

In these beautiful poetic images, Isaiah invites us to imagine a world where God's people will come “with singing; they shall obtain joy and gladness and sorrow and sighing shall flee away” (v10). It is possible that Isaiah took time to name the variety of God's creation to demonstrate that true everlasting joy must include all persons, with and without disabilities. It does not deny the reality of disabilities or imagine these as spiritual disabilities but rather, it is an acknowledgement that disabilities exist and that they can cause fear. Nevertheless, the prophet also points us to the fact that healing for disabilities goes beyond the physical to that which enables human dignity, inclusion and mutual participation.

In this chapter, Isaiah challenges us to work alongside those who, due to differing conditions, do things rather differently. As we wait for God's kingdom come and the perfection of all things, we can recognise the fulfilment of Isaiah's words in Jesus Christ (Isaiah 53). The prophet calls us, as partners with Christ, to act towards the removal of all human barriers that deny disabled people the joy and gladness that God in Christ promises to all. Perhaps he uses the metaphors of blindness and deafness to highlight the power of God to remove physical barriers from the disabled. Perhaps it could be the building of a “highway [...] for God's people” (v8) for easy passage.

Psalm 146:5-10

This passage follows characteristically the Psalmist's pattern of infusing hope in narratives of lament – whether of grief, injustice, or sickness. It aligns well with the hope-filled passage of Isaiah 53, where the Prophet imagines a reality of everlasting joy divinely replacing that of conflict and devastation. Here the Psalmist reiterates one of its central themes, that those who seek help in God, whose “hope is in the Lord their God” (v5), will be happy or, put differently, will be blessed. For the Psalmist, it is God who blesses all who look to God. God is not absent, but “keeps faith for ever”(v6) demonstrating that God is actively present in human history to do good to the oppressed and to those vulnerable to injustice.

The Psalmist is careful to identify the one willing and capable of helping and saving: in verse 6, God is described as the one “who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them.” According to the Psalmist, all expectations find fulfilment in the Lord. The way that they describe what God does is like Jesus' description of the messianic ministry in Matthew 11:4-5 and in some ways by Isaiah in chapter 35:4-6. God is concerned about the oppressed, the hungry, the prisoner, the blind, those whose heads are bowed down, the stranger, the orphan, and the widow. These are all representatives of vulnerable categories and reflect many of the marginalised groups in our society today. The challenge for us is how we might share in God's concern and work to dismantle the structures and barriers that dehumanise and exclude those on the margins, especially disabled people.

While God watches over the oppressed, “the way of the wicked he brings to ruin” (v9), which is indicative of action towards evil and injustice. The question, perhaps, is to examine the extent to which disabled people, and minoritized people are happy in our churches. To what extent would they say that they are blessed and that actions are taken to challenge everything that impinges on their dignity as persons created in God's image and loved by God? The confidence with which the Psalmist leaves us is that the “Lord will reign for ever [...] for all generations” (v10). This God, who reigns for all time, has given us an example to accompany those who must cope with various types of impairment, disability, and injustice.

James 5:7-10

As we read this passage and note James' call to patience, we are reminded that this is Advent, when Christians wait for Christmas and patience can be a difficult virtue to practise at this time. In many churches, the Advent candles are being lit and unconsciously we count the weeks (and now days) to Christmas. For whether we celebrate elaborately or not, the Christmas spirit will be strong wherever we go, and patience is only a virtue when it strengthens our hearts for good works.

James, however, was not calling his audience to wait patiently for the birth of Christ; it was instead, about the coming of the Lord (v7). James was writing to Jewish Christians who were struggling with many temptations and whom James feared were likely to abandon faith. He wanted them to know that it was in being patient and conscious of the imminent return of the Lord that their faith would be strengthened. He likened the length of waiting to the unpredictable wait of the farmer who “waits for the precious crop from the earth ...” (v7b). The farmer is amply rewarded with a harvest after a long wait; so believers who serve the Lord must wait for the Lord’s return. James goes on to equate patience and suffering as things that belong to the faith or as things that the prophets experienced.

This passage has been used to promote the idea that anyone who loves God may have to face suffering; and that it is only in suffering, like Jesus did, that one may know God better or have a deeper understanding of God’s love and mercy. More specifically, disabled people have been told that disability is a call to suffer in the same vein that Christ suffered. The implication is that disabled people must be patient, without grumbling, for their lack is part of God’s plan for them. Often there is a reference to John 9:3, where Jesus spoke of the blind man, that “he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” When churches interpret biblical verses in this way, they give themselves excuses for the marginalisation and exclusion of disabled people.

Suffering is not the prerogative for disabled people or for any people under any circumstances. Suffering and patience are not necessarily examples of good Christian virtues. It would be helpful to see in this passage a desire for James to point believers to Jesus as their strength and succour in difficulties, just as the other passages today have done. In Jesus, all expectations find fulfilment and as Christians, we are encouraged to wait for God’s response as our Lord and Saviour.

[Matthew 11:2-11](#)

This passage describes the encounter between Jesus and the disciples of John the Baptist. In summary, it is about doubt and identity arising between two people who were friends and family. After an elaborate announcement of the coming of Jesus in Matthew 3, John the Baptist introduced Jesus as the “one who is more powerful than I [...] I am not worthy to carry his sandals.” Jesus was the one “with the winnowing-fork [...] to clear his threshing floor [...] gather the wheat into the granary [...] and the chaff [...] burn with unquenchable fire” (Matt 3:11-12). Not long after that public proclamation, John the Baptist is arrested, and Jesus seemingly does nothing (Matt 4:12).

In this passage, we are told that news of Jesus's flourishing ministry reaches John in prison. Between chapters 4 and 10, we read details of Jesus's ministry marked by the calling of the first disciples, teaching, healing, acceptance, preaching the good news, creating new community, engaging in acts of hospitality and compassion. As John the Baptist waits in prison, he begins to ponder his fate, to examine his life and wonder if he was right about Jesus. He boldly sends his disciples to ask Jesus, "are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" (Matt 11:3)

Jesus is not upset or dismissive, but instead points John's messengers to the miracles that had been performed: "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them" (vv4-5). In effect, Jesus reminds the messengers and the crowd, that Jesus is indeed the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecies of the Messiah who responds to the news of the people (Isaiah 35).

Very few Christians would say that they have never had doubts, about life or about their faith. For disabled people, whose identities are often debated due to disability, and where the Church can be anything but affirming, doubts abound. Perhaps, when doubts come, Jesus encourages us, as with the disciples of John the Baptist, to revisit who Jesus is and what He represents for us as believers. We may never understand why Jesus takes the stance of silence, first when John is arrested (Matt 4:12) and when he is beheaded (Matt 14:12-13). What we see is Jesus's affirmation of the role that John the Baptist played in the fulfilment of the messianic ministry (vv9-11).

This passage raises the questions of how might we deal with doubts, especially when it concerns our faith? More so, how might the Church acknowledge the place of all persons, especially those disabled by structural inequalities and injustices?

Sermon ideas

In arriving at our sermon ideas, we have tried to see how the passages connect to one another and their relevance to the theme of disability. Helpful questions leading to sermon ideas are: What are the highlights of the lectionary passages? How do they relate to the theme or current events? What two passages (Old Testament and New Testament) should be used? What should be the main thrust or guiding thought for the sermon or reflection? Today, the central theme is disability inclusion within the context of Advent. The Season carries with it the themes of justice and healing. Our sermon ideas for today are the centrality of God in human affairs, the question of identity and the encouragement for patience in waiting.

The centrality of God

The centrality of God, working for the good of all and bringing healing to all categories of persons is evident throughout the passages. In all of them, healing involves much more than physical changes to emphasise the holistic nature of God's presence. Isaiah 35:4 speaks of God as the one who has come to save. God pays attention to the disabled, meeting them at the point of their needs and granting everlasting joy to God's people. In Matthew 11, Jesus enumerates the various ways His ministry impacts on the community, setting an example of godly service – inclusion and mutual care of those on the margins. Psalm 146:10 concludes with the proclamation of the God who reigns forever, through all generations. No aspect of life, no geographical region, no condition of humankind is removed from God's sight.

Identity

Another emerging theme is that of identity. In Matthew 11:3-6, Jesus' identity comes into question: is Jesus really the Messiah or is another still to be expected? How does this question make Jesus feel and how does He respond to John's disciples, who brought this question? It is instructive that Jesus' response was not about who He is, but rather about what He was doing – restoring health and the preaching the good news. Nevertheless, in verses 7-11, Jesus speaks about John's identity. Compare this to how disabled people are mentioned or identified in Matthew 11:5, Isaiah 35:5-6 and Psalms 146:8. How are disabled people identified today and what is most appropriate? How do we reflect that we are all created in God's image – with or without disability?

Waiting

James 5:7-10 carries the theme of waiting most pragmatically of all the passages. It is in James that we hear the instruction to be patient or to bear afflictions without murmuring, to cease from grumbling and to accept suffering as an experience of discipleship. The believer is encouraged to wait "until the coming of the Lord" and to learn the act of patience and suffering from the prophets. Impatience, James implies, could lead to judgement. Was John the Baptist impatient and did he lack the discipline of waiting when he sent his disciples to Jesus in Matthew 11:3? When Isaiah (35:4) says that God "will come and save you," was he indirectly asking the people to wait? What does 'waiting' mean for disabled people who are looking for the Church of inclusion and participation?

Prayers

As part of the call to worship, welcome people and invite them to use the space in the church in a way that makes them comfortable. The prayers for this Sunday have been written by disabled people. The prayers (opening, confession, supplication, intercession and closing) are adapted from prayers written by Lynda Herbert, who is a Church of England

Reader, a Through the Roof volunteer and a wheelchair user, and a prayer written by eye movement, using an alphabet board, by 16-year-old Jonathan Bryan.*

**[Through the Roof](#) is a registered charity that exists to transform lives through Jesus with disabled people.*

Call to worship

We come together in this place.

To be together and to claim that we are God's people.

We look to ourselves and to each other

To express the love of God as a sign of hope for the world.

We abandon ourselves

To the working of the Holy Spirit, trusting in God's mercy.

Gather us, O God

And we will know Your life that makes us one.

Gather us, O God

And we shall celebrate our variety and our uniqueness.

Gather us, O God

And we will give You the pain of our brokenness.

Gather us, O God

And we will share the gifts of Your Spirit.

Trinity of love, bind us as one.

That our brokenness be healed by You,

that our fear be held by You,

that our gifts be used by You,

that our lives be offered to You,

so may the world believe.

Amen

Opening Prayer

Father, we come before You in prayer,
praising You, worshipping You, and thanking You

for the life-changing, transforming love we have found in You.

A love that reaches out, into our lives,
a love we find in friendships, community and worship,
reassuring, comforting and guiding us.

Today we're giving thanks for all those who reach out,
in support and friendship,
enriching the lives of disabled people.
Enabling and welcoming all into worship,
into the presence of the Saviour Himself.
Going Through the Roof to bring us to Jesus.

And so,

May we reach out in fellowship

Prayer of confession and supplication

Merciful God, we come confessing our sins and shortcomings.
Though we try to put the past behind us,
all too often we are haunted by mistakes.

Though we try to make amends for the wrongs we have done,
we find it hard to escape a sense of guilt.
Often, we ask You for forgiveness,
but find it hard to forgive those who treat us badly.
Remind us that You are always ready to offer free and total forgiveness.

Forgive us for the times we have marred Your image within us.
We are sorry for when we have made assumptions
about people different from ourselves,
and excluded those who Jesus went out of His way to include.
Help us to accept Your forgiveness and to forgive others.

Receive, then, our thanks and lead us forward,
granting us grace to worship You aright,
in the name of Jesus Christ.

Amen

Prayer of intercession

Precious Father, there are many people
who would love to come into Your presence,
but struggle to find a place of worship,
community and teaching,
that meets their needs.

Help us to work this out,
to find new ways of welcome, of acceptance.

Teach us Your ways Lord
and help us to be those friends
who go *Through the Roof* to bring people to Jesus.

And so,

May we reach out in fellowship

Father, we pray now for our worshipping community.
Help us to be welcoming, accessible and considerate,
to care for all, leaving no-one out,
so that together we may praise Your Holy Name
knowing that You are with us.

May we find joy in Your presence,
and help us to be those friends,
who go *Through the Roof*
to bring people to Jesus.

And so,

May we reach out in fellowship

In our daily lives Father, we ask for Your peace and blessing
to be with us, our families, friends, work colleagues
and people we meet in passing.

May we feel Your presence with us, guiding us, leading us,
helping us through the challenges and difficulties we face in life.

We pray that Your healing hands may reach out

and comfort us when we are sick,
and may You tenderly hold those who need our prayers.

We ask for Your blessing, Your comfort
for those who are distressed, or anxious,
and peace for those who mourn the loss of loved ones.

For You are the God of love, and Your mercy knows no limits.
Help us to be merciful to one another
and to be those friends
who go *Through the Roof* to bring people to Jesus.

And so,

May we reach out in fellowship

Father Your love knows no limits.
May we too be limitless,
going above and beyond,
to welcome and value all people.

Amen

Closing Prayer

Loving heavenly Father

Thank You for the beautiful diversity of people You have created,
and that we are all fearfully and wonderfully made.

We praise You for the variety of gifts You have given to Your people.

Lord of life and love

Hear our prayer

Help us to reach out to those on the margins.

Enlarge our vision to value and actively include everyone who is differently abled.

Lord of life and love

Hear our prayer

We pray for people who feel disabled by society's assumptions
and who are prevented from reaching their full potential.

Lord of life and love

Hear our prayer

Thank You for the organisations working hard to unroof the lives of people with disabilities.
May Your Church lead the way in demonstrating life in all its fullness.

Amen

Blessing/Benediction

(this could be said and signed together)

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
be with us, now and forever more,
Amen

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.

- Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" could be played as people come into the church. This is a tune Beethoven never heard himself since he was profoundly deaf when he wrote it.

- CH4 160 – “Praise, my soul, the King of heaven” – This song written by Henry Francis Lyte who “was known as a man frail in body but strong in faith and spirit.” Suffering from chronic asthma and tuberculosis, he retired from his parish in September 1847 aged 54 and died a few months later.
- CH4 198 – “Let us build a house” – This hymn by Martyn Haugen (b.1950) is popular for its strong theme of inclusiveness and loved by many disabled people.
- CH4 512 – “To God be the glory” – Both this and CH4 561 were written by Frances (Fanny) Jane Crosby, who was probably the most prolific hymn writer ever (estimated total around 8,000). At only six weeks old she lost her sight because of a doctor’s error. But this remarkable woman later on said: “I have believed that the good Lord, in his infinite mercy, has, through my blindness, consecrated me to the work that I am permitted to do.”
- CH4 561 – “Blessed assurance”
- A suggested playlist of songs for Christmas can be found online here: <https://music.churchofscotland.org.uk/inspire-me/playlist/advent>
- Christmas songs known to the congregation can also be included as part of the Advent season liturgy

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](#)

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