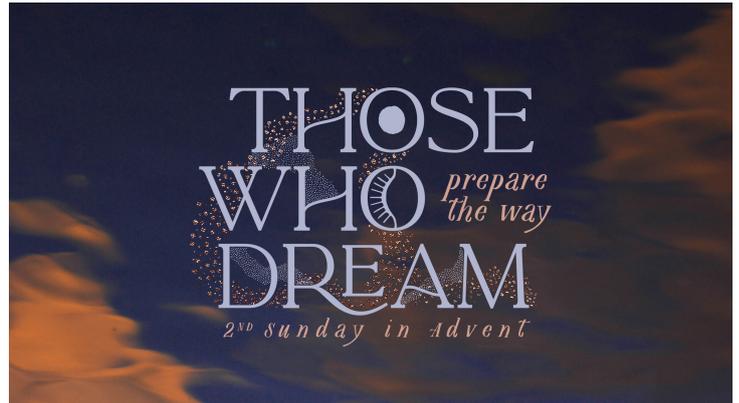


***Those Who Dream... prepare the way
(Peace)***

Gathering

Create a space for worship - perhaps with a small table with a bible, cross and candle. This week, it would be appropriate to find a purple cloth or scarf to decorate the table. Start by lighting the Christ candle. The candle helps to centre us. Take some deep breaths as you gather your thoughts towards God.

A video of parts of this service can be found here: <https://vimeo.com/487960914/d4f1b85790>



Welcome and introduction

Welcome!

How exciting is this - this is our last week when we are not able to sing together...

Friend or stranger, long-termer or visitor, whether you have got it all together or are still wondering where it all went - you are welcome here and I pray we will encounter God's love and grace together.

Light candle

We light a candle to remind us of God's presence with us always, and to draw us once more to the Christ, the Light of the World, whose light shines into even the darkest places of the world and cannot be overcome.

Acknowledgement of Country

We recognise the stewardship of the Wodi Wodi people of the Dharawal nation for the land on which we gather today. Our indigenous brothers and sisters have cared for this place since time immemorial and pay our respects to them and their elders, past, present and emerging. We commit ourselves to the continuing work of seeking justice and reconciliation in this land.

Call to Worship

John the Baptist said, "Prepare the way."

So family of faith, how do we prepare our minds for worship?

We silence the inner critic.

We let go of busy thoughts.

We make space for God to speak.

How do we prepare our hearts for worship?

We bless all emotions.

We feel what we feel.

We open ourselves up to be moved.

How do we prepare our bodies for worship?
We take in the scent, sight, and feel of this space.
We breathe in God's mercy.
We exhale God's love.

How do we prepare our souls for worship?
We bring our full selves into this space.
We wear our hearts on our sleeves.
We trust that even now, God is here.

Family of faith, what we practice in worship, we try to live out in our daily lives.
So prepare the way.
Let us worship Holy God.

Sanctified Art

Holy One, embrace us with your Holy Spirit as we gather here this morning. As we wait in expectation, as we dream your dream, as we seek to live lives that reflect your grace, may we find courage, that our courage would move us to action, and that our actions would reflect Love come into the world. Amen.

Listen: Advent News

Lighting the Advent Candles

We relight the candle of hope.
Light the candle from last week.

A: I dream of the first ball of the Boxing Day Test.
B: I dream of a laundry day, where each sock finds its mate.
A: I dream of family home for the holidays.
B: I dream of good books and homemade meals.
A: I dream of sunset drives with the windows down.
B: These are beautiful dreams, but I also have urgent dreams.

A: I dream of conversations across party lines.
B: I dream of more bridges and less walls.
A: I dream of more laughter and less fear.
B: I dream of more listening and less tears.
A: But most of all, I dream of peace like a river.
B: Today we light the candle of *peace*.
Light candle.
B: May it remind us that there is another way. Amen.

Sanctified Art

Video / Listen: Tell A Story of Hope: <https://vimeo.com/486170681>

Reading: Isaiah 40:1-11

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,

that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.

³ A voice cries out:

'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

⁵ Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'

⁶ A voice says, 'Cry out!'

And I said, 'What shall I cry?'

All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.

⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.

⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand for ever.

⁹ Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;

say to the cities of Judah,
'Here is your God!'

¹⁰ See, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.

¹¹ He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.

Prayer - confession

Holy God,

too often we descend into the deep valleys of this life and
find ourselves stuck in their shadows.

The hills and mountains around us seem to hem us in as
walls in a prison.

In our anxiety, it is easy to convince ourselves that there is
no way out, no way forward.

Forgive us when our fears tell us to hunker down and turn inwards.

Remind us that from the depths, you will lift us.

Merciful God,

too often we find ourselves balancing in the heights, feeling as though there are no ropes or

nets to catch us. The perspective seems solitary, and we feel trapped, afraid of falling. In our anxiety, it is easy to convince ourselves that there is no way down, no way forward. Forgive us when our fears tell us that any move we make will be disastrous. Remind us that you will not let us fall but will bring us to humility and safety.

Gracious God,
from all of the places of fear in our lives, speak comfort to us, call us to prepare our way back to you.
Remind us that even in the wilderness moments of our lives,
we will find the way back to you.
Forgive us when we act out of anxiety, rather than faith.
Forgive us when our human reactions of fear, anger, and vengeance close us off from the ways of peace that you desire for us.
Open our eyes and open our hearts that the path to you might
be revealed before us,
guiding us in compassion and mercy to your holy and ever
lasting peace.

Adapted from Seasons of the Spirit, Advent 2, 6 December 2020

Holy God,
We so wish that peace was something we could buy.
We wish that peace could be ordered in a subscription service,
found on a map,
downloaded in an app,
or voted for in a ballot.
We wish that peace was as easy as a one-time choice when we are feeling our best.
However, what we know is that peace involves everyday decisions over and over, whether or not we are feeling our best.

So today we confess, here with our fellow followers of Christ, that we need your help.
Prepare the way for greater peace, and teach us how to be a part of it. Amen.

Adapted from Sanctified Art

Words of affirmation

The words and deeds of humans are just for a season, only a part of this great Creation.
But the grace of God endures forever, filling all that has been, all that is, and all that is to come.
In all our seasons, we are called to prepare for our God, who forgives all our sins. Thanks be to God! Amen!

Sing/Listen: Comfort, Comfort (TIS 647)

Listening for God's Voice

Let's hear from the scriptures. You may notice that I am not putting the words of the text up on the screen. I want to encourage you to listen to the words and, even better, to bring your bible or device and follow along...

Reading: Mark 1:1-8 (Glenice Richardson)

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

² As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;

³ the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight” ’,

⁴John the baptiser appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptised by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, ‘The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptised you with water; but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.’

Hear what God’s Spirit is saying to the church.

Thanks be to God!

Video - Spill The Beans: <https://youtu.be/5kAAiAKBbnw>

Prayer

God of Peace,

We must admit, there are a million things on our minds.

We would like to be as focused as John the Baptist—preparing the way,
gathering the crowd,

spreading the word of your arrival.

Maybe then we’d know peace.

However, more often than not, we are a swirling compilation of grocery lists,
text messages, e-mails, and over-referenced to-do lists.

So today, we ask for your help in preparing the way.

Could you start with our ears, and then maybe move to our hearts? We’d like to hear you more clearly.

Maybe then we’ll know peace.

Gratefully we pray, Amen.

Sanctified Art

Reflection - Those who dream, prepare the way...

“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” (Mark 1:1)

So begins the story of Jesus’ life and ministry as it is told in the gospel attributed to Mark.

And in one short sentence there is so much, if we are to pause and take it in...

The beginning - can you hear the echo of Genesis 1:1?

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth”.

The gospel writer points us immediately to God’s new creation in the coming of Jesus.

Good news. In the time the gospel writer is telling this story, the birth of an important person was always “good news”; as was the declaration of a new emperor claimed then as ruling by divine right.

imperial inscriptions

The word for “good news” in greek is *εὐαγγελίου* (*euangelion*). It is the word from which we derived the word, “evangelical”.

What we need to grasp here is that this word is not confined to the Christian lexicon. What the gospel writer is doing here is claiming space from the imperial world and giving it a new and subversive meaning.

“Good news” is found, not in the imperial might and rule of the emperor (also often described as the son of god), but in this Jesus, the Christ.

Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God - in naming Jesus here, the gospel writer, in the first sentence, sets the tone for the rest of the narrative.

Jesus, the one the people of Israel were waiting for, the Christ, the Messiah.

Son of God, a claim much more subversive in the political world imperial Rome.

So in one brief sentence, the gospel writer captures the expanse of what is being written about. And then presents a quote from the passage we heard from Isaiah 40 establishing that all of this is indeed what the prophets had foretold.

“Prepare the way...”, the messenger is coming.

This is a new creation, but the point of this quote is continuity - Jesus is the fulfilment of the prophecies that the people of Israel knew well.

Prepare the way...

In the lead up to Christmas, many of us spend a great deal of time preparing - cleaning the house, mowing the lawns (often, at this time of the year!), putting up trees and lights, cooking lots of food. We “get ready”, if you like.

But the word for “prepare” in Greek is more like “construction” or “build” so the connotation is not just that we get ready by sweeping, cleaning and cooking, but there is something far more fundamental than that - something more like - construct or lay the path.

So perhaps this is calling us to be “paving the way”. It seems to me to be a much more pro-active word, something that calls us to not be stalled by a roadblock, by a bump in the road, but perhaps calls us to be people who work to smooth out the bumps, to lower the mountains and raise the valleys (to use the language of Isaiah 40).

And then the writer of Mark launches into the story of John the Baptist, appearing in the wilderness, preparing the way for Jesus, proclaiming “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4).

There is no birth story of either John or Jesus here.

Mark’s gospel leaps straight into the adult appearing of both men.

John appears in the wilderness. Mark’s gospel will point us often to God’s love and grace coming from unexpected places - not from the temple or the places of wealth and power, but from the margins. And it begins with John in the wilderness, calling out a message of “of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”.

Now there is language that has tied the church in knots for centuries: “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (!)

As we wrestle with how we share good news with our communities, with our families, we need to wrestle with the language we use.

“Repentance for the forgiveness of sins” has attracted connotations that are largely unhelpful and, frankly, are not heard as “good news”, particularly not if these are the first words we hear. Mind you, from the story the gospel-writers tell, I don’t think the Jewish leaders heard them initially as good news either!

In some ways, these words are like the headline in a news story, but unless we click on the link or read the rest of the story, we lose a good deal of their meaning and depth.

So if we are going to use that kind of language, then we need to unpack the words for 21st century ears and hearts.

“Repentance” means “turning” - accepting that we are heading in the wrong direction and turning around.

“Sin” is separation from God - less about doing something deliberately wrong or being innately bad, and more about our being and doing, our choices, that lead us away from God.

“Repentance for the forgiveness of sins”, then, turns us back towards the God who welcomes us in an all-encompassing embrace of love.

John is calling the people of Israel back to God.

John is calling us back to God.

And the rest of the story recorded for us by the gospel-writer, describes the one, Jesus the Christ, who will teach us what that means; who will live a life that embodies what it means to live in relationship with God, even when that living leads to his arrest and death. Jesus the Christ whose rising again will show that the choice to live in relationship with God, to embody love and grace and peace, will bring life in all its fullness and will, indeed, change the world.

How, then, are you preparing the way / laying the path - for you, for your family, for this community - to hear and respond to the “good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God”?

God of all, grant us peace.

When obstacles stand in our path, may we not despair.

When we feel like we’re in free-fall, may we trust.

When life feels chaotic, may we remember to breathe.

When everything is going well, may we pause to savour.

God of all, we pray: grant us peace. Amen.

Seasons of the Spirit, Resources for Advent 2, 6 December 2020

Video / Listen: Those Who Dream

Responding

Prayer for others

God of faithful grace and goodness,
we give thanks for the words of hope and comfort that echo down the centuries
from Isaiah to John the Baptist,
from Jesus of Nazareth through Mark the evangelist,
through translators, and publishers and printers
to us here today.

“Comfort them,” the prophet is told,

“tell them that they have suffered long enough, their sins are forgiven”.

And so he does, so she does, so they do.

Faithful God, may we be open to hear your word, and daring enough to look in unlikely places
for signs of your presence.

May we be wise enough to discern

which of the many voices that we hear speaks for you, and brave enough to pass on the radical
good news that we hear.

As John spoke from a barren, desert place to people on the margins,

far from the centres of power, so we pray for those who live on the margins now, their births
uncelebrated;

their deaths not publicly grieved.

We pray for refugees and asylum-seekers;

for visitors to food banks in our communities,

and for others who lack even that safety net.

We pray for those whose fragile hold on coping has been shaken by the effects of Covid:

people without secure jobs or money in the bank;

people for whom home is not a place of safety;

students without loving parents to go back to;
old people without children to look out for them.

We pray for those in positions of power,
the best of whom feel powerless, and admit it; troubled by the huge responsibility that they bear.
May this be an opportunity for all of us to reassess what really matters,
and what sort of world we want to live in.

May our vulnerability create a crack through which your light can shine,
as the solid ground of our confidence is shaken,
may a tiny mustard-seed of faith drop in,
and your kingdom have a chance to grow.

God, in just such times as these
you have sent your prophets to challenge the powerful and comfort the oppressed.
In just such times as these
you have slipped in alongside your people to let them know that they are not alone, for you are
with them.
May we be among those who help to prepare the way for your coming,
may we speak words of comfort and compassion,
may we be gifts of comfort and compassion to our families, community and the world;
and may all the honour and glory be yours. Amen.

Spill The Beans, Issue 37, p.22

Offering

In responding to what we have read and how we have heard God speak to us, we commit ourselves to moving with God's Spirit, breathing life in the world around us.

Let's pray...

Our God, you give us always what we need, and not what we think will make us happy.
We ask for success, and you show us how to grow through failure.
We ask for peace, and you set us a challenge.
We ask for growth in numbers, and you give us a microscope to search
for signs of the kingdom.
But when we are hungry, you feed us;
when we grieve, you console us;
when we are weary, you let us rest.

And now, what do you need and want from us?
Not money; not right belief
not ritual praise; not even the doing of good unless
that springs freely from lives steeped in love.
So all that we can offer
is what you have already given.
We give it back with gratitude and joy. Amen.

Spill The Beans, Issue 37, p.22

Notices:

- if you would like to receive the notices by email, then please let us know and we will make sure you get added to the list - there is a card you can fill in as much or as little, and put it in the plate or give it to an elder.
- Advent - devotional studies - \$5 - available today.

- Christmas tree - take a gift tag, buy a present, return it here by 17 December
- Uniting World - gift cards
- Christmas Bowl - envelopes are available today - you can return them directly, give online, or put your envelope in the offering plate
- Christmas Services - who will you invite to share this special time?

Sending out

Blessing

As you go,

May you have the strength to dream wild dreams of justice, peace, and joy that overflows.

May you have the humanity to listen to the dreams of others.

May you have the confidence to trust that the God who heard the cries of the Israelites in Egypt, hears your dreams as well.

And may you have the conviction to return to this space, for our best dreams are those we dream together.

In the name of God who dreamed us into being;

Jesus the one who lived God's dream;

and the Holy Spirit who continues to inspire our dreams.

Go in peace, go in love. Amen

drawn from Sarah Are

As we go into this week,

may we prepare the way of the Lord,

making straight the paths that lead to God,

in our hearts and souls,

through our words and actions,

by our choices and decisions.

May we go as God's beloved, filled with the Holy Spirit.

Spill The Beans, Issue 37, p.23