

Second Sunday of Advent – Year C

Sunday 8 December 2024

The Faith Action Programme would like to thank Ruth Harvey, Leader of the Iona Community, for her thoughts on the second 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.

An archive of resources for daily worship can be found on the Sanctuary First website: <https://www.sanctuaryfirst.org.uk/daily-worship>

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

The four Sundays in Advent focus in turn on the virtues of hope, peace, joy and love. On this second Sunday, we reflect on peace.

We live in a war-weary world. Thousands suffer daily, directly or indirectly, from the consequences of human violence. Peace may not be only the absence of war. But the impact of war shatters the peace of millions of God's creatures. Each casualty of war or conflict is a unique, beloved child of God. Here are some startling statistics:

Since 1989, by far the biggest number of deaths through war and conflict per capita have been in Africa (307/100,000) and the Middle East (274/100,000). Turn to your news source of choice as you prepare for this Sunday's worship, and you can be sure that amidst the tinsel and Christmas recipes, there will still be news of world conflict in the Middle East, in Sudan, in Ukraine, in Yemen. Since 1800, 37 million combatants have died while fighting in war. If this figure now includes civilians, and those who have died as a result of famine precipitated by war, the figure rises to 110 million people in the 20th century alone (source: <https://ourworldindata.org/>).

In this season of Advent we anticipate the arrival of the one who is Prince of Peace. What did this prospect mean for first-century folk? What does it mean for us today?

It means reading the signs of the times (and the news feeds) to be alert to the world at war. It means using our God-given gifts to understand the dynamics that disrupt peace. And it means joining in solidarity with others to pray for and to build communities of hope, peace and reconciliation.

John Paul Lederach remains a deep source of inspiration for me as I try to read the signs of the times through the lens of scripture, and as I read scripture through the signs of the times. His book, ['Reconcile: conflict transformation for ordinary Christians'](#) offers eight Bible studies looking at war, peace, conflict and reconciliation through the lens of scripture. Lederach is a touchstone for me as a deep thinker who keeps my faith grounded in the ebb and flow of daily life. Who are the touchstone thinkers in your life? Another for me is the late, great Kate McIlhagga, whose prayers and meditations continue to resonate for me each time I prepare worship. Her collection ['The Green Heart of the Snowdrop'](#) is available [through Wild Goose Publications](#).

Typically I will read the lectionary passages twice or three times, noticing, and marking connections between them. Then I'll move my body – usually a walk/run/swim (other

activities are available!) – with the passages in mind. I’m always surprised and delighted by the experience of physical exercise making sense of intellectual complexity. There’s something here for me about the interplay between the right side and the left side of my brain. Next I’ll turn to the writings of others – commentaries such as www.spiritualityofconflict.com or deep thinkers such as Lederach above, to throw light on the passages. I also occasionally delve into such tomes as [‘Peake’s Commentary on the Bible’](#), which is full of insightful wisdom.

I’m conscious that I bring my whole self to worship preparation. For me this means there will be familiar themes that I brush up against each time I prepare. I will typically notice threads of conflict and reconciliation in scripture, given my experience as a faith-based mediator with [Place for Hope](#). And I realise increasingly that I draw on the wisdom of the [Quaker](#) approach that has become dear and meaningful to me on my Christian journey over many years.

What are the typical threads that you bring from your wisdom and experience to the art of worship leadership?

[Baruch 5:1-9](#)

The return of scattered Israel

The six chapters of the book of Baruch are from the Septuagint, the deuterocanonical biblical tradition used mostly in Catholic and Orthodox traditions (referred to as the biblical apocrypha in many protestant traditions). Scholarship about why this book was not included in the Hebrew Bible is wide-ranging. The date of its writing and the authorship have also been the subject of academic discussion, with consensus gathering that it was most probably scribed in the time between 200 and 100 BCE, and most probably written by the same authors as those who wrote Jeremiah and Lamentations.

Reading all six chapters reveals a tender rhythm familiar in life and in worship – a movement from despair to hope. The first movement (chapters 1-2:10), after some historical context, focusses on confession – of a recognition that we the people of God have fallen short of God’s plans and hopes for us. The second movement turns to the praise of wisdom. And the third, in which chapter 5 sits, is usually called ‘Baruch’s Poem of Consolation’. Having recounted the woes of a nation, then placed them in the context of God’s wisdom and omnipotent knowledge, we are left with a poem of consolation. You could say that chapter 5 is a large sigh. An articulation of this insight: “therefore.... in the face of what we now know about our plight, and in the knowledge of the love within which

we are held, let us step away from the robes of sorrow and affliction and rather focus on the glory, the splendour, the fragrance, the light of the love of God.”

What is the self-awareness that we as God’s people now have? What is the sorrow and affliction that we are being invited to step away from? What is the splendour, glory, fragrance and love that we are now being invited to focus on?

[Luke 1:68-79](#)

God’s tender compassion

There’s a beautiful symmetry here between these words of Zechariah’s song, or Benedictus, and the song, or Magnificat of Mary in verses 46-55. The whole of Luke’s first chapter is devoted to birth announcements, songs and ‘exuberant stories’ telling of the coming not only of Jesus of Nazareth, but of his second cousin John also. In his commentary of the Book of Luke, [‘The Widening Road – from Bethlehem to Emmaus’](#), Church of Scotland Minister Leith Fisher explores these parallels in detail. He illustrates clearly that while Luke wants to ‘show on the one hand that the event of Jesus of Nazareth is firmly rooted in the promises of God to Israel’ (see notes on Baruch above) ‘on the other hand, [he wants to show] that the realising of these promises in Jesus will burst the old bounds in a fresh blooming of the wonder of God’s grace.’ (Fisher, page 7).

I wonder if this parallel reading of the texts is the key for this second Sunday in Advent. That the promise of peace, rooted in God’s promise of consolation to God’s people throughout all time (Baruch), will actually come to fruition, will ‘bloom’, only when the old bounds of belief are burst open in the person of Jesus of Nazareth?

John had a powerful role to play in this bursting forth, and here we ‘sing’ the blessing of John’s father, Zechariah, as he recognises the enormity of what is to come.

Zechariah and his people have been living in dark times – and so the final words of this passage would have a special significance, foreshadowing the light that will illuminate the darkness that has been all-consuming. ‘The picture of the dawning of the new day is striking. We watch more sunsets than sunrises. How powerfully the sunrise can speak to us of God’s unfailing purposes, and the inexhaustible hope God offers.’ (Fisher, page 16).

[Philippians 1:3-11](#)

A harvest of righteousness

Paul's letter to the people of Philippi is considered to be one of the most intimate and joyful of his letters. Yet it is set in the context of Paul's imprisonment, in the context of the messenger, Epaphroditus, having fallen ill while the message was being delivered, and in the context of political and economic upheaval experienced by the Philippians.

The journey from desolation to consolation of the people of Israel, as outlined in the passage from Baruch; the message of overwhelming joy displayed by Zechariah in the face of the barrenness that he and his wife had faced for decades; and the message in Luke 3 that out of the desert, the most peripheral and barren of places, will spring not only new life but a revolutionary force for good, for peace and justice, all point to a clear message on this second Sunday in Advent: in the face of all that is wrong, even in the face of multiple wars and planetary desolation, even when all seems lost – there is hope. And this hope comes in the form of Jesus of Nazareth – the one to whom each of us is pointing.

[Luke 3:1-6](#)

Prepare the Way of the Lord

For a fairly comprehensive and fascinating introduction to the Gospel of Luke, and bearing in mind Leith Fisher's fabulous commentary (above), you don't need to look much further than Pádraig Ó Tuama's introduction to this passage on the Spirituality of Conflict website:

“For the purposes of clarity about how comfortable Luke's gospel is in detailing political conflict, here follows some political history. Obviously these are broad brushstrokes. A quick warning – you might want a pot of fortifying tea (or whatever your brew of choice is); you'll need it...” and he goes on to outline some of that political history. Follow the link for the full comment: <https://www.spiritualityofconflict.com/readings/339/second-sunday-of-advent>

Here are some additional notes about this text:

- Chapter 3 may have been the beginning of the Gospel, as the collection of ‘the great and the good’ named in verses 1 and 2 are given by way of authenticating the story.
- In introducing this list, Luke locates the coming of John and of Jesus firmly on the stage of human history.

- Luke also emphasises that ‘from the wilderness, the desert, the periphery, comes a force to challenge the central powers.’ (Fisher, page 36)
- “The word came to John” – ‘before we speak, we listen, see, hear. That’s always the way with any prophet or preacher worth listening to. They first of all have listened to discern what God is saying and doing in their lives, the lives of others, and the life of their society.’ (Fisher, page 36)

Sermon ideas

Think of your beginning, middle and end – what is the arc of your sermon? Here’s one possible flow to consider:

- **Beginning:** Peace is elusive – and can seem like a hollow promise in the context of so much war. But if peace is not the absence of war, but is, according to Spinoza, ‘a virtue, a state of mind, a disposition for benevolence, confidence, justice’, how then, might we live in peace in this time of Advent? Illustrate with stories of people or projects you know who point to this kind of peace. I can think of the Network of Christian Peace Organisations [profiled here](#), or the [Corrymeela Community](#) as two examples.
- **Middle:** Allow people time to consider the sorrow and lament alluded to in Baruch. Or the barrenness described in the song of Zechariah. So often in times of conflict (however small or large) we can be tempted to rush to solution, to resurrection perhaps, before truly experiencing or understanding the impact of living in the despair, or the not knowing – the Holy Saturday – of loss and grief. Be aware of the tenderness of this process – that opening up the enormity of despair can be overwhelming for some. So lean on your community, take the opportunity, as Paul did with the people of Philippi, to focus on the intimacy, the solidarity, the collective love we have for one another, even in the midst of difficult times.
- **End:** What message do you want to leave ringing in the ears and the hearts of the congregation? Luke points us to new horizons. John points us to the one who is to come. Where are the stories of hope from within the life of your congregation, your community, your nation that point to new horizons, to the hope and peace that is to come?

Questions you might like to consider as you prepare:

- At this time of Advent, as we prepare for the ‘coming’ of our Lord, what does ‘peace’ mean to you?

- If peace is not the absence of war, then what is peace? Reflect on the quote from Spinoza above.
- Consider the [Quaker Testimony to Peace](#) and the timeline shared there. What might a timeline of peace action look like for your local or national church?
- Are you someone who watches more sunrises than sunsets? What might it be like to meditate on the sun rising as a sign of hope for the world?
- Paul writes an intimate letter to the people of Philippi, even in the midst of despair. Consider the communities to which you belong. Where are the threads of hope and delight and joy, even when things are tough?
- Who are the songwriters in your midst, like Zechariah or Mary, who are perhaps poetically capturing the 'signs of the times'. Can you identify them? Invite them to sing their song for your community.

Prayers

Over these last 30 years I have worshipped increasingly in my local Quaker Meeting. This means that I grow more and more at ease with silence in worship. Silences in our Meeting can extend to the full 60 minutes. These are powerful times of collective, prayerful reflection. There is a phenomenon that we call 'gathered worship' when there is a sense – perhaps a tingle in the back of the neck, or a flicker across closed eyelids – that the prayers being offered come from a common source of peace, love, goodwill. These are moments to cherish.

As a Presbyterian Quaker, I do also, however, love song and sermon, poem and spoken prayer. And so here, whichever, or however many words you use in prayer, consider the power of silence when our collective prayers are gathered up in the great mystery of faith. When you offer 'a time of silence' in worship, consider offering at least 60 seconds (apparently a typical 'time of silence' in worship is around 3 or 4 seconds...)

Gathering/Call to worship

This can be a short acclamation of our intent and desire to worship God.

Breathe on us, breath of God.
Inspire our minds and our hearts today.
Enliven our thoughts and our senses we pray.

May we be
open to Your Word;
alert to Your world;
awake to Your gift
coming in Jesus Christ, Prince of Peace.
Amen

Confession/Repentance

As we gather before God we acknowledge our turning away from God: from all that is good, that is loving, that is true. In this time of Advent, let us focus in particular on the times we turn away from peace, accepting also God's unconditional forgiveness of us.

God of peace,
we come before You tired and weary.
Worn out from a hard week of tasks; weary from a short night of rest,
fragile as dew on a blade of grass.
Yet You set before us a fresh morning,
a window of opportunity, an offer of a new start.
For this we praise You.

God of peace,
we come before You doubting and confused,
senses dulled by relentless worry, minds restless with niggles and cares,
fragile as frost on a winter's morning.
Yet You set before us an anchor of openness,
the wide arms of questions and acceptance
that know nothing of right or wrong.
For this we praise You.

God of peace,
we come before You often judging,
living on the breath of assumptions,
fragile as a half-heard whisper.
Yet You draw us in to Your unconditional love,
embracing us in our diversity and uniqueness.
For this we praise You.

God of peace,
forgive us our fickleness,

release us from our inner critic,
lead us gently by Your living, constant flame
to the glory of Your love and peace in which we are
welcomed, renewed, made whole.
This we ask in the name of Jesus, Prince of Peace, Amen.

Thanksgiving/Gratitude

This prayer is adapted from one written to John Harvey and first published in 'Candles and Conifers: resources for All Saints and Advent.' Ruth Burgess, Wild Goose Publications, 2005.

At this time of Advent,
fire our imaginations
with the sweep of Your salvation.
Catch us up
in the cause of Your kingdom,
already breaking through into this world
yet waiting for its final fulfilment
when Christ shall come again.
And let Your Spirit,
wild as the wind,
gentle as the dove,
move within us and among us,
to enliven our worship
and strengthen our faith,
sending us out
with anticipation and joy.
Amen.

Prayers for others/intercession

In Iona Abbey we have space, in the South Aisle Chapel, where our concerns for the world are shared. Here we offer resources, inspiration, prayers, and space for quiet meditation on themes of justice and peace including LGBTQ+ concerns, concerns for peace and reconciliation in the world, concerns for refugees and all who flee war or persecution, and more. You may have a similar space in your place of worship. You may, during Advent, like to invite worshippers to write their concerns for others, and for the world, on a small slip of paper. These could become the basis of your prayers for peace during this time.

“Peace be within you” the Psalmist says,
and so we pray, loving God, for peace in our hearts.
We name before You now prayers for ourselves, and for individuals known to us
who are anxious, ill, alone, afraid or hurting ...

“Peace be within you” the Psalmist says,
and so we pray, Prince of Peace, for peace in our communities.
In the midst of political strife, social upheaval,
economic stress and neighbourhood arguments.
We name before you now those known to us
in our local communities who are hurting ...

“Peace be within you” the Psalmist says,
and so we pray, Spirit of love, for peace in our world.
In the midst of war, angry words, broken homes we pray for all who live in fear.
We name before You now situations of war or aggression ...

We pray for peace within the governments and institutions of our world –
may all decision-makers know the art of compassionate conversation.
We pray for calmness and wisdom in our world leaders –
may they know the delight of diversity when opinions differ.
We name before You now leaders and
institutions in our world nurturing or needing peace ...

God of love, Prince of Peace, Holy Spirit –
we ask all these prayers in Your name,
and for the sake of our world, Your Creation.
Amen.

Blessing/Closing Prayer

Now go in peace;
may this day unfold as it should;
may you find solace in scripture and spirit;
and may your journey through Advent
be filled with the hope and promise of God
for the sake of the world.

Musical suggestions

God Welcomes All (GWA) is the new supplement to Church Hymnary Fourth Edition. This exciting new collection features over 200 hymns and songs in a wide range of styles by writers from Scotland and around the world.

The full music version is now available; and the words-only book, digital resources including the expansion of the existing Church of Scotland music website, will be published in due course, with streaming functions and further information on each song; backing tracks; and lyric videos. *God Welcomes All* is available to order from

<https://chbookshop.hymnsam.co.uk/books/9781786225573/god-welcomes-all>

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.

- GWA 84 – “Peace be with you” – a simple call and response blessing from Benin
- GWA 86 – “May you find Peace” – a joyful easy to learn blessing
- GWA 90 – “We are a people of hope” – a song with a verse for every Sunday in Advent
- GWA 91 – “Centuries of waiting before a Christmas Day” – an intergenerational song for Advent
- GWA 92 – “Maranatha” – a beautiful song to be sung meditatively perhaps between sections in a prayer
- CH4 274 – “Comfort, comfort now my people” – a paraphrase of the wonderful prophecy from Isaiah
- CH4 275 – “Come now, O Prince of Peace” – a hymn from Korea, a country divided by war, making these words all the more poignant as we pray for peace and await the birth of Christ. Verse one, sung in harmony, unaccompanied, can offer a powerful

invitation to all into the worship of the Prince of Peace.

- CH4 277 – “Hark, the glad sound! ” – a powerful Scottish paraphrase of Luke 4
- CH4 284 – “Hope is a candle” – a great candle-lighting song for Advent, sung to a Scottish folk tune; you could add one verse each week throughout Advent. Particularly relevant for the first Sunday of Advent, with the focus on hope. You might like to sing verse 1 through two times on this first Sunday
- CH4 786 – “May the God of peace go with us” – an alternative, gentle ending set to a well-known tune. Could be sung 3 times
- CH4 789 – “Now go in Peace” – a wonderful upbeat song to conclude worship on the 2nd Sunday of Advent, as we leave one another with the peace of Christ. Could be sung first by a small group, then by all together
- A suggested [playlist of songs from CH4 throughout Advent](#) can be found on the Church of Scotland website.

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’.

- If singing in our congregations is 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

God Welcomes All can be ordered from [Hymns Ancient & Modern](#)

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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