

ADVENT EVERYDAY 2023

*The kingdom of God
has come near*



Message from the Editor

This year, once again, we are blessed to have thoughtful, honest, and encouraging reflections for our spiritual nourishment in the season of Advent. 23 people from Southside Uniting Church (Brisbane, Aust.) reflected on readings from either Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezra or Luke (with an exception from Mark). These readings are guided by the Narrative Lectionary, and give us the context within which the expectations, lament, and hope arise within a people looking for God's saving work.

Each week of Advent will focus on readings from a single book:

First Week	Jeremiah
Second Week	Isaiah
Third Week	Ezra
Fourth Week	Luke

The theme, 'the kingdom of God has come near,' is taken from Mark 1:15, which will become the focus gospel for our congregation into the new year up to Easter.

We are once again grateful to include original artwork from Peter Kennedy, inspired by Jesus' question to his disciples in Mark 8:29 titled, *Who do you say that I am?* In addition, Narelle Richardson supplied us with a beautiful image, *The Rainbow Promise*, taken on one of her extended trips around Australia. Other images included are either from previous editions of *Advent Everyday*, or used by permission.

A new feature this year is the inclusion of a short auto/biography for each author near the front of the edition. For those from Southside Uniting especially, I hope this helps us as readers to get to know each other a little better.

To those making use of this resource in other parts of Australia and the world, we would love to hear your reflections and stories along the way. Get in touch, at jock.dunbar@ssuc.org.au

About Advent

The word 'Advent' is derived from the Latin word *adventus* which means 'coming'. During the season of Advent, the church remembers and welcomes again the coming of the Christ-child into the world. Jesus lived to heal, save, reconcile, and give birth to God's new life for all. The life of the Christ-child continues to heal, save, reconcile, and give birth to God's new life in all of life throughout the world through the Spirit of God. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, God declares the power of death and darkness are not enemies of God, but the means through which God is present and always will be present. To the exiles of Judah and Israel in Babylon, God remained present. To the returning exiles who rebuilt their lives and the Temple, God was present. To Mary and Joseph, searching for a place to bring their child into the world, God was present. God is present today, with you and me, and especially with those suffering in places like Gaza and the Ukraine. God, let there be peace.

Thanks to all the authors and artists for their contributions, and to the team making the arrangements for the launch event of this resource.

Rev Jock Dunbar, December 2023

Contributors

Kathryn Arthy

Kathryn attended her first Southside worship service in November 2019 and was very pleased to share her confirmation of faith with the Southside congregation in August 2022. Kathryn is currently living in Arusha, Tanzania and is planning to return to Brisbane in February 2024.

Thalia Bielenberg

When I'm not busy teaching my wonderful class of Year 1 students, you can find me crafting up a storm at home, jamming out to Taylor Swift with my Girl's Brigade Juniors, or playing (and winning) board games with my friends and family.

Bronwyn Boyce

Bronwyn has been an active member of the Uniting Church in Holland Park for 25 years. She and husband Garry are thrilled to be Nana and Pa to two toddler grandchildren.

Pam Cooper

I would like to have been a teacher, working with children. Parent pressure of the day put me in an office but I won out when I started directing plays: I could work with children and adults. My choice, and I believe my calling.

Julie Darveniza

My faith background is varied with beginnings in Church of Christ, a UC Choir and Youth Group. My husband Paul and I share a love of singing and have worshipped at several UCs - Albert St, The Gap and Redcliffe. We moved back to Brisbane to support family and have been blessed and encouraged being part of the life and mission of SSUC.

Sandra Easey

Born in Scotland I came to Australia aged 16. A wife, mother, and grandmother, I have attended St Marks since 1974. Being an avid reader, I help run the book stall at garage sales. Since retired from teaching, I conduct tours at QAGOMA and enjoy the art history learning this entails.

Areana Eivers

Areana is a dreamer of big dreams, a lazy philosopher, a potential writer, a passionate therapist and educator, a mother who loves big whilst trying (and often failing) hard, a thwarted dancer, a lover of laughter and soulful reflection in equal measure, a sometimes rebellious, but always seeking, child of God.

Heather Griffin

Heather is a retired Uniting Church minister who is currently the Uniting Church Queensland Synod's representative on the Executive of the Queensland Faith Communities Council. She is a strong believer in "not hiding your light under a basket". To quote Jonathan Sacks: *For though my faith is not yours and your faith is not mine, if we each are free to light our own flame, together we can banish some of the darkness of the world.*

Lauren Harris

I started coming to Southside Uniting Church family service because Jock invited me while I was over at Megan and Brendan's house. I am both a believer and a skeptic and I live in the tension. I really like to know things and I want to know more. I like sewing cute things, or things for cute people. My husband makes me a great coffee everyday. It makes me feel loved, and also awake.

Allison Horne

Throughout 2023, I asked God 'What now, Lord?'. He answered by affirming the vital work of lay people and opening a pathway for me into counselling.

Roslyn Johnson

Roslyn Johnson is a busy high school teacher who has a lot of drama in her life (in and out of the classroom) - married to Ian and grown-up son Nick. Ros is from Townsville originally and then spent some time in Cairns where she was a worship leader at Northern Beaches. Ian and Ros have been in Brisbane for about ten years now and for the last few have made Mt Gravatt East their home base church.

Ann McDonald

I was the youngest in a loving and stable family with 3 older brothers. I am now a wife; mother to 3 daughters; and grandmother to 3 granddaughters. I like engaging with people and enjoyed this aspect of my paid employment, as a physiotherapist; in counselling roles; and within our church community.

Kylie Moors

I am Kylie, wife of Richard and mum of Oli. I have been part of Southside Uniting for almost six years. For the past twenty-five years I have been teaching in primary schools. I enjoy cleaning, bush walking and crocheting in my spare time.

Alan Neill

Always a Brisbanite, except for 12 months working in the UK in 1976. A lifetime commitment to Christ and his church and a lay preacher and teacher for over 60 years. A career in nutritional biochemistry culminating in policy development in primary industries in Queensland. Married to Barbara for 55 years, with 2 adult children and 8 grandchildren.

Ryan Robertson

I'm a lifelong Southside resident by choice, a public policymaker by trade, and a keen cyclist and Star Wars tragic by way of recreation. And, most importantly, someone who experiences God's abundant grace by getting to be part of a wonderful family, together with my lovely wife, Suzie, and our two beautiful kids, Freya and Abel.

Bruce Rowe

A Victorian who married a Scot, Charmaine, in Victoria. After a sojourn in Durban, South Africa, where our first two children were born, we settled in north-western Sydney in 1975. We worshipped at Old Toongabbie Uniting and then St Matthews Baulkham Hills Uniting. In March 2019 we moved into The Village Yeronga and were welcomed into what is now the Yeronga Community of Southside Uniting Church. I participate in Sunday/Saturday worship and a small group Bible Study.

Alison Semple

A former teacher of Mathematics and lover of theology, ballet and music! Lovers of nature: Alison and Bill, husband of over 50 years, find God through nature and its sheer majesty, beauty, adaptability and regeneration. Because of family, we are active in advocacy for those with disabilities.

Dorothy Smith

Two years as an international student in the USA, followed by working in the UK for seven years and three months in Shanghai, China as a TAFE teacher sparked my passion for cross cultural encounters and friendships. Since retiring I have enjoyed volunteering at English conversation classes at Annerley Baptist and SSUC Holland Park. My involvement in “New Friends” mission group has enabled me to further my passion and make friends with women from diverse cultures.

Florence Spurling

A member of Southside since 2015, Florence worked as a specialist broadcaster with the ABC’s Religious Programs for 32 years then contributed as a volunteer hospital chaplain for the Uniting Church in her early retirement years. Florence and her husband Paul value the friendship and support of Southside ministers and members and seek opportunities to serve where they can.

Marie Thwaite

I was named in honour of a French Catholic missionary nun. Apart from serving at the Op Shop, I enjoy reading, art and learning French. Empowered by my faith, I am committed to generating change in the mental health space, particularly in relation to domestic and family violence.

Vivienne Valentine

I enjoy learning, exploring, experimenting. I am always reading and have multiple books on the go at any time. I enjoy making things, and have multiple hand crafts under way all the time. I enjoy walking, especially in the bush. I find it fascinating to watch children learn and discover.

Liza Wieland

My career was in education – Special Schools, Early Intervention programmes and inclusion support in mainstream classrooms. I found my faith rather late in life. No crisis, it just came upon me quietly. What you might call ‘the best God momentever!’.

Rebekah Woodward

A musicologist who loves teaching music history and musicology at university. Rebekah also loves home-educating her two children, Flora and Hugh. Rebekah selects music for the monthly Southside Family Service and leads the singing there.

Sunday, 3 December 2023

Jeremiah 33:14-18

This assurance from God that the line of David would continue came at a time of great turmoil in the life of the people of Judah. Jeremiah received this pledge while in jail for previously angering the King by speaking God's truth. For Jeremiah his fate was always secondary to his need to be faithful to the Word of God. Jeremiah could now continue his unpopular prophesies to the King with the hope of a positive future.

Our world is in a period of great turmoil, and we have many loud voices insistently claiming the rightness of their words. It seems there is a constant barrage of viewpoints through the many platforms available. Do we listen to God's words to us however in these worrying times? Do we proclaim God's messages to us from scripture outside of our church communities, as Jeremiah so courageously did to the King?

Whatever the age we live in we can still rely on the faithfulness of God's promises, whether they be delivered through a 'still, small voice', the 'ah ha' moment through reading a text or listening to a reflection, or the prayer that is answered in a most unexpected way. Please listen for God's messages of love, grace, forgiveness and know His presence with you this Advent Season.

Faithful God, as we await the drawing ever closer of the Kingdom of God, we consciously open our hearts to your Word and ask that you please speak to us, bringing us into your presence. Amen.

Ann McDonald

Monday, 4 December 2023

Mark 8:27-29

It probably didn't feel like it at the time, but Jesus's stern order to his disciples not to reveal that he is the Messiah contains, at heart, a tremendous promise.

Peter had given an inspired answer to Jesus's questioning about who he is. So why take solace from Jesus ordering him to silence?

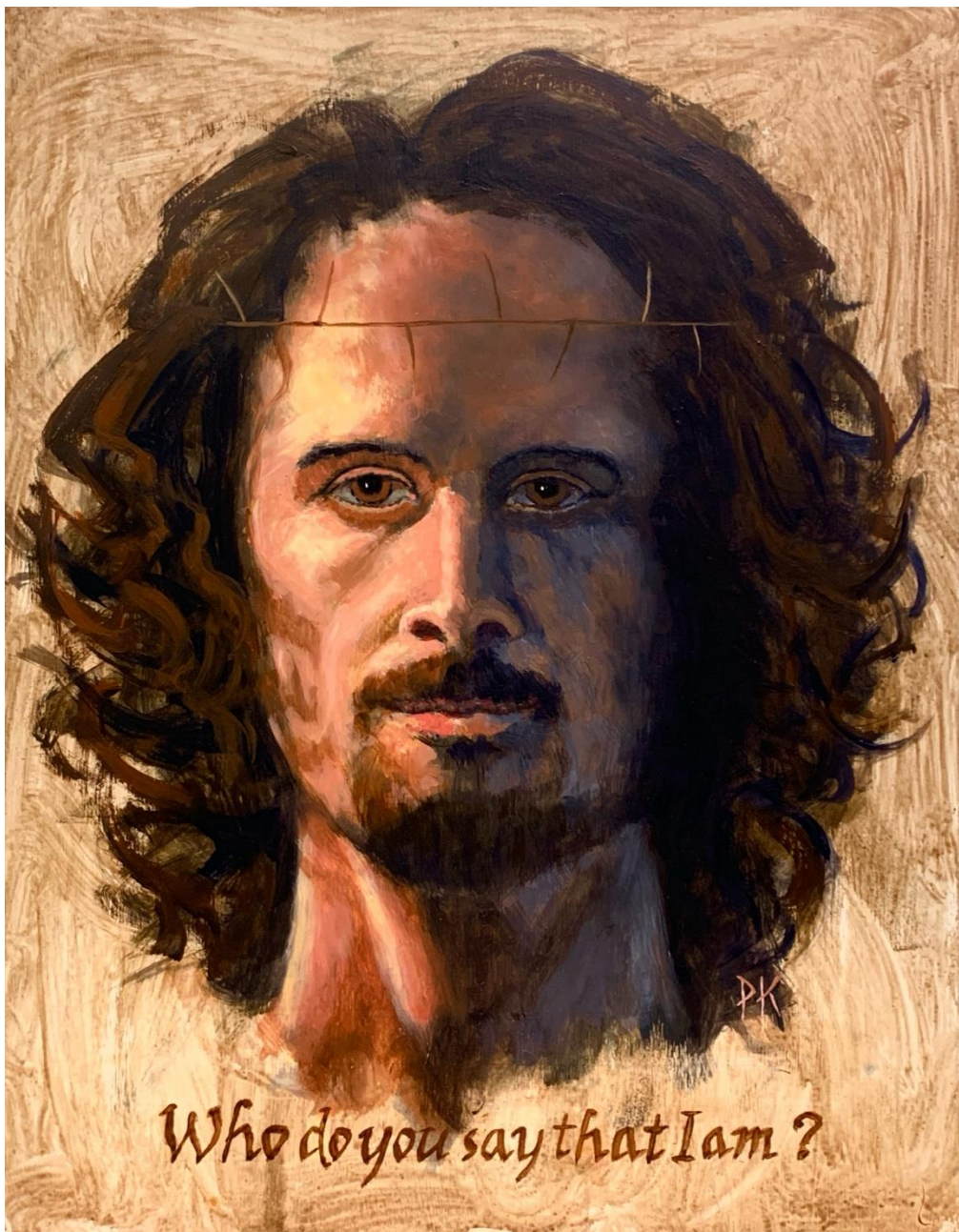
Perhaps because Peter's answer reveals his partial understanding of the divine revelation. Peter glimpsed the truth, but as in a mirror dimly. His belief of the Messiah as a conquering king falls so very short of God's truth of the Messiah as a suffering servant.

Jesus's sternness redirects the disciples' attention forward to where, beyond the cross, God's truth will be revealed in its fullness. It promises that that revelation will both confirm and confound Peter's expectations in the most gloriously transcendent way.

This promise remains just as true for us today. The kingdom has drawn near and we are blessed with a tantalising glimpse of its coming glory: through our faith; the love we share with our friends and families; and, our vibrant Southside community. How much more glorious will it be when we experience God's truth face-to-face?

Lord, we pray that you continue to sustain us with your abundant grace and love in the present, while your promises continue to unfold in their glorious superabundance into the future.

Ryan Robertson



Peter Kennedy, 'Who do you say that I am?'

© Southside Uniting Church (2023)

Tuesday, 5 December 2023

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Like Jeremiah, I sometimes feel unsure of how to speak of God: what do I say and how do I say it? Perhaps I overthink it: speak from the heart, remember the power of words, don't judge, don't make assumptions etc.

What I've come to understand in more recent times is the power of listening; the art of 'holding space' for another, listening to everything, spoken and unspoken, and how silence can speak volumes.

It's a privilege and a blessing when God gives us the opportunity to be with another in that place of fear, anger, confusion, loss or sadness. If I truly listen to understand, that then informs my words, if and when the time comes to speak; responding from a place of love, respect and sometimes of ignorance and inexperience, acknowledging that I have not lived another's life.

If we truly believe in "the good news", are we ever really 'too young' to speak of God's love? Listen to Him and trust in Him to guide the way. Faith is a journey, perhaps learning to speak of it is a journey too.

Lord, may Your love, patience, wisdom and acceptance guide our words always. Amen

Marie Thwaite

Wednesday, 6 December 2023

Jeremiah 1:11-19

The old adage, 'a picture's worth a thousand words,' is so true. It provides a quick and effective message about even the most complex of matters, particularly where we can closely relate to the subject matter. And pictures leave a more lasting impression than words. Perhaps that's why God chose pictures through dreams and visions as one way of communicating his purposes to humankind. Psychologists tell us that dreams and visions are an altered state of consciousness in which a disarmed human mind can see reality for what it is.

We all dream, so were told. I'm conscious of dreaming at times, but rarely do I recall but a fleeting idea of their content which often doesn't make a lot of sense. I don't believe God has ever spoken to me through my dreams, but he certainly does through the word pictures created for us from those visions as recorded in scripture, and also the written experiences of both historical and modern mystics.

Some of God's messages, both then and now, are strikingly terrible, as in Jeremiah's case. Others are fearfully wonderful, as in Mary the mother of Jesus' case. But of course, God's words are never mere words. And his promise to us through Jeremiah is: *I'm sticking with you. I'll make every word I give you come true* (Jer 1:12 MSG).

Loving God, give us eyes to see you, ears to hear you and hearts attuned to your perfect plan. Amen

Alan Neill

Thursday, 7 December 2023

Jeremiah 2:1-8

Often we use these words in accusation, aggrieved that God has seemingly abandoned us in our time of need.

When bombs rain down in Gaza, we cry out in disbelief and despair 'Where are you, Lord?"

When children from broken homes break into the homes of others to steal with seeming impunity, we wonder aloud "Where is God in this mess?"

When the voices of First Nations peoples are silenced, downcast souls ask 'God, where are you?'

In today's reading, God re-frames the implied accusation.

First, he reminds us of the all-consuming, intoxicating love we felt for him when newly redeemed. Then he speaks of our damning tendency to stray from him, trading that which is valuable for the worthless. God contends that if we are distant from him, it's not because *he* left *us*.

This tumultuous advent, ask yourself: Am I where God is? Because that's where I need to be. Begin the difficult navigation of the soul by conducting an honest audit of your attitudes, perspectives, and priorities. Seek God's help to bring them in accord with his and God will restore the joy of your salvation.

Dear Lord, help me see where you stand on an issue or in a relationship. Give me courage to follow you there.

Allison Horne

Friday, 8 December 2023

Jeremiah 33:19-26

Read in isolation I confess it meant very little to me – confusing and a bit pointless. So I read a lot more of Jeremiah and then... I felt angry. 'Here we go again with the bloodshed and carnage and destruction, the death and despair of so many.'

A loving God that orchestrates such violence and destruction? I can't ignore that, and I can't reconcile that. What am I meant to do with it?!

And then... there is the beautiful part where God tells us:

I will love you till the very fabric of time disintegrates.

To demonstrate that love, he sends Jesus to show us the way.

The 'Old Testament' God will always confound me I suspect, but this reading has made me reflect a great deal on keeping faith with God's love and the blessing that is Jesus.

Dear Lord, in good times or in bad, I pray that I will turn and hold fast to the truth that is your Love. Amen

Liza Wieland



Saturday, 9 December 2023

Jeremiah 34:1-7

What hit me with this passage is that the people of Judah were warned there would be war. This was over 2000 years ago. Still they are at war! I find it so sad that the original people of God are still fighting.

Throughout history Jewish people have not been well accepted. This hatred, (strong word), reached its climax in the holocaust in World War II. Afterwards, they were given lands but sadly, this has not given them peace: hatred is two-way in a very complex history.

I find this very ironic as we approach Christmas because it was to the Israelis that the Son of God came, bringing love and peace. Everyone needs this love and peace offered so humbly: we need to make sure we always embrace and spread this very special offering.

To make this real we need to realise that peace and love start with us, you and I: in all interactions to treat others with respect, no matter their race, religion, appearance or economic status.

Dear Lord, help us to know and spread your love and peace this Christmas and forever. Amen

Alison Semple

Sunday, 10 December 2023

Isaiah 40:1-11

Part of today's reading provides the text for Scene One of Handel's oratorio *Messiah*. If you can, listen to a performance of the *accompagnato* "Comfort Ye" and the aria "Every Valley".

(Many recordings are available on YouTube; try <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=91Z3ShZH7T4>.)

Listen for the calmness of the music in "Comfort Ye" and think about how well it reflects the meaning of the words.

Listen also for Handel's use of word painting in "Every Valley": he uses music to reflect the meaning of the text. My favourite example is the way that the words "valley" and "exalted" are treated. Often, the pitch (highness or lowness of the sounds) matches the idea of the words: "valley" is set to a low pitch and "exalted" is at the highest part of the melodic line.

But sometimes Handel is tricky! He subverts our expectations by making "valley" high and "exalted" low. You can hear it in the very first phrase. And this sums up the meaning of the whole text beautifully: things we expect to be low are high, and things that seem high are low. It's an idea that appears again and again in the Christmas story: God's own son, born in a stable.

Thank you, God, that you subverted everyone's expectations by sending us Jesus in the way you did.

Rebekah Woodward

Monday, 11 December 2023

Isaiah 41:1-20

This passage provides clarity about the pre-eminence of God, His constant, faithful, reliable presence and His steadfast love for the people He has chosen to serve Him in the world. The wonder is that this is despite the majority of His chosen people seeming either to ignore Him in favour of idols and/or refusing to accept the validity of the voices of the prophets speaking on God's behalf.

It is hard for me to reconcile God having favourites in the light of the New Testament teaching that God loves everyone equally! But then I have to reconsider – the chosen people were to represent God and be a guiding light to the world. Israel are descendants of God's friends, Noah and Abraham. He counted Abraham as 'righteous' and promised Abraham 'and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice'.

Unfortunately there was only ever been a remnant who remained faithful to God. Nonetheless God remained confident that through His constant love for the Israelites that the remnant in each era would serve Him and be the light to the world that He planned. So eventually through Jesus all people are drawn into God's family.

Let us pray from Psalm 66:

Dear God, you are our God; we acknowledge your constant love and so we praise you, give thanks and sing for joy that your constant presence upholds us in good times and the difficult times – even when you seem absent from us.

Bruce Rowe



Tuesday, 12 December 2023

Isaiah 41:21-29

Yet again the Israelites had rejected God to worship the false gods of the nations they dwelt amongst. God directly challenges these false gods to establish their credibility. Can they predict their future, interpret recent history or initiate activity, good or bad, that demonstrates sovereign control?

The challenge goes unmet; God declares them to be powerless and worthless. He presents his own evidence. He will raise up Cyrus to defeat the Babylonians, and the Israelites will return to Jerusalem.

These verses are an admonition to reject the false gods of our secular society, and encouragement to trust in God. God alone is the lord of history – past, present and future. In the words of the folk spiritual, ‘He’s got the whole world in his hands.’

As we look back on 2023 and towards 2024 we are confronted with many challenges at global, national and local levels. We have seen many changes in the life of Southside Uniting Church, some of which have caused sorrow and pain. We may be asking, ‘what is our future?’ Do we trust in God? Do we look forward with anticipation to the new things ‘God will do’?

Do we seek to live and love like Jesus so that the communities in which we dwell will recognise that the Kingdom of God has come near?

An Ethiopian Jewish Prayer:

*You alone are God, you were from of old,
and you will be until eternity, always first and last,
now and always for ever and ever, may we trust in you.*

Dorothy Smith

Wednesday, 13 December 2023

Isaiah 42:1-9

At 16 years old I was a Junior Pathfinder. Each Summer holidays we would take children from other parts of South East England to various holiday camps. The children looked up to us, wanted to do things for us, carry our bags, wash mud off our shoes, help with the cooking in fact, all our Junior Officer duties.

My little helper was Bethany (Bet) and, at her mother's request because we had bonded so well at camp, I went to her home for a visit. Bet's father had left the family home, her Mum wasn't allowed to read her stories because her Dad did that and, sadly, she had stopped reading the bible story book she had been given at camp.

What on earth could I do!? "Be a servant of God..." I was told. We talked, cried, read, prayed and, after a few visits, we laughed again.

Now I'm well aware this wasn't me, I reached out to my Heavenly Father and He reached right back. This was my first experience of 'serving' God and, seeing the pure gratitude in Mum's eyes and joy in the child's face, I felt I had served God's purpose.

Heavenly Father, help us to see situations where, in service to you, we can reach out and give love and comfort to others in need.

Pam Cooper



Thursday, 14 December 2023

Isaiah 42:10-20

Prophesying the coming of Jesus, Isaiah exhorts all the world to recognise God's goodness and sing praise to the Lord. I was reminded of this need to sing praise recently, when I was subtly 'bopping' along, in tune with one of the lively worship songs we sing in church. It seems to me that singing is a powerful tool to allow people to actively express their faith in a way that is accessible to all.

The eclectic mix of the songs we sing can fulfil our individual needs. When we are open to them, the words and music enable us to express joy, find consolation, prompt contemplation, and learn about God's grace and mercy. Songs provide a myriad of ways to proclaim the glory of the Lord for what he has done and what he can do.

Of themselves, however, worship songs are only words put to music—easy to recite. To truly sing praise requires more than this. It demands ears to hear the voice of God and eyes to see Jesus as our guide and the Light of the World.

Dear Lord, help us to be active listeners, open to hearing your voice so that our actions may daily bring praise to your name. Amen.

Sandra Easey

Friday, 15 December 2023

Isaiah 42:21-25

The Holy Land today is the site of atrocities and devastation on a scale that would, to Isaiah's eyes, have seemed truly apocalyptic. And holy times like Christmas, which we often think of as positive and lovely, are part of the complex relationship between God's perfection and our very broken world.

I spent many years of my life investing emotionally in the perfect Christmas. It was obsessive. I hid a massive anxiety behind the festive façade.

But along the way I had to let go. Ornaments got lost and broken; someone was allergic to dairy and the recipe had to be changed; rituals were reinvented, and eventually relaxed. Our family Christmases became real - real enough to cope with the trauma of losing parents, financial woes, broken relationships and this year, my sister's cancer diagnosis. Yet our recent chaotic, partly improvised celebrations are even more special than that time we posed for a photo with our family enclosed in a snow globe. (Yes, I did that). The anxiety is still there, but now I do a lot of Elsa-type self-talk in the run-up to Christmas. "Let it go, Roslyn".

Our faith is not something which separates us from the condition of being human. We live in the real world. And there's the good news Mark is telling us about - the only thing that needs to be perfect is Jesus, and He already is.

O Lord, preserve life and shelter for those who own and proclaim your name in the Middle East, and in the land of your Son's redeeming death and resurrection, turn hearts to look to the Saviour and live.

Roslyn Johnson



Saturday, 16 December 2023

Isaiah 43:1-7

This bible reading reminds me of the wonderful blessings of being part of God's family and I reflect on the blessing of God's constant presence in my life. Like many people, I have experienced some significant changes this year. There were certainly times when I felt stressed and anxious, but I also felt God's presence guiding me through the challenges and helping me adapt to the changes.

In August I returned to live in Arusha to reunite with my partner Kora and stepson Thomas. Resigning from my job, renting out my house, and leaving my family and friends in Brisbane was a significant challenge. As I arrived in Tanzania, I had a glorious view of Mt Kilimanjaro. I felt like God was holding up a 'welcome back' sign for me as I gazed in awe at this wonder of his creation.

As we share this Advent season together, I think of Mary and Joseph, and I imagine that they sometimes felt afraid on their journey to Bethlehem. But God was with them, just as he is always with us. It's a busy time of year, but in amongst the Christmas shopping lists and social gatherings, we can feel God's presence as we share God's blessings with our families, friends, and strangers.

Lord, I give thanks that you are always with us, and I pray that in this moment of stillness I will remember to trust in you, to treasure your love for me, and to share that love with others. Amen

Kathryn Arthy

Sunday, 17 December 2023

Ezra 1:1-4; 3:1-4, 10-13

God's people are returned to their homeland after exile and can rebuild their Temple. Ezra 3, verses 10-13 remind us, however, that even the most profound restoration of what was lost carries poignancy and grief as well as joy. Building the foundations anew of the Temple in Jerusalem brings powerful rejoicing from the priests and people. We can almost *hear* this rejoicing sound as they praise their God whose "steadfast love endures forever toward Israel".

But the old people – they who had seen the foundations of the first Temple – some of them weep loudly. There are joyous shouts of restored life mingled with the loud weeping of those who remember not only the first Temple as a building but also a different time of worship and belonging to their God and to one another.

This mingling of grief and renewal, nostalgia and joy characterize so much of our lives both as individuals and as a Church. We lose what is precious, we find God's steadfast love bringing new life into our midst, and we realize that our lives are a mixture of loss and finding. The common thread through the book of Ezra and for ourselves is that as praise and tears mingle in us, God is ever-loving and enduring. God's love transcends time, God's love embraces anguish.

God's love is our home.

Loving God, we thank you for your steadfast care of us through all the changes of our lives. Help us to rely on you as our safety and solace. Amen.

Florence Spurling

Monday, 18 December 2023

Ezra 4:1-5

What happens when “enemies” offer to help you rebuild? Beware! You can’t build together without first reconciling.

During the time of the Assyrian Empire, the leaders of ten tribes of the northern kingdom were taken into exile, leaving the peasants behind. The Assyrians then brought in others who intermarried with the remnant. It seems they adopted many of the local religious practices. And so the people known as the Samaritans came into being.

The Jews of the southern kingdom, who were exiled later during the reign of the Babylonians, had spent much time pondering and reflecting on the question, “Who is the God that we worship?” They had come back a very different people. So, same God but two similar yet different religions. And they chose to be enemies.

It took several thousand years, the rise of other major Abrahamic faiths, and much continuing conflict for the wisdom of Jewish Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of London to surface:

The test of faith is whether I can make space for difference. Can I recognize God's image in someone who is not in my image, who language, faith, ideal, are different from mine? If I cannot, then I have made God in my image instead of allowing him to remake me in his.

“The Dignity of Difference” 2002.

Lord remake me, and continue to remake me, in your image. Amen.

Heather Griffin



‘The Rainbow Promise’ by Narelle Richardson, © Southside Uniting Church

Tuesday, 19 December 2023

Ezra 4:6-24

The Jews are in Jerusalem, given the job of rebuilding the temple. By orders of the King. But as often happens, there are those who don't agree with what's happening, don't agree with the King's edict. However, they can't openly disobey or thwart the King's wishes.

Initially they try a direct approach, reminding the Jews that they are "family" however distant the relationship. They think that if they can be part of the working group, they can work from the inside to delay, sabotage or stop the building. When that doesn't work, they try a sneakier approach, and write to the King. As often happens, half-truths, inaccurate reports and mis-information is twisted into a plausible logic, so that the work is officially stopped for a long time. Until another King is on the throne.

Sound familiar? How often are there good ideas, God's ideas, worked on and developed. And then things happen which delay, threaten to stop or destroy the work. We see so much mis-information, exaggeration and distortion of facts being reported every day. Even to the extent that hope is lost, the original purpose or need has been forgotten.

But God hasn't forgotten, and often nudges things along again. Encouragement comes. Hope returns.

Dear Lord, thank you for remembering and enabling, even when plans are thwarted. Thank you for the hope you bring us.

Viv Valentine

Wednesday, 20 December 2023

Ezra 5:1-17

In this reading, Zerubbabel and Jeshua are rebuilding the Temple of God in Jerusalem, with the help of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. The governor of the land, Tattenai, asked the men if they had permission to be rebuilding the Temple, and sent a letter to King Darius to confirm if this was true. God was watching over the men as they worked.

It's important to remember that God is always watching over us while we go about our daily lives, working hard to contribute to kingdom of God. We may not be rebuilding physical temples, but we can certainly share God with others in many different ways. We might be laying foundations for our friends to ask questions about God. We might be making windows for people to see what a life with God might look like. We might be crafting roofs for people to shelter with God when the storms get rough.

Whatever it is that we are building, we know that God has already given us permission to do so, and to share His love and His message with others.

Dear God, thank you for granting us permission to contribute to the building of Your kingdom on Earth. Amen.

Thalia Bielenberg

Thursday, 21 December 2023

Ezra 6:13-22

My Nana Molly knew how to make a feast - especially for Christmas. Like the people of God in this reading, she cooked lamb ... and ham and pork and turkey with stuffing and all the sauces, and every kind of roasted root vegetable, heaped high on our plates. And just when we thought we could eat no more... homemade Christmas pudding, months in the preparation, with custard. And a magnificent trifle, layered in a cut glass bowl. An abundance of food, served with love. More than the quantity (and quality) of the food, the meal was made a feast by the joy Nana brought to the table.

Joy is one of God's best gifts. More than mere happiness, joy contains hope and appreciation. Joy is possible even when times are tough, and life is challenging.

I inherited Nana's love of cooking and, now that I'm a grandmother, I better understand her joy in preparing the family feast. Yes, it can be hard work... but the reward is in the giving. Even a sandwich is a feast when it is made with love and shared in a spirit of generosity.

Creator God, thank you for the joy you brought to the world through the birth of Jesus. Help us share that joy this Christmas with everybody who needs to hear Your message of love, hope, peace and forgiveness.

Bronwyn Boyce



Friday, 22 December 2023

Luke 1:5-13, 57-80

Choosing a child's name is challenging. When you finally choose a name you face the reactions of family, friends and complete strangers. In this passage we learn of Elizabeth and Zachariah, who have waited so long and so painfully, as those who struggle with infertility would recognise, for a child.

When finally this child arrives, bound to be their only child, the expectation to follow tradition, and the temptation to name the son after the father, must have been immense. Yet the child is given the name of John. You can almost hear the collective sucking in of breath and rolling of eyes from friends, neighbours and religious leaders. Why do it then?

This reading, coming at the start of Luke's Gospel, speaks to me of a new beginning. Not a rejection of tradition, but a future grounded in, not tethered to the past. This is Christmas for me each year. A life still full of potential. Jesus showing a new way of relating to God. A man called John, not Zachariah, who led the way. A new voice in the wilderness. A new form of testament. A fresh start. A different lens. Each year, a renewed spirit within me.

My God, who inspires new perspectives, fresh starts, second (third and fourth) chances, may this Christmas inspire me again to not only believe but also find hope in the message of birth, rebirth and renewal this Christmas.

Areana Eivers

Saturday, 23 December 2023

Luke 1:14-38

I wouldn't want to be either of these women. Elizabeth is too old to be pregnant and Mary is too young. Not much has changed, being of "advanced maternal age" or a pregnant teenager is still cause for a dose of side-eye.

Elizabeth was deemed barren, a societal reject. Her story of unblessed barrenness and then unexpected pregnancy makes me squirm: are women only worthwhile and valuable if they produce children? Is that the message? I don't like it. Mary's story of teenage pregnancy stresses me out, as it did Mary: "She was troubled". I hear you, Mary!

I can't deny that pregnancy and motherhood have been defining features of many women's lives; also the agony of longing for children that never come, and children that are lost. Maybe I like that this story reflects those stories, after all. Maybe I do like that these women's stories have been written down and read for two thousand years. Could they have been left out? What would be lost if they were? I haven't finished thinking about this.

I'm listening again to the story, listening again to these women. What do they think of their own story? They are delighted and empowered. They are a comfort to one another. They are vessels of hope and they know it. Elizabeth and Mary are celebrating. I like that.

Holy Spirit, help me to stay with the story long enough to see the celebration. I believe it's coming.

Lauren Harris



Sunday, 24 December 2023

Luke 2:1-14

The Christmas Story shows God's purposes coming to pass amid the mundane things of life. The Census plays its part by forcing Joseph and his heavily pregnant wife to make a long, hazardous journey to Bethlehem. However, God's in control of what's happening here (not Rome) and the time is right for God's Kingdom coming near (Mark 1:15). Micah prophesied Bethlehem as Jesus' birthplace and Joseph was a descendant of David (royalty). However, he was a poor carpenter and Bethlehem was full of travellers, so the long-awaited Messiah was born in an inn's animal shelter. How mundane is that!?

Then, we find humble shepherds, out in the fields doing their work, having a supernatural experience of God's glory! I always feel closest to God when I'm singing His praises and I reckon the angels have the best job!! I experienced God's purposes coming to fruition when I sang "O Holy Night" in a carol service as a teenager and discovered the person who would be my life partner was there in the congregation and "the rest is history".

Life is often hard, but God is there with us, through all of life's twists and turns. Let's celebrate that with great joy!

Lord God, thank You that You keep Your promises, so help us to be patient as we wait and know that You are in control, whatever the situation. Amen

Julie Darveniza



Monday, 25 December 2023

Luke 2:15-20

After seeing Jesus, the shepherds and Mary responded in different ways. Mary took time to be still and reflect. The shepherds, on the other hand, went out celebrating and telling everyone they saw. Their enthusiasm was contagious and led people to believe and follow.

Both responses were important.

For the last nine months, Mary had been a large part of God's plan. She must have endured a lot of criticism and discomfort, apart from just being pregnant. After the birth, it was her time to rest and to be cared for. God was meeting her where she was and providing what she needed.

The shepherds had been energised by their experience, giving them what they needed to be a part of God's plan, telling people about Jesus' birth.

During this advent season, there will be times when we need to stop and ponder, to allow us to be comforted and filled with God's amazing love and presence. Other times, we will be energised and ready to tell the world. It is not one or the other, but often both, at different times. Allow time to stop to be cared for and amazed so you too can be excited to go and spread the Good News.

Thank you for loving us, during this Advent season, help me to make time to both ponder and celebrate your birth.

Kylie Moors



Southside Uniting Church

hello@ssuc.org.au // 07 3848 7093 // ssuc.org.au

© Southside Uniting Church 2023