

## Season of Advent—Week 1



### Introducing the theme...

Throughout the weeks of Advent, we will encounter characters from Jesus' birth narrative as found in the Gospel according to Luke including Zechariah, Mary, Elizabeth and John. Luke was written to a disciple named Theophilus which means 'friend of God' in Greek. Each figure from Luke's narrative will reveal something of what it could mean for us to be friends of God and bearers of Christlike love, not only as individuals but as an incarnational community in our time and place.

James Alison recently observed, 'The whole point of the Incarnation was to manifest God with us at our level, working out our salvation from within a human framework and allowing us to become inside participants in God's creative act.'<sup>♦</sup> Alison calls this the 'undoing from within so as to open us out to life' model of salvation. As an incarnational community, we have the capacity—and, dare we say, *urgent calling*—to 'make visible the real power of the Spirit.'<sup>♦</sup>

As part of your exploration of this theme, you may wish to enrich your Season of Advent with this at home contemplative resource. Each reflection includes a short Gospel reading, questions and ideas for engagement, and simple prayer. May seeds of new life blossom among us.

### Reflection 1

Luke 1:5–7

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.

Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

The Gospel of Luke starts the narrative of Jesus' birth with a childless couple getting on in years. This seems like a disheartening if not hopeless situation, yet this longing space has within it the capacity for love to take root and grow. The Season of Advent is one of longing. Thus we begin the liturgical year by getting in touch with our desire—for ourselves, those we love and for the world.

You may wish to do this by placing your hands open on your lap as you bring to mind the realities of this time. Allow responses to the questions below to enter your heart and mind. Resist the temptation to dismiss, judge or problem solve. Simply notice and have compassion on what comes.

- What do you desire for yourself?
- What do you desire for those you love? for the world?

Source of Wonders,  
receive the desires of my heart.  
Help me to rest in your love  
gently and with anticipation.  
Amen

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<sup>♦</sup> Candlemas Lecture delivered at Boston College on 7 February, 2024.

<sup>♦</sup> Ibid

## Reflection 2

Luke 1:8–11

Once when Zechariah was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense.

Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense.

Priests were called upon to serve in the temple for one week at a time, two times a year. Entering the sanctuary where the Ark of the Covenant was kept was both a privilege and a fearful duty. One could never be sure what might happen when entering the temple's Holy of Holies!

In her book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard provides a compelling image of Zechariah's contemplative stance—that is, seeing in a way that is able to behold the sacred in and through all things:

The world is fairly studded and strewn with pennies cast broadside by a generous hand. But—and this is the point—who gets excited by a mere penny? But if you cultivate a healthy poverty and simplicity, so that finding a penny will literally make your day, then, since the world is in fact planted in pennies, you have with your poverty bought a lifetime of days.

You might like to be on the lookout for 'pennies' strewn throughout your day. Make it your intention to pay greater attention to the little glimmers of divine in your midst. How might you nurture the 'healthy poverty and simplicity' that will enable you to recognise and cherish these gifts?

Source of All:  
cultivate in me  
a poverty born of simplicity  
that makes room in my heart  
for the ordinary manifestations  
of your presence  
everywhere.  
Amen

## Reflection 3

Luke 1:12–17

When Zechariah saw the angel, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.

He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Imagine the range of emotions and thoughts that must have come to Zechariah when the messenger said, 'Do not be afraid ... for your prayer has been heard.' After long years of trying and disappointment, having settled in and accepted their state of barrenness, Zechariah and Elizabeth are told they will bear a child. The stories of this season ignite hope and invite trust, even for the seemingly impossible situations in our lives and the world.

In *The Monk Within: Embracing a Sacred Way*, Beverly Lanzetta observes: 'The most astounding thing about the interior life is accepting that you are beloved and cared for by the Divine. There is a force of consciousness working in you for the good.'

Recall a desire you have for yourself, those you love or the world.

- How does Elizabeth and Zechariah's story speak to you just now?
- What do Lanzetta's words about a force 'working in you for the good' encourage?

Ground of Being:  
may fear be minimised  
and courage take root  
as I am drawn by your Spirit  
to be love in this world.  
Amen

#### Reflection 4

Luke 1:18–20

Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.

"But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur."

It is natural to conclude that Zechariah is being punished for his questions and doubt. But another way of looking at this story is to see the silence that has entered Zechariah's world as a gift. What will it be like for Zechariah to hold back for a time on sharing his experience with the angel?

In her article 'Zechariah and Holy Silence,' Marina Berzins McCoy observes, 'Sometimes our words, like Zechariah's, manifest our own limits. Silence makes room for the fullness of God. God's presence and activity exceeds our own ability to name, to capture, or to control... In entering into silence, we enter more deeply in God's mystery.'

Carve out space in these days for silence. What do you notice?

For You alone  
my soul waits in silence;  
from You comes my salvation.

—Psalm 62:1