

... Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place...
(Mark 6:31)



DO NOT BE AFRAID
- When heaven breaks through –

Angel-song and heavenly dreams – when heaven breaks through and life is never the same again!

This may seem a strange theme for the season of Advent.

Yet it was a prevalent theme for those whose lives were most impacted by the birth of Jesus. That first Advent was a time when Heaven broke through to earth and tipped everything upside down.

It was a time of angels, dreams and heavenly choirs – and the call to courage!

It was a time when ancient promises and deeply-held longings were about to be fulfilled.

And when ordinary lives are touched by the extraordinary, it can be scary!

It's at times like this we most need to hear the words, "Do not be afraid!"

This season is about God's purposes being fulfilled...

About life (our plans for our lives) being disrupted...

About being confronted with the extraordinary...

And about saying yes to engaging with the eternal and transcendent
– no matter how ordinary we think we are.

We reflect on Mary, Joseph and the shepherds, who in the midst of their ordinary every-day lives were invited to put aside fear and embrace the extraordinary.

Here is the video link if you would like to follow this on-line:- <https://youtu.be/yA0EyZKzY10>

Do Not be Afraid!

Call to worship

*Hope of all hopes, dream of our dreams,
a child is born, sweet-breathed; a son is given to us: a living gift...*

*He will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Dear Father everlasting, ever-present never-failing,
Master of Wholeness, Prince of Peace. Isaiah 9:6 (VOICE)*



Scripture

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
² He was with God in the beginning.
³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.
⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.
⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.
⁹ The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.
¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.
We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son,
who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. John 1:1-5,9,14

Prayer

Wonderful Counsellor, mighty God,
We worship and adore you.

Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace,
We lay our hearts before you.

You, who are light and life,
Open our eyes to see you in all your radiance and glory.

You, the Incarnate one who lives among us,
Open our hearts to live in your grace and truth,
So that all may see the glory of the Lord breaking through the darkness.

Scripture

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.

But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favour with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled."
Then the angel left her. Luke 1:26-33, 38



Reflection

A young woman, barely more than a girl – in a small town in Galilee
A man, engaged to be married – discovers his fiancée is pregnant
Shepherds, minding their own business, in a field at night

For each of them, suddenly everything is turned upside down!
They experience something extraordinary and they are called to step out and embrace the transcendent
- and to see where it will lead them.

There are angels in the night, dreams, and words of great significance that will transform many lives.

Can you imagine it?

A girl, planning her marriage – and suddenly, out of the blue, her life is turned upside down.
She is faced with disgrace, misunderstanding, public humiliation – perhaps the loss of all she had hoped and
dreamed for – perhaps a violent death awaits her.

Can you imagine it?

A man, also planning his marriage – discovering his fiancé is pregnant, and not to him!
What goes through his mind? Shock? Betrayal? Confusion?
He knows what his community expects of him – what her punishment should be.
He too, sees his dreams and hopes for his new life, his marriage, turn to dust.
And yet, he hesitates.

Can you imagine it?

An ordinary night out in the fields – a group of men, uneducated, living their lives on the edge of
community. What were their hopes and dreams?
Then, in the stillness of that dark night – there is light and radiance
– and the night is filled with heavenly song.

Each time, for each of these startling experiences, God graciously speaks:
“Do not be afraid”.

Do not be afraid of the life that is being formed within you and what that will mean for you and the world.
Do not be afraid of what those around you will say
– I am doing something extraordinary and you get to be part of that!
Do not be afraid, when the sky splits open with glory – for you will see the Saviour!
Mary was puzzled, the shepherds were terrified.
We don't know Joseph's initial reaction to his dream apparition.

What we do know, is that each time, there was a “Yes!” to the breaking through of the extraordinary.
Mary replied: “May your word to me be fulfilled.” “May it be to me as you have said”.
Joseph, apparently a man of few words, simply did what he was asked
and took Mary to be his wife, trusting that God was at work.
The shepherds responded:
“Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened...”

When the extraordinary breaks through into our everyday lives,
when there is a gracious encouragement to let go of fear,
when angels and dreams and heavenly choirs bring unexpected messages,
when suddenly everything we thought we knew is turned on its head...

...the invitation is to say “Yes!”
...to respond as Mary did: “May it be to me as you have said”.

When we choose to let go of our fears, to be open to the extraordinary,
we too may see the greatness, wonder and mighty deeds of God!

This Advent season, as we ponder the courage of Mary, Joseph and unnamed men in a field, let us be open
to how God wants to break through into our lives and what he is inviting us to say “Yes!” to.

Mary, as the one who gave birth to the Son of God, holds a unique place in history.
Joseph, without saying much at all, shared this remarkable journey with her.
The shepherds – unidentified, never mentioned again, ordinary men
– were the first to kneel before the Saviour.

And us?
There will only ever be one Mary and one Joseph – but there are countless ordinary people,
like the shepherds, who remain unnamed throughout history, like us,
who get to see the glory of God in unimaginable ways.

What will we get to experience when we remain open to however
God wants to break through into our ordinary lives?

What fears are we being asked to let go of?

What new things are we being invited to embrace?

During this season of Advent, what are we being invited to ‘go and see’?

Silent Prayer

Prayer

Mary sings:

My soul lifts up the Lord! My spirit celebrates God, my Liberator!
For though I’m God’s humble servant, God has noticed me.
Now and forever, I will be considered blessed by all generations.
For the Mighty One has done great things for me; holy is God’s name!
From generation to generation, God’s loving kindness endures
for those who revere Him.
God’s arm has accomplished mighty deeds.
The proud in mind and heart, God has sent away in disarray.
The rulers from their high positions of power, God has brought down low.
And those who were humble and lowly, God has elevated with dignity.
The hungry—God has filled with fine food.
The rich—God has dismissed with nothing in their hands.
To Israel, God’s servant, God has given help,
As promised to our ancestors, remembering Abraham and his descendants in mercy forever.
Luke 1:46-55 (VOICE)



Song suggestion:

My soul magnifies the Lord, Chris Tomlin

Scripture

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.

This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven,

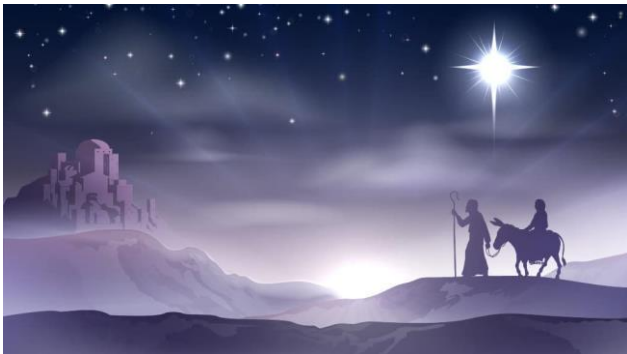
and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests."

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." Luke 2:8-15

Prayer

O Lord God,
who called your servants
to ventures of which we cannot see the ending,
by paths as yet untrodden,
through perils unknown:

Give us faith
to go out with a good courage,
not knowing where we are going,
but only that your hand is leading us,
and your love supporting us;
to the glory of your name.ⁱ



Scripture

My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:
a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.

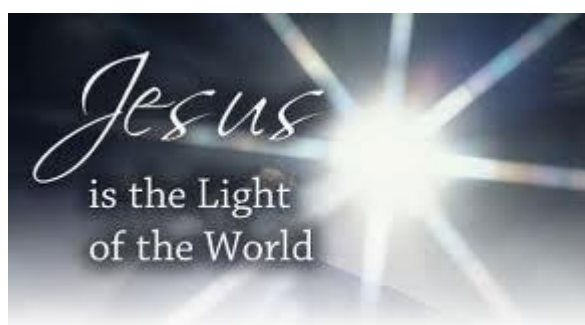
Glory to God in the highest heaven,

and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.

Luke 2:30-32, 14

Benediction

When you encounter angels, dreams, and heavenly choirs,
when your world is shaken by the extraordinary and unexpected,
may you, like Mary, be open and willing to receive, and let new life grow within you;
may you, like Joseph, step out in faith, even if it means being counter-cultural;
and may you, like the nameless shepherds, follow the song and see where it leads you.
May you be filled with the courage you need to see the glory of the Lord right here and now.



GOING DEEPER: Here are some suggestions that may help you to engage more deeply with this theme.

Pray. This is Mary’s song again, in a different translation. Read it through slowly and reflect on what the words are saying to you.

“My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name.
His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful
to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.”
(Luke 1:46-55 NIV)

Now read it though again, this time making it your own by filling in the spaces...

“My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit,.....

for he has

From now on

for the Mighty One has — holy is his name.

His mercy

He has

He has

(Luke 1:46-55 NIV)

Do not be afraid:

Take the words **DO NOT BE AFRAID** and write them mindfully in the heart below.

Add your name e.g. Do not be afraid N_____!

These words are God's gift to you.

God also adds "I am with you always!"



Slowly repeat them to yourself, allowing them to interact with your inner world of concerns, memories, and ideas.

Allow this inner pondering on these words to invite you into dialogue with God.

Let these words rest in your heart. Breathe them in and breathe them out.

What fears or concerns do you have at the moment?

What is God inviting you to let go?

How does this change when you repeat these words to yourself, "Do not be afraid, _____", knowing that God is with you always?

- **Meditate** on one of the many verses of Scripture that remind us to “not be afraid”. One example is Phil 4:6-7
- You could use one of the Bible passages or prayers provided in the material to practise **Lectio Divina**. (see page 8).
- **Visualise Scripture!** Choose one of the Bible stories where God says, “Do not be afraid”. (It may be helpful to use a concordance). Read it through slowly – all of it or some selected verses. Close your eyes and picture what is being described. What do you see, smell, hear? How is God revealing himself to you through this? How could you act out these verses? You could record this experience in your journal or share it with someone.
- If you enjoy being **creative**, find some way to express what it might have been like for Mary, Joseph or the shepherds to have experienced God the way they did. What might that look like? What would it feel like? You can create a collage, or draw, paint, use clay, write a poem or compose a song. If you enjoy working with clay (or plasticine) take a piece of clay and knead it in your hands. As you feel it moving beneath your fingers, let it move into a shape that expresses something of what God is saying to you about fear.
- If you are **sharing** this retreat day with someone else, spend some time sharing your experiences. Pray together.
- If you like to **journal**, make a note of what you have experienced during this retreat time in your journal.

EVEN DEEPER

LECTIO DIVINA

Lectio Divina is an ancient spiritual practice from the Christian monastic tradition. Its title derives from the Latin words meaning reading and divine/holy. In Lectio Divina, we seek to experience the presence of God through reading and listening, meditation, prayer, and contemplation.

1. Text

Begin by choosing a section of Scripture that you would like to read and pray. You can choose the text randomly or use a liturgical book, such as The Book of Common Prayer. Try not to set a goal for how much content you will cover; the goal is to listen for God and to experience his presence.

2. Preparation

Do what you must to quiet and prepare yourself to hear from God. If you need to find a quiet room, sit in silence for several minutes, or sit in a comfortable chair, take whatever posture will help you prepare to receive and experience God's presence.

3. Reading/Listening

When you sense that your heart is prepared, begin by slowly reading the passage of Scripture that you have selected. Move slowly through sentences and phrases. As you read, pay attention to what word, phrase, or idea catches your attention.

4. Meditation

Begin to meditate on the word, phrase, or idea that has captured your attention. Repeat it again and again.

Consider:

What thoughts come to mind as you meditate on this word, phrase, or idea?

What are you reminded of in your life?

What does it make you hope for?

Meditation is no easy task—as you try to concentrate don't be disappointed if random thoughts enter your head. As they do, offer them to God.

5. Prayer

Now begin to speak to God. Tell God what word, phrase, or idea captured your attention and what came to mind as you meditated upon it. How is God using this word, phrase, or idea to bless and transform you? Tell God what you have been thinking and feeling as you've listened and meditated. Tell God how you hope this word, phrase, or idea will change your heart to be more like His.

6. Contemplation

Finish by focusing your attention on the fact that God's presence is with you. If as you try to focus on God's presence you sense a need to read the text again, to continue meditating, or to simply continue talking with God, allow yourself to do so. As you do, know that you are in the presence of God.

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THE PRAYER OF EXAMEN - Finding the movement of the Spirit in our daily lives as we review our day.

This is something that can be done throughout the day or at the end of the day. It helps us to become more aware of and focused on the presence of God in the midst of everyday life.

1. Recognize the presence of God

Be still and know that you are with God.

2. Look at your day with gratitude

Acknowledge God in the big and small things of life.

3. Review your day

When or where in the past 24 hours did you feel you were cooperating most fully with God's action in your life? When were you resisting?

Ask yourself

- What habits and life patterns do I notice?
- When did I feel most alive? Most drained of life?
- When did I have the greatest sense of belonging? When did I feel most alone?
- When did I give love? Where did I receive love?
- When did I feel most fully myself? Least myself?
- When did I feel most whole? Most fragmented?

4. Reconcile and Resolve

- Seek forgiveness
- Ask for direction
- Share a concern
- Express gratitude
- Resolve to move forward

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ⁱ Eric Milner-White (1884-1963) and G.W. Briggs (1875-1959)