

## ADVENT HOUSE GROUPS 2024 SESSION 3



*The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned - ISAIAH 9:2*

## Opening Antiphon

Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I say, rejoice. Indeed, the Lord is near.

## Opening Prayer

O God, who see how your people faithfully await the feast of the Lord's Nativity, enable us, we pray, to attain the joys of so great a salvation and to celebrate them always with solemn worship and glad rejoicing. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever.

**Amen**

## To Share

- Last week, the scripture spoke of a great light shining on those who walked in darkness. In the past week, have you encountered a situation where you felt God's light breaking through a difficult or dark moment? How did it change your perspective or bring you comfort?
- The scripture called Jesus the "Prince of Peace". In what ways did you encounter peace, either in your own heart or in your interactions with others, over the past week? How did your faith contribute to that sense of peace?
- The scripture described the breaking of the yoke and the rod of the oppressor. Did you feel any burdens lifted in your life or your faith? How did you experience God's deliverance or sense His presence helping you through challenges?

## To Listen: Matthew 1.18–24

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel', which means, 'God is with us.' When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife.

## Advent through the eyes of Joseph

I come from a long line of dreamers. You wouldn't know it to look at me. I am not what philosophers are supposed to look like: my hands are rough and gnarled from a lifetime at the lathe; knotty, like the wood I turn. But anyway, dreaming and philosophy is not the same thing. I don't question things to find out what they mean. I hope for things, so that inside this old body there is always a fresh spring rising.

I am a practical man. I make things. I take the hewn timber from the forest and I produce the chairs that you sit on, the tables you eat from, the beds you lie on. I know how to join one

piece of wood to another. I know which wood works for which purpose. I know how to measure and how to saw. I know the value of a tool. I know that you don't mistreat them; that time spent cleaning and mending and sharpening is time saved from the job itself. I have the wisdom that the so-called learned will never know: a wisdom that comes from doing; and the satisfaction. When my work is done, it is done. There is no question, no turning back, no second thought. I do not ask whether a table is a chair if you sit upon it. But as I plane the surface down, work it till it is smooth and straight, I may dream who will sit at my table, and who will eat from it, and what delights they may share.

How could it be any other way? I was named after the most famous dreamer in history. But life does funny things to you. All my dreams are still intact, but as the years have gone by they seemed to get buried deeper and deeper. There is that spring inside me, an underground stream that makes glad the heart, but I don't know whether anyone can see it anymore. Nobody calls me a dreamer, like they used to when I was young. Well, not till now. And until this year I felt the same about myself. I was alone. Self-sufficient but not fulfilled. Grafting, making ends meet, I inhabited the world like a single, solitary tree in the middle of a wide and empty plain.

But then it changed. Betrothal. Me an older man, and she a young girl full of joy and vigour; full of hope and expectation of what life could bring, full of zest. She re-awoke my dreaming. After so many miles of travelling in the same direction, meeting her was like a turning in the road, a new possibility. It was arranged by our families, and none the worse for that, and the arrangements were made quickly so that we could get on with our life. I had had many dreams, but I had stopped dreaming of this. And her presence filled me with delight. She was a sudden burst of springtime joy in what felt like the long meandering decline of autumn. She was spring rains on thirsty ground, and her exuberance replenished the hidden springs of my own dreaming and flooded me. Her presence, and what it promised, irrigated me. there is no other way of putting it.

Was it love? I don't know. Not yet. Love isn't a feeling. Love isn't just desire, though how I desired her. Love is the patient accumulation of shared memories, the joining together of two lifetimes into one, the weaving of separate stories into this story. Love begins to grow when falling in love is left behind. It takes time. It matures slowly in the fertile ground of commitment, of determined choosing: this person and not another, this path and not that. Love isn't what men think it is. They mistake falling in love for being in love. They forget that the finest wines take many years to settle. They allow their eye to rove, and lose the greatest gift of all: a lifetime shared, to know and to be known.

That was what opened up for me when Mary became my intended. Hope blossomed. Love became a possibility, something to be started.

But no sooner had we begun, than things changed. And I have to tell you this tonight – with Bethlehem just a day's journey away and our travelling almost ended, and Mary, heavy with child nearing the completion of her time – I have dreams, and my dreams have given me faith that God is in this quandary that I face; but I have doubts as well: dark doubts and dark moments. Sometimes I find myself looking at Mary, looking at her body swelling with the life that is in her, and harbouring dark thoughts that it is someone else's child she carries, and I

am a fool to stand by her. After all, that's what everyone else says. They snigger behind my back, and say he is not so much a dreamer as a dupe. How could he be stupid enough to believe her tall tale, and why doesn't he just leave her to lie in the bed she has made; separate quietly, and let her stew in her shame?

And don't think I haven't lain awake night after night saying these same things to myself. You're a fool, Joseph, a stupid dreamer, a love-struck old man, and there is no fool like an old fool. You have been turned by the winsome smile of a pretty girl, and you are ready to believe anything. Except when I did sleep . . . after she first told me, and I saw the fear and horror in her eyes, the fear that I wouldn't believe her and wouldn't stand by her; and, yes, I was furious and angry and jealous, and all sorts of other things; I raged around the house and went into the yard at the back of my workshop and polished the blade of my axe and furiously hacked and chopped at limbs of timber till I was completely exhausted; but my fury still not spent, and then not able to sleep; not able to face her, not able to believe her, though still wanting to, seeing the pleading agony in her eyes . . . when I did fall asleep, I had a dream. A simple dream, no coded messages like my namesake, no starving cattle, no ripening sheaves, but a simple requirement. In the unfussy logic of a dream I was instructed clearly: 'Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. Do not abandon her. The child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' And then the words from Isaiah the prophet that I had heard many times ran through my dream: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, "God is with us."'

And what do you do with a dream like that? Ignore it? Despise it? Argue against it? I woke with a start. It was still night, and I had been asleep for only a few minutes. But the dream and what it said to me were as clear as the day. It was as if God himself had spoken to me, a simple practical man in the uncoded clarity of my dream, and asked me just to be faithful: faithful to Mary and faithful to the dream inside me.

I ran those two words over in my mind – Jesus, for he will save his people; Emmanuel, God is with us. Is this who the child will be? One who saves? God with us?

I was comforted and confused. What is it the psalm says? I have always loved that verse, when I go to the synagogue and hear the ancient prayers chanted, and the brooding resonance of the priest's deep baritone, and the clouds of incense mysteriously burning and rising like prayers to heaven: 'there is a river that makes glad the city of God'. Were those the streams stirring inside me? And also in Mary? Was she the city of God, the place where God has come to dwell?

And so I have done what I have been told. I lay on my bed for a few more hours, then I rose before dawn and walked the half-mile or so to Mary's house. I knew she wouldn't be sleeping either; our two stories were already becoming one. Sure enough, even as I approached the house, I heard the sound of her gentle weeping. I think she had been up all night too, worrying and probably praying that there would be some sense in all of this. She opened the door to me and there was a lovely defiance in her eye. She was ready to meet whatever it was I would give her. I saw then, as clear as the dream, her own certainty in what was inside her. I held her tiny soft hands in mine, looked her full in the eye, and told her that

I was with her, that I believed her; I had had a dream, and my dream had confirmed her story.

I said no more. I am not a man of words, but deeds. I do what I believe to be right. I do not look back. I returned to my workshop. I tidied up. I arranged the chopped wood into a pile outside the door, ready for the fires of winter. I set about my daily work.

Others came to me. They came with every kind of advice and admonition. They believed all sorts of things about me, and about Mary. I said nothing. I told them I would stand by her.

We became the talk of the town. People would point and whisper and plot. But inside I knew. or at least I thought I knew. Or at least I knew what I had decided. I knew how I had chosen to respond. And I was not going to go back on this. Something was unfolding in the shared story that was my life with Mary. God had visited her in some way that I will never fully understand. For even if you begin to believe the strangeness of the story I am telling you, Mary is not what you might think she is. She is not a quiet stream. She is a tempest. She is not an empty vessel, but a skin of wine uncorked. She is not what men think godly, self-effacing and discreet, reposed and receptive. She is a force: a force of joy and energy and life. And I love her for that. I will go on loving her for that. I will stand by her. And if it is so that God has chosen her to be the Mother of the Lord – and notice in these moments I still have to say ‘if’, for my faith is not that great – then surely he could have chosen someone better prepared, better positioned, and with more resources of maturity and wealth. What capital has she for this vocation, except the abundance of her love for life, for God, for the crazy possibilities that what she says an angel laid before her?

Now my head spins again. An angel? A messenger from God? And a message for this young, green Nazarene shoot, hardly broken through the earth, hardly flowered, no more than a girl, her life hardly started. How can this be?

Well, tomorrow we may know. We should be in Bethlehem by dusk and this baby can't be far from birth. I place my hands upon Mary's stomach each evening as we lie down to sleep, and I feel the baby's strong movements, turning in her womb and kicking out against the world.

But will I know then? God with us? What does a son of God look like, except a son of man, a child like every child? And for what purpose is this child born? Is it to save? How does that work? Who will know him and who will believe him?

Night is falling and we must rest. There is a place here beneath the vast, protective canopy of an oak. It could have stood here for centuries. It is impossible to imagine it not being here, and yet I know (because I know the land and I know trees) that it too, like every life there is, was born of a miraculous and tiny beginning, just a seed in the earth.

I know the names of all the trees, and their habitat and their uses. In winter I can tell them by their shape, in summer by their leaf. Cedar, sycamore, oak and aspen; I know them all. Like Adam I can name them. I admire their strength, their steadfastness, their inscrutability. They gaze upon the world and do not blink. They grow accustomed to a single place. They put down roots. They don't long for distant horizons. They are satisfied.

How unlike us they are. We fidget to be different from others, or better; or idly long to be someone else, or somewhere else, or not a man at all, but a god. How petty and futile the world suddenly seems. What hope is there for all our falsehood? Idolatry was always our greatest failing – making God out of wood, rather than seeing God in the wood itself.

Mary is settling down for the night now. Although she is tired, so tired, she is still all focus and energy, holding and bearing an inner stillness and resolve that is beyond the meandering fantasies of most men. What tree is she? It must be a holly: prickly and evergreen and bearing in the midst of winter the brightest berry. And the child she bears, this child from God, what tree is he? I cannot know, but I imagine him a vine; that the uncorked, poured out, full measured vintage of Mary's challenging faithfulness is going to bring something wonderful to the world. Something refreshing.

Or will he be rejected? Will he be broken? Will he be a barren tree on a lonely hill that bears no fruit at all?

### Discussion Questions

- Which person in the story did you most relate to?
- What surprised, shocked or delighted you the most?
- How has this changed your understanding of the Christmas story?

### Additional Questions

- Joseph speaks about having dreams that give him faith, but he also expresses dark doubts. How do you navigate faith and doubt in your own life? Are there moments when doubt actually strengthens your faith, as it did for Joseph?
- Joseph describes himself as a practical man, yet his dreams play a key role in his spiritual journey. Do you consider yourself more practical or a dreamer in your faith? How do you balance the practical aspects of daily life with your spiritual aspirations and hopes?
- Joseph reflects on the judgment and gossip from those around him regarding his decision to stand by Mary. Have you ever faced criticism or misunderstanding because of your faith or a decision you made based on it? How did you handle it, and how did it impact your spiritual growth?

### Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, as we have gathered in the warmth of this house, we thank You for this season of Advent, a time of reflection, anticipation, and renewal. We have shared in the hope and joy that Christmas brings, and we ask for the grace to see Christmas in a new light.

Help us to look beyond the familiar and seek the deeper meaning of Your Son's birth. May we see Christ in every act of kindness, every gesture of love, and every moment of stillness. Open our hearts to the wonder of Your presence in unexpected places—whether in the humble manger or within our own hearts.

**Amen**

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