

Advent-ures With God

Join us on an ADVENT-ure at Toowong Uniting Church. Starting December 1, would you commit to doing five things:

ONE: Pray Daily – set yourself the challenge of spending a consistent length of time in prayer. Whether 10 minutes or two hours, the length matters less than your resolve to devoting some uninterrupted time to just being with God.

TWO: Daily Nourish Your Soul from God's Word – take some time each day to read the bible and ponder its word, As part of these adventures with God we will suggest a passage and provide a short reflection on it for each day but reading our notes is much less important than thinking carefully about the scripture passage looking for ways to put what you read into practice and seeing how it might inform your prayers

THREE: One Act of Fasting per Week – Advent was once, like lent a time of fasting. Fasting normally involves abstaining from food for spiritual purposes. It is not so much that we deny ourselves in order to earn spiritual credit and favours from God. Rather the act of abstinence expresses our love for and devotion to God, expecting nothing in return. Advent-ures with God challenges us to one act of fasting per week. Depending on your past experience, this might be fasting for one day each week, or one meal per week, or like lent doing without a different luxury each week (chocolate, soft drinks etc).

FOUR: A Weekly Act of Worship – Commit yourself to joining with God's people once each week for corporate worship. This is important because when we commit ourselves to personal devotions it is easy to assume this is all we need. But it is not. We must also worship in the company of one another. Of course there are times when we simply cannot get to church.

FIVE: A Daily Act of Service – find an opportunity each day to intentionally serve someone else through word or action. It might be as simple as offering a compliment where you would have kept silent, sending a card of encouragement, inviting someone for a meal, lending a helping hand, picking up a piece of rubbish.

The ADVENT-ure: I will commit to

1. Pray every day
2. Nourish my soul daily from God's Word
3. One act of fasting per week
4. A weekly time of worship
5. A daily act of service

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Toowong Uniting Church Advent 2010—Week 1

Some of us may have written off Christmas. Maybe it brings up too many old issues for us. Maybe we're sick of the commercialization of it all. Maybe we feel every day ought to be a celebration of the birth of Christ, so why make such a big deal out of December 25? But as creatures bound in time and space, we need real time and space markers that remind us of the great events that define our faith. But if our Christmas is to be spiritually successful, we're going to have to fight for it. And the way to do that is through preparation.

This week you are invited to take a leisurely stroll through the early verses of Luke Chapter 1, exploring the circumstances of a couple who were waiting and watching for God.



Adapted from Bible Study Material by Mark Mitchell and JoHanna Reardon

Week 1 Day 1

Core Reading

Luke 1:1-4

Secondary Reading

Isaiah 40:1-5

Advent is all about preparation. Sometimes we forget that before God sent his Son into the world, he prepared the way. Jesus arrived on the scene after 400 years of silence from God—preparation. He arrived after an angel named Gabriel visited numerous people—preparation. God even saw fit to prepare the way for his Son by sending a man named John to call people to repentance. God is into preparation.

The Gospel writer who focused most on preparation was Luke. Maybe it was because he was a physician. We all know the amount of preparation it takes to become a doctor. Or maybe it had something to do with the purpose of his writing. Luke was a prolific writer. He wrote more of the New Testament than anyone else, including Paul.

Luke tells us of his purpose in the opening of his Gospel (Luke 1:1–4). He wrote so that a man named Theophilus would know the accurate truth about Jesus Christ. Theophilus was probably a Gentile who had become a Christian, and Luke wanted him to get the straight scoop. Luke himself was a Gentile who had never seen Jesus, but he wrote down the accounts of those who were eyewitnesses of Christ. He investigated everything carefully, and laid it all out in logical order. It was a two-volume work: Volume 1 is his Gospel; Volume 2 is the Book of Acts.

In a day and age of best-selling books on lost gospels, it's good to know that someone—a very well-educated, thorough researcher—did his homework. And so, in keeping with his purpose, Luke carefully chronicled what happened before Christ was born. It was all about preparation for the coming of Christ.

Questions:

[Q] What, if anything, do you do to prepare your heart for Christmas?

God has a way of sending signals of hope to remind us that life is stronger than death. Light is more powerful than darkness. God is more powerful than Satan. Good will overcome evil. Joy is stronger than disappointment. That's the message of Christmas. The question is: Are we prepared for it? Are we able to believe that God is acting for us, in ways we never could have imagined, to take away our disgrace and disappointment?

Action Point: How about you? Do you believe God is able to bring you joy and blessing where there has been disgrace and disappointment? Share with the group a prayer request about how you need renewed hope.

Today I will pray for:

Today's intentional act of service:

He said, “Mrs. Thornhope?” She nodded. He said, “Would you sign here?” She invited him to step inside and closed the door to get away from the cold. She signed the paper and said, “What’s in the box?” The young man laughed and opened up the flap, and inside was a little puppy, a golden Labrador retriever. The delivery boy picked up the squirming pup and explained, “This is for you, ma’am. He’s 6-weeks-old and completely housebroken.” The young puppy began to wiggle in happiness at being released from captivity.

“Who sent this?” Mrs. Thornhope asked.

The young man set the animal down, handed her an envelope, and said: “It’s all explained here in this envelope, ma’am. The dog was bought last July while its mother was still pregnant. It was meant to be a Christmas gift for you.” The young man then handed her a book, *How to Care for Your Labrador Retriever*.

In desperation, she again asked, “Who sent me this puppy?”

As the young man turned to leave, he said, “Your husband, ma’am. Merry Christmas.”

She opened up the letter from her husband. He had written it three weeks before he died, and left it with the kennel owners to be delivered with the puppy as his last Christmas gift to her. The letter was full of love, encouragement, and admonishments to be strong. He vowed that he was waiting for the day when she would join him. He had sent her this young animal to keep her company until then. She wiped away the tears, put the letter down, and then, remembering the puppy at her feet, she picked up that golden, furry ball and held it to her neck. Then she looked out the window at the lights that outlined the neighbor’s house, and she heard from the radio in the kitchen the strains of “Joy to the world, the Lord has come.”

Suddenly, Stella felt the most amazing sensation of peace washing over her. Her heart felt a joy and wonder greater than the grief and loneliness. “Little fella,” she said to the dog, “it’s just you and me. But you know what? There’s a box down in the basement I’ll bet you’ll like. It’s got a little Christmas tree in it and some decorations and some lights that are going to impress you. And there’s a manger scene down there. Let’s go get it.”

Is there anything you need to change about the way you celebrate Christmas to better do this? What would it take for that to happen?

If you suddenly found yourself with no obligations or expectations from others regarding the use of your time on Christmas Day, how would you spend the day?

A good friend of mine had a Christmas Day tradition that everyone in the family would dedicate some time to write to one other person who was in need of encouragement and support, after praying that God would inspire them to identify the right person. What sort of achievable tradition of giving could you see yourself adopting?

Today I will pray for:

Today’s intentional act of service will be:

Week 1 Day 2

Core Reading

Secondary Reading

Luke 1:5-7

Romans 8:28-39

Are you prepared for Christmas? Not do you have your tree up, or have you done your shopping, but are you really prepared? Are you prepared for the arrival of God’s Son? You might wonder how you do that. Luke helps us by telling the story of an old Jewish priest and his wife.

We see here that Zechariah was a priest, and Elizabeth was a descendant of priests. That’s not unusual. The priesthood was divided into 24 divisions, which amounted to about 18,000 priests. Most of them were poor and worked small farms. Nevertheless, this was an unusual couple. Luke says they were righteous in God’s sight; they kept his commandments. This doesn’t mean they were without sin, but unlike many priests of that day, they were examples of genuine faith.

This is significant because of the other thing Luke tells us about them: they had no children. Elizabeth was barren, and the days of hoping for a child were long over. In those days, to be barren was a sign of a spiritual defect in the wife. They didn't have fertility specialists back then; they simply believed God closed a woman's womb because he held some grudge against her. So a barren woman was a disgraced woman. It wasn't uncommon for a husband to divorce his wife because of her supposed flaw. In essence, Elizabeth was forced to walk through life with a sign hung around her neck that read "sinner." You think you don't want to go to church sometimes? Consider how she felt!

And though Zechariah didn't have quite the same stigma to deal with, he still lived with the deep disappointment of having no child to carry on the family name—a tragedy for a man in that culture. Many of us have something like this that rightly or wrongly brings disgrace. It could be something we've done in the past. It could be an addiction we battle every day. Maybe we've been in prison. Maybe we've been divorced. Maybe we've been fired. Maybe we've been abandoned. Any one of those things can hang like a sign around your neck for all to see.

Perhaps you're like Zechariah and Elizabeth. You've been ambushed by some tragedy or disappointment that you never could have expected. You wonder if you will ever be able to really enjoy life again. Perhaps you know someone else in that situation. Spend some time praying for them today.

[Q] How would you define a blessing? Is it getting what you want, gaining perspective, becoming wiser? Explain.

[Q] Have you ever felt that you were in need of a blessing? What made you feel that way?

Do you feel that you received the blessing you needed? Why or why not?

[Q] How can we deal with other people's judgments, as Zechariah and Elizabeth had to do? How can we keep from feeling despair?

Today I will pray for:

Today's intentional act of service:

Week 1 Day 5

Bringing things together Reread Luke 1:1-25

Zechariah wasn't prepared for Christmas because he didn't believe that God could step into his life and answer long-forgotten prayers in out-of-the-box ways. Most of us are secretly disappointed with God, but afraid to admit it. So, like old Zechariah, we just do what we're supposed to do, never really believing that God is at work to bless us in ways that will blow our minds.

That's what the coming of Christ really means for each one of us. What Elizabeth says in verse 25 is true of each of us, because God sent his Son—he's looked with favor on us, to take away our disgrace among people.

We may believe that God could do that for someone else, but not for us. We think: You don't know what I've done. You don't know what I've gone through. You don't know how hopeless my situation is. Some of us have become so cynical and jaded by life that we no longer believe God is at work in us. If we're stuck in our unbelief, we're not ready for God's gift. But God has some interesting ways of getting through to us.

James Dobson relates a story of an elderly woman named Stella Thornhope, who was struggling with her first Christmas alone. Her husband had died of cancer just a few months earlier. Now, several days before Christmas, she was almost snowed in by brutal weather. She felt terribly alone, so much so that she decided she was not going to decorate for Christmas. Late that afternoon, the doorbell rang, and there was a delivery boy with a box.

Bible every day. He does all the right things in all the right places in all the right ways. But when God comes along and challenges him to a new level of faith, he's not ready.

Many of us like to use cruise control. But cruise control doesn't work in traffic. Zechariah was on spiritual cruise control, going about his religious duties—he could do it all with his eyes closed—but God chose to throw him into traffic, and he was not ready; he didn't want to turn off his cruise control.

This couple reminds us that it really doesn't matter how long you've known God, or how well you've obeyed God, or how faithfully you've served God; there is always room for growth. God is committed to stretching and growing the faith of people like Zechariah and Elizabeth.

[Q] Why is underestimating God sin? Give an example.

[Q] How might you be on “spiritual cruise control” in your Christian life? What can you do to turn off the “cruise control”?

[Q] Share a time when God “threw you into traffic.” What happened to your spiritual life, and why?

How should we respond when God “throws us into traffic”?

[Q] Which of the following keep you sharp spiritually?

Regular Bible reading

Continuous prayer

Faithful church attendance

Solitude

Fasting

Accountability partner

Outreach

Other

Why did you choose the one(s) you did? How does that thing keep you spiritually sharp?

How might any of those things fail you at times?

[Q] What do you think kept Zechariah and Elizabeth faithful to God in spite of the disappointment and shame of not having a child?

Today I will pray for:

Today's intentional act of service will be:

Week 1 Day 3

Core Reading

Secondary Reading

Luke 1:8-14

Luke 18:1-8

At least for Zechariah there was his work. Zechariah was chosen by lot to enter the Holy Place in the temple and burn incense, which was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. While he was inside the temple, the people were outside offering prayers, waiting for him to come out. He would cast incense on the altar, prostrate himself, and then leave.

But on this day, Zechariah didn't come out for a long time.

Our tendency is to read this like he had a visit from an old friend. But this was an angel, and it scared him to death! What exactly did he see? What exactly happened? Not ever having had an angelic encounter, it is difficult to say. But the result of the experience was to receive good news: Elizabeth would give birth to a son, whom they were to name John, and he would bring joy not only to them, but to many others as well.

The angel said, “Your prayer has been heard.” What prayer? This passage doesn't mention a prayer. The angel must be talking about Zechariah's prayer for a son, which he had probably stopped praying a long time ago. Zechariah may have even forgotten that prayer, but God hadn't.

[Q] Have you ever had a prayer that was answered long after you prayed it? What does that tell you about God?

[Q] Why does God so often say, “Wait,” when we ask for something?

Why do you think he allowed Zechariah and Elizabeth to wait so long?

What is the prayer that you are most longing to see an answer to?

Today I will pray for:

Today’s intentional act of service will be;

Optional Activity

Purpose: To help us see how often the Bible gives us examples of those who must wait.

Activity: Name at least ten Bible characters. Write the names down in a column on the left side of a piece of paper. Considering them one by one, try to recall a time that each of these people had to wait to see God act. (This may not be true for all of them, but most of them probably had to wait for God.) When you’re finished, ask what this might tell us about waiting for God to answer our own prayers.

Week 1 Day 4

Core Reading

Secondary Reading

Luke 1:15-25

Hebrews 11:1-6

Maybe Zechariah also had in mind another prayer—other than to pray for a son. As a righteous man, he would have prayed for the Messiah to come. The angel told Zechariah that his son’s mission and purpose would be to “make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” Have you ever been promised something that was beyond your wildest dreams—something so out-of-the-box that you could hardly believe it? That’s what this was for Zechariah.

Look at verse 18: “Zechariah asked the angel, ‘How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.’” That’s a tactful way of putting it. In essence, Zechariah is saying: Because my wife and I are so old, I’m going to need some proof—a sign that this is really going to happen.

The angel didn’t like that. If an angel is scary, think about what an angry angel would be like.

Gabriel was a famous angel who would have been well known to Zechariah. So not only do you have an angel, you have an angry angel; and not only do you have an angry angel, you have a famous angry angel. He says: Don’t you know who you’re talking to? Don’t you know where I’ve been hanging out? What kind of sign did you want?

So Zechariah is left in the temple with nothing to say. He’s been muted. Meanwhile, the people outside are wondering if he’s had a heart attack in there. When he finally does come out, he’s unable to speak, so he starts signing. Imagine trying to describe what had just happened to him using sign language!

Elizabeth became pregnant and stayed in seclusion for five months. We don’t know why she did this. Some say she was afraid of losing the baby. Luke doesn’t tell us, but he does tell us she spent that time thanking and praising God. During this time, she was thinking and talking about how God had worked in her life to bless her and to take away her disgrace among people.

Think about these two. Zechariah is righteous. He’s old. He’s a priest. He knows God. He knows what it means to serve God. If there ever was a real saint, it’s this guy. But he still had some growing to do. God sent the angel Gabriel to him to give him a marvelous promise. But what does he do? He doubts God. He underestimates God. The angel says it flat out: “You did not believe my words.”

We don’t always think of that as sin, but it is. Underestimating God is just as serious as rebelling against God. Look at the Gospels—the thing that frustrated Jesus the most was the people’s lack of faith. Faith isn’t just something we exercise to get into God’s family.

Zechariah is an example of a person who has known the Lord for a long time. He goes to church. He gives his tithes. He leads a small group. He goes on mission trips. He prays before meals. He reads the