

SMALL GROUP ADVENT REFLECTIONS (Year C)

*This is a discipline for use in relation to the Sundays of Advent, a method of aural reflection on a reading appointed for the coming Sunday. It follows a pattern similar to those found in *Becoming the Story We Tell* and *Gospel-Based Discipleship*.*

Participants may sit in a circle or around a table, meet online in a platform such as Zoom, or hybrid setting. In this form of scripture reflection, it is desirable for the group to engage the reading aurally (rather than reading along); only the reader needs to have a copy of the text. The group thus requires a single copy of these procedural and commentary pages (for the leader or host) and a single copy of the readings (to be shared amongst those called upon to read aloud). The leader may need to encourage readers to speak slowly and audibly.

It is recommended that the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible be used for the first hearing of each of the readings. These readings are available at <http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu>. You may find it useful or desirable to use other translations for the second and third readings of the passage.

Opening:

The leader (or host) may begin the time of reflection with a brief introduction in these or similar words:

Advent is the season in which the church casts its gaze to the horizon to catch sight of God's future. Even during times of darkness, difficulty, or despair, Advent teaches us to "remember forward." It reassures us that we can allow our lives today to take the shape of God's tomorrow, living in the full confidence that God's promises will be fulfilled.

Along with the seasons of Christmas and the time between Epiphany and Lent, Advent emphasizes that Jesus Christ is the herald of God's Kingdom. To speak of our Lord in this way, however, is to recognize him as more than a preacher of the Kingdom. After all, the prophets and John the Baptist were also preachers of the Kingdom. To speak of our Lord as the herald of God's Kingdom is to claim that in Jesus the Kingdom is present. As the great missionary bishop Lesslie Newbigin once said, "In Christ we are no longer dealing only with the proclamation of the Kingdom; we are also dealing with the presence of the Kingdom." Jesus Christ proclaims and embodies God's kingdom.

While we often think of Advent as preparation for Christmas, the lectionary's narrative shape seems to suggest the arc of time between the First Sunday of Advent and the Sunday immediately prior to Lent, with its focus on the Transfiguration, finds its pivotal moment in The Baptism of the Lord, much like Easter serves as such in the narrative arc of the Lenten and Easter seasons.

The readings assigned for the Sundays of Advent are rooted in the above understandings. They also prompt us to a rigorous and sometimes uncomfortable examination of the degree to which our ultimate allegiance is aligned with God's promised Kingdom. Each passage, however, not only poses a challenge, but also offers hope for each of us, for the church, and for the world.

The leader may then continue with the following prayer:

Let us pray. *(allow a time of silence)*

Give us ears to hear, O God, and eyes to watch,
that we may know your presence in our midst
during this holy season of preparation and joy,
as we anticipate the coming of Jesus Christ.
We ask this in his name.

First Hearing:

- The leader may read aloud the commentary provided for the scripture reading. (*see below*)
- The leader then invites one person to read the passage aloud, after giving the following instruction to the group: *"Listen for any promises of God for the people that are either stated or implied."* The rest of the group simply listens.
- SILENCE
- The leader invites responses to the question, *"What promise of God for the world do you hear?"*

Second Hearing:

- The leader invites someone else to read the passage aloud a second time, after giving the following instruction: *"Listen for any yearning of Israel to which this promise responds. Listen for ways in which the promise offers hope to Israel."*
- SILENCE.
- The leader invites responses to the question, *"What human yearnings today does the promise you hear address? What word of hope does this promise offer to you, to the church, or to the world?"* The cross is passed around the circle until everyone has had a chance to respond.

Third Hearing:

- The leader invites someone else to read the passage aloud a third time, after giving the following instruction: *"As you listen to the passage one more time, think about what Israel might need to do in order to prepare for the fulfillment of the promise or promises we have noticed."*
- SILENCE.
- The leader invites responses to the question, *"What do you need to do in order to prepare yourself for the fulfillment of any promise you or this group has heard through this passage?"*

Open Discussion:

- The leader invites people to name and discuss the issues arising from hearing the gospel.
- The leader closes the discussion when the agreed time limit has been reached and initiates the prayers.

Closing Act of Prayer:

- The leader invites everyone to offer a prayer for the person on his or her right. The leader may suggest a form of prayer, such as, *“Strengthen N in your love, and prepare her/him/them for the coming of the Lord.”*
- The leader may close with the following prayer:

God of justice and peace,
from the heavens you rain down mercy and kindness,
that all on earth may stand in awe and wonder
before your marvelous deeds.
Raise our heads in expectation,
that we may yearn for the coming day of the Lord
and stand without blame before your Son, Jesus Christ,
who lives and reigns for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Commentary (Year C)

1st Sunday of Advent: Jeremiah 33.14-16

This passage from the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah speaks a word of hope. However, this hope is not rooted in some blind optimism; anyone at all familiar with the person of Jeremiah knows he does not view the world through rose-coloured glasses.

In its scriptural context, Jeremiah voices the promises of today's passage as the armies of Babylon are drawing closer to Jerusalem. Soon the buildings of the city, including the Temple, will be laid waste, and the blood of many inhabitants will flow in the streets while those who survive are taken away captive.

Yet, in the face of this dreadful inevitability, Jeremiah – a man who has known persecution and imprisonment; a prophet who has contended the people will know famine, conquest, and captivity as a result of their idolatry and unfaithfulness – this Jeremiah now intones notes of hope.

In the previous chapter, Jeremiah has purchased a plot of land, a foolish investment when the territory is about to be seized by invaders. His action, however, is not based on projections for the real estate market, but rather on the promise of God, as recorded in Jeremiah 32.15: "For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land." In the midst of impending doom, a sign of hope is enacted.

Now, in today's passage, Jeremiah announces, "A righteous branch will spring up." This means God's promise addresses more than simply the restoration of daily life. Rather, one of the defining signs of God's favour also will be restored: the restoration of the Davidic line, a dynasty of four centuries that has been brought to a tragic end. The image is that of a sprout of new growth emerging from what looks to be nothing but a dead stump.

2nd Sunday of Advent: Luke 3.1-6

One of the major figures of Advent is John the Baptist. Through both his words and his posture, he directs us to look to God's future with hopeful expectation. This expectation, however, is not "other-worldly." Rather, it is very much rooted in this world, and has an impact on our lives today.

In today's Gospel we note Luke's attention to political and historical detail. Luke shows that salvation is for all people and situated in world events. Therefore, Luke lists the political and religious leaders at the time of John's appearance in the desert. Salvation is understood as God's breaking into political and social history.

John's call comes to him in the desert, the place where God formed and purified Israel many centuries earlier, both in the Exodus from Egypt and in Israel's return from Exile. He then proclaims "a baptism of repentance" which will lead to forgiveness of sins. True repentance involves a complete change of heart, a turning away from sinful attitudes and behaviours and a turning toward God and his ways. This change of heart is symbolized by a ritual cleansing in the waters of the Jordan.

By going to the Jordan and inviting people to pass through its waters, John is summoning his listeners to re-enter the Promised Land as God's chosen people, and to live this time in faithfulness to the covenant with God. John uses the words of an earlier prophet, Isaiah, to challenge the people.

3rd Sunday of Advent: Luke 3.7-18

This Sunday's Gospel continues last week's focus on John the Baptist and his role in preparing the way for Christ and directing us to look toward God's future with hopeful expectation. Recall that last week's reading described John's appearance in the desert and established his connection with the prophetic tradition of Israel. By going to the Jordan and inviting people to pass through its waters, John summons his listeners to re-enter the Promised Land as God's chosen people, and to live this time in faithfulness to the covenant with God.

In the verses prior to today's Gospel, John has been issuing a strong call to repentance as the way to prepare for the coming of the Messiah. Some in the crowd open their hearts to John's message and ask him three times: "What must we do?" Although John himself lives an austere life removed from the ordinary pursuits of people, he does not ask his inquirers to dissociate themselves from their own lives or occupations. Rather, he challenges them to carry out their daily responsibilities with concern for others, and to live with honesty and integrity. All of the Baptist's instructions are relational in nature.

John makes it clear that he is a signpost pointing people to Jesus. He seeks to help his listeners to convert their desires into appropriate and authentic words and works.

4th Sunday of Advent: Luke 1.39-55

The passage we are about to hear may lead us to think that our attention is simply being directed back to the birth of Jesus. However, like the other prophets of Advent, the Virgin Mary also continues to direct our gaze to the future, to the return of Christ and the fulfillment of God's purposes and promises.

The full Gospel reading for this day recalls Mary's actions after the announcement of Jesus' birth by the angel Gabriel. Mary goes to visit Elizabeth, her cousin, who is also with child. Elizabeth greets Mary with full recognition of the roles that they and their unborn children will play in God's plan for salvation. In the portion of the Gospel we are about to read, Mary responds to Elizabeth's greeting with a song of praise, the Magnificat. The song echoes that of Hannah in the Old Testament after she gives birth to Samuel, who would become a great prophet in Israel.

Hannah, Elizabeth, and Mary are all women who recall and echo God's history of showing favour upon the people of Israel. They also dare to speak and act today with confidence in God's promised tomorrow.

It is noteworthy, too, that Elizabeth describes Mary as the first disciple, as the one who believed that God's word to her would be fulfilled. Mary's faith enabled her to recognize the work of God in her people's history and in her own life. Her openness to God allowed God to work through her so that salvation might come to everyone. Because of this, Mary is a model and symbol of the Church.