

Treason!

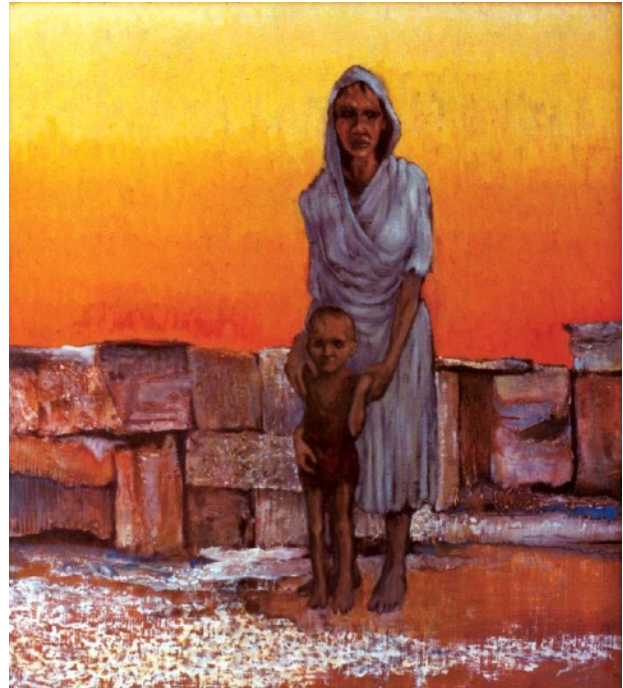
Gathering

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

As we prepare for Christmas 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, putting alongside the readings from Luke as Mary prepares for the birth of her child, readings that tell the story of some of the women in Jesus' genealogy as recorded in Matthew 1.¹

Last week we met Tamar; today we meet Rahab.



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.

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.

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.

¹ These readings are taken from the "The Women's Lectionary", by Ashley M. Wilcox

Call to Worship

This season reshapes itself around the long and deep promise that is God.
From ancient times
the echo of the story has haunted our world,
reinventing itself,
finding a way
to bring hope into every age.
And we hear it still,
whispered through the air,
in the hope and expectation:
incarnation,
incarnation.

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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.

The first flame banishes darkness, inviting us to hope.
This second flame is to bring balance
and the promise of harmony.

***This is the candle of peace.
Let us honour the Light!***

Sing - Come O God Of All The Earth (TIS 181)

We sing a song of invitation and praise, of anticipation and celebration.

Come, O God of all the earth:
come to us O Righteous One;
come, and bring our love to birth:
in the glory of your Son.

*Sing out, earth and skies!
Sing of the God who loves you;
raise your joyful cries;
dance to the life around you.*

Come, O God of wind and flame:
fill the earth with righteousness;
teach us all to sing your name:
may our lives your love confess.

Sing out, earth and skies...

Come, O God of flashing light:

twinkling star and burning sun;
God of day and God of night:
in your light we all are one.
Sing out, earth and skies...

Come, O God of snow and rain:
shower down upon the earth;
come, O God of joy and pain:
God of sorrow, God of mirth.
Sing out, earth and skies...

Come, O Justice, come, O Peace:
come and shape our hearts anew;
come and make oppression cease:
bring us all to life in you.
Sing out, earth and skies...

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Prayer

Creator God,
what an amazing universe you have created,
a multitude of mysterious galaxies,
stars and black holes,
a world of diversity, danger and wonder,
humans made in your image with free will to do whatever they choose.
What a crazy mess it feels like sometimes,
yet into the craziness you sent Jesus,
you took a risk and entered into creation
to show us your great love for us
and to help us to choose wisely and carefully.

Around the world,
our brothers and sisters are preparing for Christmas,
remembering the story of Jesus coming into the world as a tiny, vulnerable baby.
So many people,
down so many centuries,
involved in his birth story.
Normal men and women,
some choosing well and others not so well.
Women, like Rahab,
Elizabeth and Mary,
each one different and with different choices to make,
each one open to you,
their living God,
and each one given a different life to live.

These women played their part
in your greater story and today we are invited to remember and give thanks for them
and to ask what is it that you want us to do with the lives we have been given.

Loving God, we seek your forgiveness,
for the times we have judged others for their choices,
and for the times we have failed to choose your way.

Merciful God,
you promise to forgive us and to accept us back into a loving relationship with you,
help us to receive your forgiveness and commit ourselves to making better choices in the
future.

Ageless God, your story is still unfolding today in our crazy world
and we still have a part to play,
help us to be bold and accept your call to take risks and build your kingdom,
here and now. Amen.

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Listening for God's Voice

Video - Jesus' Family Tree

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YiSbUibK6VA>

Here is another version of Jesus' family tree from Matthew 1 - this time using the names of people as they might be named in the way of North American First Nations peoples.

Intro to readings

Our first reading comes from the book of Joshua.

After decades wandering in the wilderness, the people of Israel, under Joshua's leadership, are getting ready to enter the Promised Land.

But this land is not vacant - there are people living there - in towns and cities - so it seems they are going to have to fight for it.

Reading: Joshua 2:1-21

Then Joshua son of Nun sent two men secretly from Shittim as spies, saying, 'Go, view the land, especially Jericho.' So they went, and entered the house of a prostitute whose name was Rahab, and spent the night there. ²The king of Jericho was told, 'Some Israelites have come here tonight to search out the land.' ³Then the king of Jericho sent orders to Rahab, 'Bring out the men who have come to you, who entered your house, for they have come only to search out the whole land.' ⁴But the woman took the two men and hid them. Then she said, 'True, the men came to me, but I did not know where they came from.' ⁵And when it was time to close the gate at dark, the men went out. Where the men went I do not know. Pursue them quickly, for you can overtake them.' ⁶She had, however, brought them up to the roof and hidden them with the stalks of flax that she had laid out on the roof. ⁷So the men pursued them on the way to the Jordan as far as the fords. As soon as the pursuers had gone out, the gate was shut.

⁸ Before they went to sleep, she came up to them on the roof ⁹and said to the men: 'I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that dread of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt in fear before you. ¹⁰For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites that were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed. ¹¹As soon as we heard it, our hearts failed, and there was no courage left in any of us because of you. The Lord your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below. ¹²Now then, since I have dealt kindly with you, swear to me by the Lord that you in turn will deal kindly with my family. Give me a sign of good faith ¹³that you will spare my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death.' ¹⁴The men said to her, 'Our life for yours! If you do not tell this business of ours, then we will deal kindly and faithfully with you when the Lord gives us the land.'

¹⁵ Then she let them down by a rope through the window, for her house was on the outer side of the city wall and she resided within the wall itself. ¹⁶She said to them, 'Go towards the hill country, so that the pursuers may not come upon you. Hide yourselves there for three days, until the pursuers have returned; then afterwards you may go on your way.' ¹⁷The men said to her, 'We will be released from this oath that you have made us swear to you ¹⁸if we invade the land and you do not tie this crimson cord in the window through which you let us down, and you do not gather into your house your father and mother, your brothers, and all your family. ¹⁹If any of you go out of the doors of your house into the street, they shall be responsible for their own death, and we shall be innocent; but if a hand is laid upon any who are with you in the house, we shall bear the responsibility for their death. ²⁰But if you tell this business of ours, then we shall be released from this oath that you made us swear to you.' ²¹She said, 'According to your words, so be it.' She sent them away and they departed. Then she tied the crimson cord in the window.

Reading: Luke 1:39-45

³⁹ In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy

Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

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!

Reflection

Let us pray...

God of our ancestors,

loving God, from generation to generation,

we hear stories today both familiar and perhaps not so much.

Open our hearts and minds to receive your story

and deepen our understanding and our commitment to show more of your love in the world we encounter. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

So how does Rahab earn her place in Jesus' family tree?

Rahab lives in Jericho, one of the towns the people of Israel will need to destroy in order to control the land God has given them.

Today, I don't want to go into the issues around how this part of Israel's history is read and understood by indigenous peoples - suffice to say, that God's supposed instruction to God's people to take the land and kill all its inhabitants is deeply problematic - we might come back to that another time...

For now, let's meet Rahab. She is a Canaanite, a foreigner to the people of Israel, a citizen of Jericho.

The Israelite spies are staying in her home.

Most English translations of the Bible, describe Rahab in Joshua 2:2 as a "prostitute" - and many scholars, in reflecting on Rahab's behaviour, have focused on her profession and so not expected any loyalty from her.

But some scholars today suggest that the translation is not accurate, and that Rahab was not a prostitute but an inn keeper - which would also explain why the spies were in her home; and the presence of flax on her roof (Josh 2:6) and crimson cord (Josh 2:18, 21) may indicate that she was also involved in the textile trade, a business woman.

Sex worker, inn-keeper or business woman, Rahab is smart.

She quickly reads the situation she is in and, in effect, she plays both sides in order to secure her own safety and that of her wider family.

She tells her own king's men that the spies are not with her any more - while she hides them on her roof - and then sends the king's men in the opposite direction. Some might say, that was treason!

She then negotiates with the spies and demands protection - for herself and her family (Josh 2:13).

In the midst of these negotiations she speaks in a way that is remarkably well-informed about what God has done for the people of Israel in rescuing them from Egypt, and the fierceness of the Israelite army as it has begun to secure the land (Josh 2:8-11).

And once she has secured what she needs, she then ensures the spies escape safely and can return to their camp (Josh 2:15-16).

In the ensuing invasion, Rahab and her family were indeed rescued and protected from the destruction of Jericho (Josh 6:22-25) - remember Joshua's army marched around the walls until the walls collapsed (one wonders can only assume Rahab's house that was located within the walls was destroyed when the walls fell). The Scriptures record that Rahab was brought out of the city as promised and "her family has lived in Israel ever since" (Josh 6:25).

Rahab, a foreigner in Israel, then settles and Matthew's gospel tells us she married Salmon and had a son, Boaz who we'll meet next week when we encounter Ruth.

So what might we learn from Rahab?

It seems Rahab is a single woman, trying to make her way in the world.

When the spies arrive, she is vulnerable.

She takes a risk in protecting them, and uses that situation to ensure she and her family will be protected. The first risk was courageous in itself, but to then make demands of the invaders is even more so.

It is tempting to judge Rahab - and in many ways, she is judged already in the way she is described and the way our English translation holds her in describing her as a prostitute. It is tempting to judge her for her treachery.

But there are women in the world today who have to act to protect their families. I can't imagine what it is like in Ukraine or Syria or the Congo where invading, violent, usually men, threaten the safety of families who are simply trying to get on with their lives.

And, I wonder how many women in the world today are judged because we have preconceived ideas about sex workers, or because they are single and childless, or because they have had to make hard decision for the sake of their families?

How many women do we overlook, failing to see the successful businesses they are running?

How many women do we judge rather than celebrating their wisdom, their courage, their street-smarts?

When Mary discovers she is pregnant, she goes to visit her cousin, Elizabeth.

Elizabeth is much older and was thought to be beyond child-bearing age and yet she is also pregnant. The story doesn't tell us why Mary goes to Elizabeth except that the angel had told Mary of Elizabeth's pregnancy and perhaps she wanted to see for herself.

Perhaps the two women were close and Mary hoped she could find sanctuary but I imagine it was still a risk for Mary to disclose her predicament, even to Elizabeth.

And then, at the sound of Mary's voice, Elizabeth's unborn child gives her a good kick (Luke 1:41), and Elizabeth proclaims loudly - the Greek phrase means "megaphone" - she proclaims loudly the blessing Mary is and carries (Luke 1:42).

"Blessed is she who believed that there would be fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." (Luke 1:45) There is no judgement from Elizabeth, she simply names and celebrates Mary's faithfulness.

Luke's account tells us that the Holy Spirit is active here - speaking through Elizabeth (Luke 1:41) and working through Mary (Luke 1:35).

Beyond the assumptions and expectations of the world, beyond our temptation to judge and condemn, God's Spirit is moving, speaking, challenging, calling.

How will we respond?

Reflective Prayer

Advent is a time of waiting,
a time when life is real

but not fully made known,
a time to reflect on the past,
to learn from the great story,
to listen and wrestle with the harsh reality of life then and now.

Today we remember Rahab,
a strong, courageous woman,
who recognises what she needs to do
to save her family,
she takes risks and is bold in her words and actions.

Her reward is to be named in the family line of Jesus.
Jesus, who is our deliverer,
our shepherd, our guide,
our peacemaker.

We give thanks for the story of Rahab,
for the wonder of humanity
and the amazing reality
that you love us so much
you sent Jesus into the world
so that we might know you
and come to follow in the way of Jesus.

Help us to be bold and courageous as we share the good news of Jesus, shining your light
for all to see.

So be it.

Amen.

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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...

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Prayer for Others (Narelle Dempster)

Loving and faithful God, prepare us with a spirit of humility as we bring concerns before you.

We thank you that we can gather here today in a safe secure space, surrounded by people of faith.

We pray for our brothers and sisters who are not able to do the same for whatever reason, war, persecution, or because they have no building to meet in. Watch over them, hold them and protect them from fear and danger.

Lord, our world is so broken by struggle and darkness, We share your pain for many in our local communities and beyond that are longing to start a new life somewhere safe, for those struggling to rebuild from failed regimes and war, for those whose journey takes them far from their families at risk of death only to be treated so badly. Open our hearts in compassion to hear their cry and stir us into action. Give us the courage to stand with the marginalised and oppressed to break through the distrust and fear that prevents them from living life to the full.

Loving God, hear our prayers today for those whom we know and care for who are affected by sorrow and illness, injustice and despair or by fear and weakness. Breathe into their lives and heal them. Speak their names and bring new life to their souls.

We hold before you in silence now people and situations you've laid on our hearts, those in our church family, our natural families, our community and our world

As the expression of the Body of Christ in this place we long to know you and make you known. We ask again for wisdom and humility to see the way ahead for how we can remain faithful to your calling and sharing your love, while living among a world in pain.

Lord in all things keep us humble and teachable. Speak your word into our hearts that your will might be done in our lives and your church

In your name and by your grace we pray. 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!

Generous God,
you created life
in all its wonderful diversity,
in your image you created humanity,
Jesus came into the world
to reveal the extent of your love for us
and to offer us a full relationship with you.

Today, we come before you in humble adoration
and offer our gifts to you.
Use the money we bring
to continue to build your kingdom, here and now.
Receive our service,
take and use our talents and time,
as you guide us to continue building your kingdom,
here and now.
Amen.

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Sending

Sing - Look Toward Christmas (Seasons 5)

This song might be new to many - a song of anticipation and celebration - hopefully it will stay with us and encourage us when life gets a bit mad in the coming weeks.

Look toward Christmas!

shout to prepare:

Advent is here:

Good News is coming,
earth be aware.

welcome December

Sing, sing alleluia!

changing the year.

Whistle up, shepherds!

Saddle up, kings!

Mary and Joseph,

Chorus up, angels, flexing your wings.

soon is the day:

Sing, sing alleluia!

ready the donkey,

sing, sing alleluia!

start on your way.

Sing, sing out the story,

You are the chosen,

sing about hope and peace.

willing to trust,

joyful your burden,

Set the world singing,

carrying Christ.

make the world glad;

Sing, sing alleluia!

now is good reason

not to feel sad!

Hear John the Baptist

*Words © Shirley Murray
Music © Jillian Bray*

Sending and Blessing

Go then,

brothers and sisters,

and share the good news,

God has come in Jesus;

God is here in Spirit.

Share the news with anyone who will listen,

be bold risk takers.

And may God bless you as you go,

may Jesus encourage you

and the Holy Spirit support and guide you, today and always.

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Rev Kath Merrifield

4 December 2022

[Drawn from material published in *Spill The Beans*, Issue 45, Resources for 4 December 22 with thanks and gratitude.]