

## ADVENT HOUSE GROUPS 2024 SESSION 4



*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

Drop down dew from above, you heavens, and let the clouds rain down the Just One; let the earth be opened and bring forth a Saviour.

## Opening Prayer

Pour forth, we beseech you, O Lord, your grace into our hearts, that we, to whom the Incarnation of Christ your Son was made known by the message of an Angel, may by his Passion and Cross be brought to the glory of his Resurrection. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever.

**Amen**

## To Share

- Last week we read about Joseph's story who faced uncertainty about Mary's pregnancy before receiving divine guidance. Have you encountered moments of uncertainty this past week? How did your faith help you navigate those situations?
- Joseph changed his plans after hearing from the angel in a dream. Did you experience any moments this week where you felt God was guiding you in an unexpected direction? How did you respond?
- Joseph had to trust that God's plan for his family was greater than his own understanding. Have you had any experiences this week that required you to trust in God's plan over your own desires or expectations? How did that affect your faith?

## To Listen: Luke 1.26–38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! the Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' the angel said to her, 'the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' then the angel departed from her.

## Advent through the eyes of Mary

My fondest memories are of home. Here in the hour of the evening breeze, with the last rays of the dipping sun shining upon me, I rest in them; curled up in my mother's arms at the end of the day, I remember her singing to me, and telling me stories from the Scriptures. I

remember the sweetness of her voice, and the stability of her gaze. She was always preparing me, teaching me about life, showing me the way to go, helping me to become a woman. She taught me the names of the flowers and the trees – which to eat and which to avoid – how to till the soil, how to bake and mend. I helped her around the house, preparing for that day – that day soon – when I too will keep a household going.

I think I always loved the world; and loved life; and loved the plants and creatures upon it. I have always believed in it, and seen God in it. I love to hear the Scriptures, especially the psalms, but also proverbs and prophets, and the dark, stirring beauty of Solomon's song. For I too know such passion. It burns within me, a fire that cannot be put out.

My mother also thought me a little wild. 'Finding a husband won't be easy,' she used to say with a smile. Like a young and strong-willed filly, she and my father didn't think I could be easily tamed. But they were wrong. I just wanted a strong love, and a deep passion, and a way to channel this energy and faith and knowledge of God which was boiling inside me.

This is how I see it. This is my creed. I believe in the flowers that brighten the world and give the earth its springtime dress: the camomile that grows in the yard, the oleanders that flourish in the streams, the sage and hyssop, the tiny white iris and the milk vetch; and at this time of year, the tall, bright blue lupins. They say the lupin is the oldest plant of all; that it grew in Eden itself.

And I believe in the flowers that bloom in the dark of winter as well as in the spring. Here in Galilee, the anemones are mostly red. They are like great drops of blood splattered upon a frozen earth. They start to appear in late December. They rise from the cold death of winter. But when it is wet, like it has been this year, they continue to splash their colour across even the dry hills to the east until the end of March and into April. This year, strangely and beautifully, they have overlapped with the poppies. Both are big and bright and red and spread colourfully over all the land. It is easy to confuse them, but the poppies are bigger, and their flowers have just two petals with a large blotch at the bottom, while the anemone has six petals radiating out from a cluster of small purple stalks in the middle. the anemone, like most winter flowers, grows from a bulb; the poppy grows from a tiny seed, almost as small as mustard, and easily scattered on the wind. That is why we find poppies everywhere. And the seeds are good to eat. You can sprinkle them on bread. They make a good tonic for animals, and the fruits, the hard seedpod that is left after the petals have fallen away, can be used in an infusion that is good for coughs. The petals can be used to make ink.

I believe in the orchids, most handsome of all. They are rare and mysterious. They seem to mirror the animals that live among them: butterflies, bees, spiders, even lizards. And near Jerusalem, where the purple-toothed orchid is quite common, the tubers are ground into a paste and make an enchanting drink. Capers also grow there: a shrub with large white and yellow flowers and long red delicate stamens. The flower buds are delicious pickled. You can eat the leaves raw as a salad. Their flavour is sharp and clean. You see them thriving abundantly, growing out of the tiniest crack in the walls of the temple itself.

And I believe in the trees: massive evergreen cypress trees, and lofty cedars and oak. I love to climb them, and sit high up in their branches, and gaze from them at the immensity of the

world, or lie beneath them and stare up at their towering majesty. I believe in the acacia, whose branches are armed with spines; and the evergreen carob and the locust tree whose seed pods can be as long as a span and are filled with a sticky pulp and a syrup that is as sweet as honey.

On the plains there are palm trees. The gardens of the wealthy have olive and fig trees, even apricot, pomegranate, almond, pistachio and walnut from Persia. Sometimes the fruits fall on the wrong side of the wall and you can gather them in your apron and enjoy their succulent splendour.

And I believe in the birds: the swifts that return in the spring; the owls that watch through the night; the sparrows that peck around the yard. And the animals: the branded newts, the yellow salamanders, the toads and marsh frogs, the squirrels, the honey bee, even the scorpion. All of it. I believe in it. I see it and inhabit it and learn its ways. It is a world of precision and beauty.

And I believe in the seasons: the fertile promise of spring, the hot, sultry abundance of the summer, the cool, warm, wet golds and yellows of autumn, and even the more brutal beauty of the winter cold. Each has its place, and each its purpose. The tree in winter is no less alive than the tree in spring. Its energy is amassing beneath the earth; it gathers itself to itself, ready to burst from the grave and fill the world with colour and plenty. The mustard seed is the smallest seed of all. Yet it grows to such height and breadth that the birds of the air shelter in its branches.

And there are seasons to life: the exuberance of youth and the responsibilities of age. Then there are moments within seasons, where one thing that wasn't, suddenly is, bursting it seems from nowhere, but actually part of what always was and what always will be. Like the birds that leave us when the days grow cold and brief, but return in the spring and build their nests where nests have always been built, and feed their young with the insects and flowers which also return at just the right time. So there is a wonderful symmetry to the span of the seasons and to the pattern of a lifetime and the meaning of each moment within it. As the Scriptures say, 'From whose womb did the ice come forth, and who has given birth to the hoar-frost of heaven? . . . Who has put wisdom in the inward parts, or given understanding to the mind?'

I believe in God. I have this tremendous sense of the presence of God. Sometimes it frightens me, because I don't know what to do with it; I don't know where it came from. I know that other people don't see it or feel it quite like me. It's not that they don't believe, but belief does not seem to infuse them and inspire them, like it does me. And it is not a belief that drives me to the synagogue, or even to the Scriptures, though I love both, and wish I could read the Scriptures for myself; it is a belief that propels me deeper into the world, and gives me a joyful longing to embrace the world and try to make it how God wants. I simply believe in God like I believe in the flowers and the trees and the birds and the seasons. God is there, with me and for me.

God is fact for me. But not a fact like other facts; I know that. Believing is not knowledge. It is not the same as knowing the flowers and the trees, or knowing the pattern of the seasons or

the leading of the stars. I believe in God because God is. God is in the world, but God is not part of the world. Nor is God merely an explanation for the world. God is not a plug to fill a gap where other knowledge fails or falls short. God is not a prop to bolster feeble thinking. God is not a thing. You cannot say, here is God, or there is God. God is not a shadow upon the world that you might miss if you were looking the wrong way. I believe in God, and God is the lens through which I look upon everything and receive everything. And because of it, my life, and my experience of the world, is magnified. I am filled and overflowing with a wild joy. I burn with passion to ravish and enjoy this life, and see the world become truly what it is meant to be, when it tunes itself to God, and sees and enjoys the world like God enjoyed it on that very first Sabbath. Believing is trusting that God is and that God will be.

For God is the beginning. God is the ever-present and sustaining source of sunlight and cyclamen, of dewdrop and daisy, of heartbreak and heartbeat.

God is the end. I look into the myriad multitude of the stars that shine like radiant beams of florid hopefulness, pinholes into heaven itself, and see that as God is my origin and the meaning to each day and each moment, so God will be my ending. I do not need to describe it or explain it, and even if I did, it cannot be so reduced. But I do believe it. It is my pulse. It is simply this: my life is an offering of praise to the wonderful God who made life possible.

My breath – this breath, which I feel drawing into my lungs now – is breath of heaven, breath of God, pure gift: God himself breathing into me and making my life possible, making what seems impossible apparent, for the dust of this earth is charged with astonishing fertility. And while I know that most men are too busy with their toil or their silly lusts to sing out praise, that is what I want my life to be: a hymn of praise to God, to the God I see and know but cannot constrain or define. God is all energy, all joy and all majesty. You cannot pin God down. You cannot nail him, and say, this is God, this is where God is. He will rise up. He will rise up in the world he has made and in the people who know him. And that is my gift.

I see it today like never before. My gift is to know God. To be content in his presence by being content in the world, by walking softly and joyfully upon the earth, and knowing God by knowing the good of the good earth God has made and the wonders of the life he has given us. It is a thrilling thing to be seized and held by the presence of the living God.

Listening to me say this, you might think me mad, or holy, or deeply religious, or all three; but the truth is, I am just a girl: a happy, energetic, excited girl who is in love with life and all its possibilities, who wants to know how the world works, all its intricacies and all its benefits. I want to seize hold of life and all its possibilities. I want to enjoy it. I want to live every moment like it is the only moment I will ever have. I want to delight in the fantastic and beautiful variety of the world. I want to be passionate. I want to know love. I want to feel its hot breath upon me. I want to live.

Sometimes, when my work is done, and on a summer evening when I have time to myself, I like to escape into the hills and run and run till I can run no more. I love the feeling of the earth beneath my feet. I love it when my limbs are so tired that every muscle aches – that feeling when my body is completely spent. Then, lying beneath the trees, and watching the

shadows lengthen, and smelling the musky fragrance of the perfumed flowers, it is all joy, all beauty.

Or like this morning, to go to the water's edge, to see the dawning heat of the sun disperse the mists that hang upon the water. To see the water's early morning milky flatness; to see it so still it is almost solid, and feel like you could walk upon it.

Oh, how I wanted to throw myself into those waters, to be cleansed and washed and born again. Or be a little girl once more, fetching water for my mother, dipping my pail into the well, waiting with expectation. It is a thrilling thing to be alive, to walk upon the earth, to taste its magnificence.

So, now I will tell you. Tell you how that which cannot be seen, but is more real than the trees and the mountains, is their source and their ending, is come to us; is come to us so that all may see, and that things unknown and hidden may be brought into light.

It is through me.

I say it with calm assurance, like I might tell you there is food on the table or a stranger at the door; and yet if you placed your hand upon my breast you would feel my heart beating faster than a falcon's wings as it hovers over a kill. I am the Lord's handmaid. He has come to me, so that through me God may be known.

This is how it happened, though I cannot give you an explanation. I can only tell you the story.

I was alone in the house. It was still early, the morning mists just cleared. I looked from the window and saw the sheep grazing in the fields, the newborn lambs playing among them. I couldn't see the shepherd. I looked for him. I was worried for the sheep, and especially for the lambs. Where could he be? Then I looked back into the house. I don't know why. Something was drawing me.

And there he was. Not the shepherd; not God himself, who cannot be looked upon – or can he? Will it now be so? – but someone. And this someone says to me plainly: 'Greetings, favoured one! the Lord is with you.'

Standing there, I don't know what I'm seeing, or what it means. This someone is 'a someone'. Someone I could reach out and touch, but not a person like I am a person. Suddenly I feel terribly cold; like my heart has been plunged into ice, my whole living suspended. And I am frightened. I know the Lord is with me. I know that already. I know it every day and every moment. So how else can he come to me? What is this stranger bringing? Where does he come from?

Silence. Then overhead, a bird sings. It is a beautiful, chirruping song, a song of undiluted joy: the song a bird sings when it builds its nest and prepares to welcome its young.

The stranger speaks again. There is warmth and comfort in his voice, though still not enough to stop me shivering in his presence. 'Do not be afraid, Mary,' he says. 'You have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord

God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.'

Another silence. I breathe it in, the import of his words. It is utterly fantastic. Unimaginable. He has finished speaking, and I don't know how to respond or what to say. Is this person a messenger from God? An angel? And how can this be? How can any of this be? For I am still a girl. Yes, betrothed to Joseph, a man I hope I may come to love, but not a man I have yet loved, or yet known. I am still a virgin. I have not dishonoured myself, or him. What is happening here?

So I laugh. I Laugh out loud and break the silence with a howl of protest: 'How can this be? This is madness. I mean, how can this be? I am still a virgin. I have not known a man.'

But it is not madness. The angel replies – for it is an angel, I see it now: a messenger from God sent to me, a wild, unruly and faith-filled girl from Nazareth. His voice is replete with a terrible certainty, as though what he is saying is what was always meant to be said, and is as plain and as true as the sun in the sky or the fire in the hearth: 'the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.'

This time the silence is complete. No bird sings. Not even a murmur of breeze whispers through the room. I breathe in, and I breathe out. But my breath is as quiet as the night. Oh, the night, how it feels like the night in that moment; and how glorious the coming dawn if I say yes.

My head spins. I am searching myself, digging deep into all that I have known about God and all I have known about the world. For this is a turning.

The angel looks away. Still there, but not so obviously there as before. Now you might find yourself looking beyond him, or even through him, and imagine yourself dreaming. Only, nothing has ever been as real as this. But it is a different reality: one that I cannot describe. It feels newly born. It is as if heaven has reached down to earth, and touched me. How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given.

Then I am not even trying to see the angel. I am looking to God; looking to God in the motes of dust that are illuminated by the bursting beams of sunlight flooding the room, revealing what was hidden; and looking for God in the spaces between them. For now there is a space in me that God is occupying, my welcome guest, my lover and my friend. 'Here I am,' I say to the wind and the sun, to the spots of dust and to the sky, and there is surprise in my voice that even I can hear, for something incredible is done in me. 'I am the servant of the Lord,' I declare to the world, though no one is listening. Not yet. 'Let what you have said,' I say to the angel, 'be done in me.' So God imparts to human hearts the wonders of heaven.

Let it be done in me according to God's word. Then, like a scroll rolled up, the angel is gone. Everything is as it was before, only everything is changed. I feel it deep within me and hold

my stomach and try to imagine the life that is, even now, in that moment, dividing and dividing and coming into being inside me.

The world is changed. The cycle of the seasons and the cycle of life and death are changed. They continue on their way, but now there is a new music accompanying them. It is the song of heaven. The song of heaven come down to earth. The song of heaven being sung in me. God made visible, vocal, local, in the only way we could ever really see him: in flesh like our flesh, in flesh from my flesh, in the language of another human life.

It is far outside the usual pattern of things. I know that. Yet, even as I say these words, I know it is also the music of a new pattern, an incorruptible flesh, a fire that burns without consuming.

For now I can hold this to myself. I know what every pregnant mother knows: the fascinating secret of a life growing inside me. But it cannot be a secret for long.

And what will Joseph say? How will I explain it to him?

And what will the world say? And how will they ever know or believe that this child is from God?

What will they do to him?

I hold my arms tightly around myself. My heartbeat quickens. I feel a sharp pain – the first of many – for being a mother is a painful thing as well as thrilling. It feels horribly frightening and impossibly difficult. But the words of the angel beat within me: nothing is impossible with God. The Holy Spirit will come upon you. The power of the Most High will over-shadow you. The child to be born in you will be holy; will be called Son of God.

And my cousin Elizabeth also pregnant. The shame that had driven her further into herself and deeper into the shadows of the world was ended. I knew then that I must go to her, and share this with her, and that we could support each other. There would be a way through, and I will treasure in my heart this story of what God has done – for me and for her. Now I see it clearly. I believe it. What is done in me is for everyone, so that all the world may see God. Elizabeth will be the first to receive it. Her darkness slipping away. Her shame expunged. She will be brought out into the light of day.

Jesus. I will call him Jesus. It means 'God saves'. That will be my prayer. That God saves him. That God saves me. That God saves Joseph. That God saves Elizabeth. And that I am given the strength to do what must be done, to cherish this child, to teach him, and walk with him safely through the world until that day when he will be made visible, and his light will scatter the darkness.

And now it is dark. This day is ended. The birdsong hushed. The flowers turned in on themselves. The mountains cool and silent. A new day awaits us.

I look out into the night. I remember the words of Isaiah and think that we have all been walking in darkness for far too long. But we didn't really know it; we got so used to it that it was strange and bewildering to encounter the light. But thrilling. Very thrilling. Full of grace



and joy. that is what I carry: the light of the world, a light that shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it. I am the Lord's lantern. He has kindled a fire inside me.

### 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

Mary sees God's presence in the natural world, from flowers to seasons. How do you experience God in nature? In what ways does the natural world deepen your understanding or appreciation of your faith?

Mary speaks of faith as a "fire that cannot be put out," burning within her and propelling her into the world. How do you understand or experience passion in your own faith? How does it motivate you to act in the world?

Mary shares moments of fear, doubt, and awe in encountering God's message, even though she ultimately responds with trust. How do you navigate feelings of doubt or fear in your relationship with God? What helps you to maintain faith during uncertain times?

Over the past week, you have encountered the story of Advent through the eyes of others, what is your Advent story? With whom will you share it?

### 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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