

## **SMALL GROUP ADVENT REFLECTIONS (Year B)**

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

*Participants may sit in a circle or around a table. 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>. In some circumstances it may be desirable to use different translations when the reading is repeated.*

*This method of group reflection may employ a cross as a 'talking stick' (only someone holding the cross can speak): everyone may be given the opportunity to respond to the current question when handed the cross by the person on the left. See p. 153 of "Becoming the Story We Tell" - <http://5062d9ba7ccc362f4859-cd58abbe0e6243265c5a27e702ee6c8b.r55.cf2.rackcdn.com/The-Primates-Proposal.pdf>*

*One possible setting for this method of reflection is the order for Home Prayers, p. 685 in the Book of Alternative Services.*

## **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.

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.

As it was for the first Christians, we need to attend to the words of the Old Testament prophets if we are to recognize in Jesus the presence of God's promised Kingdom. So this year we will look to their words and example to encourage the posture of Advent in our church and in our individual lives.

*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 to Israel that are either stated or implied." The rest of the group simply listens.
- SILENCE
- The leader then passes the cross to the person on the right, inviting response to the question, *What promise of God for the world do you hear?* The cross is passed around the circle until everyone has had a chance to respond.

### **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 then passes the cross to the person on the right, inviting response 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 this promise/these promises."
- SILENCE.
- The leader then passes the cross to the person on the right, inviting response 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?* The cross is passed around the circle until everyone has had a chance to respond.

### **Open Discussion:**

- The leader places the cross in the centre of the group and 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* 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 B)

### **First Sunday of Advent: Isaiah 64.1-9**

The passage we look at today is from the third section of the Isaiah tradition (chapters 56-66), originating sometime between 515 and 450 BC. This period, initially full of hope, turned out to be one of great turmoil and trial for Israel. After Cyrus, King of Persia, assumed control of the Babylonian Empire, he permitted the exiled Israelites to return home. Few, however, chose to do so. Those who did confronted overwhelming challenges. Economic and social conditions were dire. In short order, too, they began to face a tremendous crisis of faith. They had clung to the conviction that God would restore the throne of David upon their re-entry to the Promised Land. However, two decades after the first exiles had returned home, the city of Jerusalem and its temple were still in ruins, and hope was in short supply.

### **Second Sunday of Advent: Isaiah 40.1-11**

Chapter 40 sounds the first notes of Second Isaiah (chapters 40-55), a section originating sometime around 540 BC. Jerusalem is destroyed and many of its citizens are living in exile. In this setting, the prophet sings an aria of comfort and hope.

Prior to this chapter, the primary proclamation has been a difficult word of judgment. The people had rebelled against God and lived at the expense of their neighbours. Now, as the people transition from exile to return, there is a clear shift to the vision of a hope-filled future.

The passage paints the picture of a highway in the wilderness, an image reminiscent of the Exodus story. This second Exodus, however, is depicted as an easier journey, safe passage over flat ground.

### **Third Sunday of Advent: Isaiah 61.1-4, 8-11**

This week we return to the third section of the Book of Isaiah, originating sometime between 515 and 450 BC. Many of us will be familiar with the opening verses of this passage because Jesus proclaimed them when he visited his hometown synagogue in Nazareth, as recorded in the fourth chapter of Luke's Gospel.

God's anointed is sent to the oppressed, the captives, and all who mourn. In keeping with the prophetic tradition, we should understand that, to comfort and support those to whom the anointed is sent, it will be necessary to engage the people and situations that cause or perpetuate the oppression, suffering, and despair. We should notice, too, that God's anointed is commissioned not only to change unjust circumstances, but also to effect transformation in the identity and activity of the hopeless and suffering ones.

The vocation to "proclaim liberty" comes from the instructions for observing the Jubilee Year, as described in Leviticus 25. During the Jubilee, property and people held as payment for debt were returned to the families to which they originally belonged.

The reference to one who is anointed echoes other references in scripture, such as David's anointing as king of Israel in 1 Samuel 16, and the promise of a ruler who would heal the divisions between Israel and Judah and rule with righteousness in Isaiah 11.

### **Fourth Sunday of Advent: 2 Samuel 7.1-11, 16**

This week's passage refers to the time soon following after David's enthronement as king in Jerusalem.

As we listen to this passage, it may be helpful to know that the word "house" in Hebrew can refer to a palace, as in the opening verses of our text; a temple, at about the halfway point of the passage; or a dynasty, as we hear near the end.

It is important to note, too, how God reminds David that the divine presence has been with him since he was a young lad in the grazing fields. This signals that the God of Israel, unlike other gods, is present in all times and places, and cannot be contained in any structure.

It may be that these perspectives are behind the Christian notions of "presence" and "household" in the New Testament. It is fairly common, for example, to call our buildings "churches," or to speak of the church building as God's house. However, the New Testament makes it clear that God's house is made of people rather than bricks. We, the church, are God's household. God's presence is with us wherever we are called or sent.

## SMALL GROUP ADVENT REFLECTIONS (Year A)

*This is a discipline for use in relation to the Sundays of Advent, a method of aural reflection on the text of the gospel appointed for the coming Sunday. It follows the pattern found in Becoming the Story We Tell.*

*Participants may sit in a circle or around a table. 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 two procedural 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>. In some circumstances it may be desirable to use different translations when the reading is repeated.*

*This method of group reflection may employ a cross as a 'talking stick' (only someone holding the cross can speak): everyone may be given the opportunity to respond to the current question when handed the cross by the person on the left. See p. 142 of "Becoming the Story We Tell" - <http://5062d9ba7ccc362f4859-cd58abbe0e6243265c5a27e702ee6c8b.r55.cf2.rackcdn.com/The-Primates-Proposal.pdf>*

*One possible setting for this method of reflection is the order for Home Prayers, p. 685 in the Book of Alternative Services.*

*The following links may be used for the commentary before the First Hearing each week:*

Commentary for Matthew 24.36-44 (Advent 1):

<http://aplm2013.blogspot.ca/2013/11/0-0-1-745-4248-table-song-eighth-day.html>

Commentary for Matthew 3.1-12 (Advent 2):

<http://aplm2013.blogspot.ca/2013/12/preachers-study-year-advent-2-2013.html>

Commentary for Matthew 11.2-11 (Advent 3):

<http://aplm2013.blogspot.ca/2013/12/preachers-study-year-advent-3-2013.html>

Commentary for Matthew 1.18-25 (Advent 4):

<http://aplm2013.blogspot.ca/2013/12/preachers-study-year-advent-4-2013.html>

## **Opening:**

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

The season of Advent (along with the seasons of Christmas and Epiphany) 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 is the herald and embodiment of God's kingdom.

Each of the Gospel passages we will encounter this Advent is rooted in this understanding. Each of these passages also prompts us to a rigorous and perhaps uncomfortable examination of the degree to which our ultimate allegiance is not undivided and fully aligned with God's promised Kingdom. Each passage, however, not only poses a challenge, but also offers hope for 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.
- The leader then invites one person to read the passage aloud, after giving the following instruction to the group: "Listen for promises or signs of the Kingdom of God." The rest of the group simply listens.
- SILENCE. The leader then passes the cross to the person on the right, inviting response to the question, *What promise of God for the world do you hear? Name one way in which this promise offers you hope?* The cross is passed around the circle until everyone has had a chance to respond.

### **Second Hearing:**

- The leader invites someone else to read the passage aloud a second time, after giving the following instruction: "Listen for any explicit or implicit challenge this promise might pose."
- SILENCE. The leader then passes the cross to the person on the right, inviting response to the question, *What challenge does this promise pose 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 it might mean to live life in expectation of this promise."
- SILENCE. The leader then passes the cross to the person on the right, inviting response to the question, *What do you need to do in order to prepare yourself for the fulfillment of this promise?* The cross is passed around the circle until everyone has had a chance to respond.

### **Open Discussion:**

- The leader places the cross in the centre of the group and 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* 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.