

Courageous Choices

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 signify that we are in a time of preparation. Take some deep breaths as you gather your thoughts towards God.*

Gathering

Welcome to our preparations for Christmas!
Welcome to Advent!
Advent means “coming” - and for the next 4 weeks, we prepare for the celebration of Christmas - the coming of Christ among us: living our life, dying our death, loving us into God’s way of being.
Our preparations invite us into a space of waiting, expectation, and longing.

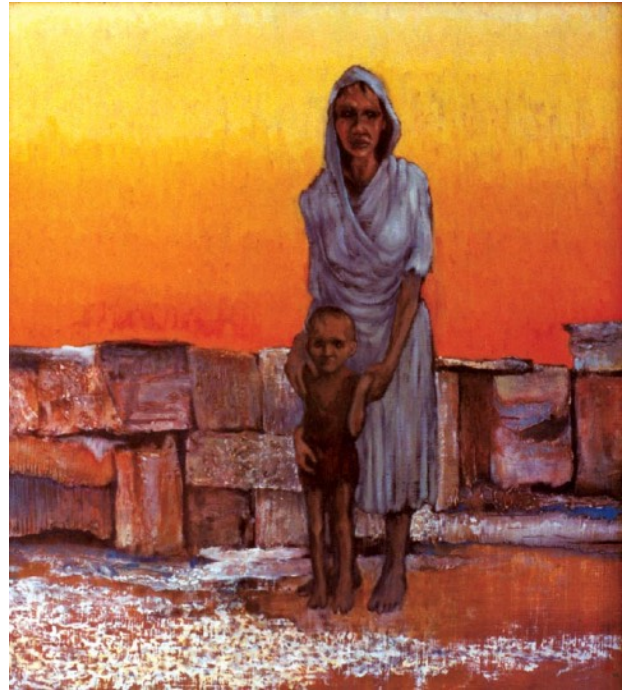
As we begin our preparations this year, we have chosen to step away from the Bible readings we usually have from the Revised Common Lectionary, and instead hear the story of Emmanuel - God-with-us - from a different perspective. For the next 4 weeks, we will be hearing readings selected for us and compiled in the *The Women’s Lectionary*, by Ashley M. Wilcox. These readings will give us an insight into the line of ancestors, particularly the women, who lead us to Jesus - the women, if you like, of Jesus’ family tree as recorded for us in Matthew’s gospel (Matthew 1:1-17). It is a kind of “*Who Do You Think You Are?*” for Jesus!

It is a fascinating family tree - and if you haven’t looked at it before, I can guarantee a few surprises. This week, we will hear Tamar’s story, then over the coming weeks, we will hear from Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba - putting them alongside the stories of Mary and Elizabeth as they anticipate the coming of their children, Jesus and John.

Some of these stories are confronting and are likely to raise some discomfort for us. Always, if there is anything you want to discuss further or need to talk through, my door is open.

Light Candle

We light the candle - focussing our attention, allowing ourselves to be drawn to its flame. We look to Jesus, the light of the world, a light that shines even in the darkest of times offering hope and healing.



She Is a Tree of Life to Them
by Frank Wesley, from the book *Frank Wesley: Exploring Faith with a Brush* by Naomi Wray, Pace Publishers NZ. Used by permission.

Acknowledgement of Country

As we look upon the hills and valleys, the oceans and rivers of this place, we see the love poured out upon this Land by those who have cared for it since time beyond measure.

This land is God's land and God's Spirit dwells here.

We honour those who have gone before and those who are yet to come.

May we be mindful of the calling God places on all humanity to care for Creation.

May we take our lead from the Wadi Wadi People of the Dharawal Nation, whose stories are entwined with the stewarding of this place.

May we learn from them and walk with them.

Call to Worship

In a new season, a new moment,
a new turning of God,

we gather.

In an old story, an old promise,
an old truth,

we gather.

In a fresh word for our time, a fresh hope for our world,
a fresh invitation into life,

we gather.

In God, and God's great love,
in Jesus, and the Advent promise,
in Spirit, and a new hearing,

**we gather, we wait,
we worship.**

Spill The Beans, Issue 45, Resources for 27 November 22, p.10

Advent Candles

As we prepare for the celebrations, we tell an ancient story - we are reminded of how it speaks to us from generation to generation.

We come to this circle of light to share in its promise.

This first flickering is to banish darkness.

This is the candle of hope.

Let us honour the Light!

Sing - Here We Are (ATW 361)

We sing a song that gives thanks for what we have and looks to how we might share our gratitude with the world around us.

Here we are, under this sky – oh, what a land to live in.

How did we come to be in such a place?

A sky that talks day after day,
telling of endless glory,
the glory of God, the work of his own hands.

But how do we say our thank yous?

Anything would be far too small.

How do we show we care?

We could try to share.

Here we are, under your roof –
safe and secure you make us.

You are the rock, the centre of our land.

Jesus here, speaking our names –
oh, what a gift his word is –

making us part of his own family.

But how do we say our thank yous?

Anything would be far too small.

How do we show we've heard?
We could spread the word.

Here we are, richer than kings,
all that we need provided,
more than enough for this life and beyond.
Jesus' love, shown on the cross,

healing our broken bodies,
filling us up with his new kind of life.
But how do we say our thankyou's?
Anything would be far too small.
How do we pass it on?
We could sing his song.

© 1988, Robin Mann

Prayer

Risk-taking God,
we gather in this place
to remember and celebrate these special days that lead to the birth of your Son, Jesus.
Scripture is full of strange and wonderful stories of children conceived in sometimes
dangerous and sometimes miraculous ways.
Two of your children,
Tamar and Mary,
are remembered today.
Two very different stories and times
but two women making choices for themselves that will lead them to become mothers
with a part in your greater story.

God, you took such a risk giving us free will, allowing us to make decisions
and accepting their outcomes,
we do not understand why,
but we trust in you and hope we can learn from history, our own and others.

[Loving God], we often learn from our mistakes
but we are sorry that we so often make mistakes,
especially when others are affected.
May we, like Judah,
realise when we have made poor decisions
and seek your forgiveness and reconciliation with anyone affected.

Each and every child is made in your image,
each one loved by you
and with a part to play in your greater story.
As we wait in these Advent days,
preparing to celebrate your greatest risk in coming amongst us [in humanity's
vulnerability],
may we cherish the love you have for us
and find ways to help others feel loved and cherished by you.
Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. Amen.

Spill The Beans, Issue 45, Resources for 27 November 22, p.10

Listening for God's Voice

Video - Jesus' Family Tree

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=06XHn4D9Nzw>

So to put things into context, here is a quick run through of Jesus' genealogy - from
Matthew 1:1-17.

Introduction to readings

The first of the women in Jesus' family tree that we are looking at is Tamar. Matthew's account of the families of Israel begins with Abraham, then Isaac and then Jacob.

Jacob had 12 sons - one of whom is Joseph - the one who enabled them to travel to Egypt to escape the famine. Another of Jacob's sons was Judah.

Tamar was married to Judah's eldest son, Er.

But Er had died and, by the custom of the time, she then married Judah's next son, Onan. Onan also died - we won't go into detail - but look it up if you are up for a further theological conundrum.

Judah, Tamar's father-in-law, then promised her the next son, Shelah - but he wasn't old enough so Judah asked her to wait. And so she waited, and waited, and eventually realised that Judah had no intention of giving her in marriage to Shelah.

So, abandoned and betrayed, what was she to do...?

Reading: Genesis 38:13-19, 24-27

¹³When Tamar was told, 'Your father-in-law is going up to Timnah to shear his sheep', ¹⁴she put off her widow's garments, put on a veil, wrapped herself up, and sat down at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah. She saw that Shelah was grown up, yet she had not been given to him in marriage. ¹⁵When Judah saw her, he thought her to be a prostitute, for she had covered her face. ¹⁶He went over to her at the roadside, and said, 'Come, let me come in to you', for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. She said, 'What will you give me, that you may come in to me?' ¹⁷He answered, 'I will send you a kid from the flock.' And she said, 'Only if you give me a pledge, until you send it.' ¹⁸He said, 'What pledge shall I give you?' She replied, 'Your signet and your cord, and the staff that is in your hand.' So he gave them to her, and went in to her, and she conceived by him. ¹⁹Then she got up and went away, and taking off her veil she put on the garments of her widowhood.

²⁴ About three months later Judah was told, 'Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the whore; moreover she is pregnant as a result of whoredom.' And Judah said, 'Bring her out, and let her be burned.' ²⁵As she was being brought out, she sent word to her father-in-law, 'It was the owner of these who made me pregnant.' And she said, 'Take note, please, whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff.' ²⁶Then Judah acknowledged them and said, 'She is more in the right than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah.' And he did not lie with her again.

²⁷ When the time of her delivery came, there were twins in her womb.

[They were named Perez and Zerah]

Reading: Luke 1:26-38

²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He 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. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' ³⁴Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' ³⁵The 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. ³⁶And 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. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God.' ³⁸Then 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.

For the Word of God in Scripture,
for the Word of God among us,
for the Word of God within us,
Thanks be to God!

Listen - Gabriel's Message (Together In Song 302)

As we reflect on Mary's story, let's listen to a carol that seems to have appeared in the English collections in the 1920s. Its words seem to be loosely based on those of a Basque carol of the late 19th century. This version is performed by Sting...

The angel Gabriel from heaven came,
his wings as drifted snow, his eyes as
flame;
"All hail," said he, "thou lowly maiden Mary,
most highly favoured lady, *Gloria!*

Then gentle Mary meekly bowed her head,
"To me be as it pleaseth God," she said,
"my soul shall laud and magnify his holy
name":
most highly favoured lady, *Gloria!*

"for known a blessed Mother thou shalt be,
all generations aud and honour thee,
thy Son shall be Immanuel, by seers
foretold,
most highly favoured lady." *Gloria!*

of her, Immanuel, the Christ was born
in Bethlehem, all on a Christmas morn,
and everyone throughout the world will
ever say,
"most highly favoured lady". *Gloria!*

Reflection

Emmanuel, God-with-us here and now, as we being our preparations to celebrate the birth of Jesus, send your Spirit to stir us, to encourage us, to enable us to reflect your love in the word and to tell your story to our family, friends and neighbours. Amen.

Tamar, appears by name in the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew's gospel (Matthew 1:3). And while we, with our western, contemporary eyes and sensibilities, might find her story confronting, it is important we ask ourselves - why is her name explicitly held in the family line of Jesus? Perhaps we can see this story less about seduction and manipulation and more about a woman's courage to take control of what she could to ensure her place in the patriarchal society she found herself in.

Tamar's is a story of a woman who has known great loss - two husbands have died and she is still childless - and who finds the system and law that was supposed to protect her is of no use at all if those who are supposed to act by that law choose not to do so. That is, for a woman, she is protected by her father until she marries and then she is considered the property of her husband and his family. Upon the death of her husband, she is to be taken in by his brothers. This is the law which was supposed to protect widows by ensuring they had a future under the care of another man - it is a patriarchal system, of course.

Tamar finds herself trapped by the rules of marriage as established by the law. Having lost two husbands, Tamar should have been given Shelah, Judah's third son, to marry. But

Judah, scared that Shelah might suffer the same fate as Tamar's two deceased husbands, prevaricates. This leaves Tamar in a kind of limbo: promised with protection, but some time in the future, not now. She is, in that culture, purposeless and vulnerable.

As time passes, Tamar realises that Judah has no intention of following through on his promise regarding Shelah, so she takes things into her own hands. Her family line will not end with her.

She discards the modest clothing of a widow, that which declares 'I am not available', and dons a veil. As Judah approaches her for sex, for she looks available now, Tamar does the deal that will guarantee her future and her family line. She asks for Judah's signet, cord, and staff, the symbols of his role as patriarch and head of the tribe, as surety for the goat he has promised her for payment.

She usurps him, symbolically - she holds the symbols of headship.

But Judah doesn't know it until months later when accusations fly over Tamar's growing belly and she plays the trump card in the face of Judah by revealing his own participation in her pregnancy.

Judah, in a moment of humility, recognises that he is in the wrong. He had failed in his promise to Tamar. She was more in the right than he and Tamar is rightly praised for her initiative and action.

She holds her place in the genealogy of Jesus. Tamar overcame the vulnerability of her position, the whispers of innuendo, and turned the patriarchal norms on their head.

Tamar, like many women in the time from which this story originates, seems to be in a powerless position when finding herself on the edge of a patriarchal society. Yet she refuses to succumb to that vulnerability and, instead, turns her vulnerability into a position of strength by her own actions.

While with our modern eyes, we may see a woman who seduces or provokes a man into sleeping with her, perhaps instead we can think of her as courageous, patient and wise as she uses the only thing she can control, her own self, to seek to ensure her safety and well-being and a future for her family.

To hold onto here, is if we ever find ourselves wondering about the disfunction or scandals that exist in our own families, I find encouragement that Jesus' family has as much scandal as anyone else - there will be more in the coming weeks(!). Jesus doesn't come from a line of people who have never done anything wrong or a family that has no secrets, scandals or falling-outs - he comes from a family line that has intrigue and survival and pain and commitment and joy.

And so we begin with a woman who makes choices for herself, choices about her own body, that in time lead us to Jesus, God's chosen one, coming amongst us.

This story, if somewhat confronting to us today, sits and is held in the family line of Jesus - Tamar's story is brought to memory when we consider the ancestry of Jesus - not to be ashamed of, but to be held, considered and shared.

One wonders about Mary, too, who finds herself in a position every parent dreads for their teenage daughter.

She too is likely to have had to suffer the whispers in her community, the judgement over her actions. And yet she responds to Gabriel's message with a commitment, "Here I am."

It is important to notice that the way Luke tells the story of Mary's encounter with Gabriel reflects the stories in the Hebrew Scriptures of many of God's call to the *prophets*. There is a messenger; the initial response is to say something like, "who me?" and to give a reason why it really doesn't seem such a good idea; there is reassurance from the messenger; and then there is commitment. Compare Mary's encounter with Gabriel to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:1-12) and Isaiah and his cherubim and seraphim (Isaiah 6:1-8).

What that means is that Mary is not just the bearer of a child, Jesus, she is named as a prophet - particularly in Luke's account - as she goes from this encounter to visit her cousin Elizabeth and sings her song of praise (Luke 1:46-55) which we will look at in a couple of week's time.

Like Tamar, Mary is resilient and hopeful for the future of her family and commits herself to the life to which God is calling her.

As we enter this time of preparation, a time that often gets way too busy, a bit mad, often stretches our patience with one another, and sometimes particularly challenges our family relationships, perhaps we can ponder for a moment women who make hard choices for the sake of their families, women who trust in God for their future and for the future of their families, women who have the courage to speak truth into the world.

May we celebrate them.

May we be them.

May we raise them.

Let's pray,

God, we know that the world is not always straight forward, that the choices we are asked to make are not always clear. Give us faith and courage to shape our lives and our choices in ways that reflect your love in the world. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

Responding

Sing - In Full Flight (Seasons 6-22)

This song will accompany us through the Advent Season - it invites us to be real about the world around us and to trust that in God's love and grace, we too can soar.

We can't quite see what tomorrow will offer.

Nothing's that clear, so little in place.

Yet, "All shall be well," the wise lady whispers;

all shall be well, a goodness to trace.

Bird in full flight, bird on the wing.

Soaring above, beyond on the run.

Journeys of change, vistas of wonder.

Leading to life through the heart of the One.

Wonders of birth, pained separations.

Myst'ries too deep, too hard to explain.

Beauty and hope in each new day dawning,

the presence of joy at play once again.

Bird in full flight...

Ev'ry day moments alive to love's splendour.

Why turn aside for a heaven above?

God in the laugh, the cry and the gesture, grace in the now, peace through the dove.

Bird in full flight...

We who are called to live out Love's passion.

Those who set out on the journey of faith; need look to the skies only to fashion

the daring of birds, bold courses they take.

Bird in full flight...

Prayer for Others (Rhonda Back)

Loving God,

Like Mary we are invited to look forward into this season of wonder to see where we find Christ at work in our ordinary lives.

As the seasons change and the Southern hemisphere welcomes Summer with longer days, we are grateful for the sunlight each day as a reminder that your light can never be put out, and that the Jesus light of the world is already here and will never leave us. Hear our prayers for the world, and help us listen for your answers.

We pray for anyone who feels powerless within their home, work or community life. May they find opportunities and people to help them.

We pray for anyone who feels bound to another person or situation where they feel helpless and unable to break free from. May they find, through you, strength to endure, and people to assist them.

We pray for anyone who is trying to follow in the way of Jesus, whatever their situation or circumstances. May they know your love surrounding them and people to encourage and support them.

We pray for all those with a responsibility for law making, may they seek to create laws that are just and fair and we pray for all those who feel the law is binding them against their will, and are struggling to change the law.

We pray for all those who seek to undermine and ignore the law for selfish greed and desire – may they realise their errors and seek to turn from them.

We pray for all our brothers and sisters in Christ all around the world, each one trying to follow in the way of Jesus, each one bound and committed to you, God. May they know your peace and guiding light in these Advent days.

We pray for anyone searching for you this Advent; may they find you in all places and people, and come to love and follow you.

Jesus light of the world, have mercy on us.

Amen

Offering

We make space now to think about what we have heard and seen today and consider our response.

As we make our offering - we remember again that this is not just about money - either here in the plate or through a bank transfer - this is also about how we are generous with our time and energy and gifts; and about how we resolve to live differently because we have encountered the living Christ.

And if this is your first time with us or if you are visiting, please don't feel obliged to give. You are our guests, and we want you simply to enjoy the blessings of worshipping together. We are glad you are here!

We pray...

Parent God,
you have given us life and love,
you are generous beyond measure.
We bring to you our offerings,
may they help to build your kingdom, here and now.
They are but a sign of all that we offer,
may we be generous
with our time and talents
taking the light of Jesus with us wherever we go this week. Amen.

Spill The Beans, Issue 45, Resources for 27 November 22, p.10

Sending

Sing - I, The Lord of Sea and Sky (TIS 658)

This song echos the conversation God has with Isaiah when God calls Isaiah to speak to the people of Israel. The response, in the chorus, also echoes Mary's response when God calls to her - as we sing it together, may it also be our response as God calls to each one of us.

I, the Lord of sea and sky,
I have heard my people cry.
All who dwell in dark and sin my hand will save.
I who made the stars of night,
I will make their darkness bright.
Who will bear my light to them?
Whom shall I send?

*Here I am, Lord; is it I, Lord?
I have heard you calling in the night;
I will go, Lord, if you lead me.
I will hold your people in my heart.*

I, the Lord of snow and rain,
I have borne my people's pain;
I have wept for love of them.

They turn away.
I will break their hearts of stone,
give them hearts for love alone.
I will speak my word to them.
Whom shall I send?
Here I am, Lord...

I, the Lord of wind and flame,
I will tend the poor and lame,
I will set a feast for them.
My hand will save.
Finest bread I will provide,
till their hearts are satisfied.
I will give my life to them.
Whom shall I send?
Here I am, Lord...

Words: Daniel L. Schutte

Sending and Blessing

Send us [into your world today],
to take risks,
speaking truth to power,
unbinding those who are bound,
and committing to continue to follow in the way of Jesus.
God bless us as we go to walk in the way of Jesus,
may your spirit continue to guide us and encourage us in our risk taking.

Spill The Beans, Issue 45, Resources for 27 November 22, p.13

Rev Kath Merrifield
27 November 2022

[Drawn from material published in *Spill The Beans*, Issue 45, Resources for 27 November 22 with thanks and gratitude.]