

Hope in the midst of darkness

1 December (Advent 1)

INTRODUCING TODAY'S THEME

It's Christmas in a few weeks' time

when we sing special songs called **carols** about the coming of Jesus into the world.

But before we get to Christmas there is the season of **Advent**, a time of waiting.

I wonder if you're good at waiting?

Waiting for a special day like your birthday to come?

Waiting for the school holidays to come?

It's hard to wait.

This season of Advent is about waiting and about getting our hearts ready to receive God's presence with us.

But it's a time filled with hope because we know God is about to do something very special.

BIBLE READINGS

Lord, open our hearts and minds

that we may hear your word with joy.

The first reading today is from one of the books of the Apocrypha, a group of 17 Scriptures written between the time of Malachi (the last book in our OT) and the time of Jesus. These books are traditionally included in the Catholic Bible but not in most Protestant Bibles. The reading is from 1 Maccabees chapter 1 and describes some of the struggles during this roughly 400 year period before the birth of Jesus.

[1 Maccabees 1 \(select verses\)](#)

After Alexander son of Philip, the Macedonian, king of Greece, had defeated King Darius of the Persians and the Medes, he succeeded him as king. He advanced to the ends of the earth, and plundered many nations. ...

After this Alexander fell sick and so he summoned his most honoured officers, and divided his kingdom among them while he was still alive.

From among them came forth a sinful root, Antiochus Epiphanes. He began to reign in around 175 BCE. ... When Antiochus saw that his kingdom of Syria was established, he determined to become king of the land of Egypt, in order that he might reign over both kingdoms. He captured the fortified cities in the land of Egypt, and plundered the land of Egypt.

After subduing Egypt, Antiochus returned in 169 BCE and went up against Israel and came to Jerusalem with a strong force. He arrogantly entered the temple and took the golden altar, the lampstand for the light, and all its utensils. He took also the table for the bread of God's Presence, the cups for drink-offerings, the bowls, the golden

censers, the curtain, the crowns, and the gold decoration on the front of the temple; he stripped it all off. Taking them all, he went back to his own land.

He shed much blood,

and spoke with great arrogance.

Israel mourned deeply in every community,

rulers and elders groaned,

young women and young men became faint,

the beauty of the women faded.

Every bridegroom took up the lament;

she who sat in the bridal chamber was mourning.

Even the land trembled for its inhabitants,

and all the house of Jacob was clothed with shame.

Two years later Antiochus sent to the cities of Judah a chief collector of tribute, and he came to Jerusalem with a large force. Deceitfully he spoke words of peace to them, and they believed him; but he suddenly fell upon the city, dealt it a severe blow, and destroyed many people of Israel. He plundered the city, burned it with fire, and tore down its houses and its surrounding walls.

They desecrated the altar of burnt-offering by sacrificing a pig on it. The books of the law that they found they tore to pieces and burned with fire. They put to death the women who had their children circumcised, and their families and those who circumcised them.

But many in Israel stood firm and were resolved in their hearts not to eat unclean food. They chose to die rather than to be defiled by food or to profane the holy covenant; and they did die.

[Luke 1:5-25](#)

In the days of King Herod of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside.

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with

heatwaves.

This is the grim reality of life on planet earth in 2024.

While it's surely tempting to jump straight into the comfort of singing Christmas carols and rolling out the mince pies and shortbreads, by doing so we would be missing out on the invitation of Advent.

It is against the darkness, suffering and oppression imposed by those who control our world that the positive Advent themes of hope, peace, joy and love shine most brightly.



Just as we need a dark night sky to see the brilliance of the stars, the good news of Advent is best seen against the darkness of the world.

The message of Advent is that despite and indeed in the midst of the suffering and darkness, God hears the cries of God's people and promises to enter their suffering and pain in a new way.

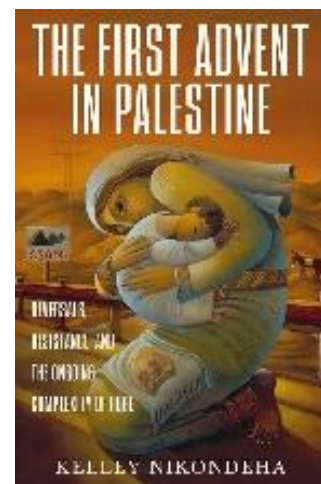
As we wait and prepare for Christmas, people all around us are rushing around like mad things following the consumerist passions of our culture, with Black Friday and Cyber Monday sales in full swing.



Advent offers us a very different rhythm.



It reverses many of these habits and expectations.



- The world says money and power rule
Advent says that God is coming to lift up the poor and powerless.
- The world says buy, buy, buy.
Advent says focus instead on what God is planning.
- The world says this season is all about indulgence.
Advent says God seeks justice and reversal.
- The world says sing songs about Santa coming to town and Jingle Bells.
Advent says sing radical songs of subversion, turning things upside down.
- The world says this season is about comfort and feasting.
Advent says this season is about standing with the poor and suffering.

Welcome to the message of Advent as told by Luke ...

Luke places the Advent stories in a definite historical and political context:

- The Roman empire is ruled by Caesar Tiberius
- Galilee and Judea are ruled by King Herod, who rules as a puppet king on behalf of Rome



Rome imposed taxes of more than 50% on all food produced,

King Herod then applied his own tax and the hated tax-collectors then took their own cut, leaving most people to live in poverty and malnutrition, unless you were one of

the elites who sided with Rome and Herod.

Roman soldiers kept the 'peace', the so-called Pax Romana. In practice that meant submitting to the occupation of the well-equipped and well-armed Roman army or face a violent response. Anyone accused of rebellion or treason was crucified. So the Jewish people were forced to live under both the military and financial oppression of Rome.

Perhaps what we don't appreciate is that this life of oppression had lasted so long that the people could scarcely remember any other way, first under the Assyrians, then the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks and most recently the Romans. The people longed for freedom and hoped for a different future.

But who could make that happen and how?

At least under the Roman occupation, the people were allowed to worship their God, Yahweh, in their own particular way in Jerusalem.

This is in contrast to the earlier Greek period that we heard about in the reading from Maccabees when there were destructive military attacks, yes, imposition of heavy taxes, yes, but also a persistent campaign to wipe out distinctive Jewish practices.



It is in this uneasy and difficult context that Zechariah the priest goes to Jerusalem to burn incense in the temple. He is described as **righteous** – someone who followed God's ways, despite the cost. When not serving at the temple, Zechariah was most likely a tenant farmer and hence poor.

Zechariah and Elizabeth had no children, which was a social stigma, and they were old – a fruitless couple living in a fruitless land, ruled over by a cruel foreign army.



One fateful day when Zechariah is serving in the temple, he lights the fragrant incense, whose smoke symbolised the prayers of the people rising up before God in heaven.

I wonder what Zechariah prayed for ...

Did he pray for enough food to put on his table each day?

Did he pray for a child or had he long given up hope of ever having children?

Did he pray for God to somehow intervene to bring a different sort of peace?



Suddenly Zechariah sees an angel and is terrified.

Now angels in the Bible are not cute but rather fearsome, like the sculpture of Michael on the side wall of the street.

One of the names for an angel is seraph meaning burning one.

Angels in Scripture inspire awe and fear.



The angel has a message for Zechariah ... that he will

have a son who must be named John and who will become a prophet similar to Elijah, Israel's most famous prophet. He will turn people back to the Lord.

Zechariah questions how this could happen, given the old age of his wife Elizabeth and the fact that she has never been able to conceive.

This seems a perfectly reasonable question to ask in the circumstances.



But Zechariah is made silent and mute because of his lack of faith, which seems like quite a harsh punishment.

There are so many gaps to fill in in this story ...

Could Zechariah not see past his shame and grief at being childless and his disappointment with God?

Was he angry and bitter at God – like Naomi in the

book of Ruth – for allowing all this to happen, especially when Zechariah and Elizabeth had been so devoted to observing the ways of God all their lives?

And besides, God seemed powerless to change his or the nation's suffering.

How tempting do we sometimes find it to give up on God's promises when our prayers seem to go unanswered and our situation remains bleak?

How do we hold on to hope and keep trusting God that all will be well when all around seems dark?

The upshot of this first story in Luke's account is that God is at work behind the scenes and does have a plan to bless both Zechariah and Elizabeth as a couple but also the whole nation through their prophetic son.

For those with eyes and ears of faith, there is a candle of hope burning in the midst of the darkness and disappointment.

Finally, a disturbing thought.

We are used to reading the Scriptures and being on the side of underdog Israel, despite their flaws and failings. They are so often the ones being oppressed or misunderstanding God.

But how might we hear the stories of Advent from a Palestinian (especially a Palestinian Christian) perspective where Israel is so often the oppressor rather than the oppressed, especially over the last year?

Will God hear the cries and prayers of the Palestinian people to bring hope to their land? What might justice and freedom look like then?

Who is God's hope for?

The next hymn is using the same tune we sang before O come, O come Emmanuel but now with revised and more subversive lyrics that bring a different perspective to the story.

HYMN O come, O come Emmanuel ... with new words ...

O come, o come compassionate Divine,
and ransom captive Palestine
that mourns with tears that will not be soothed



till empires fall and nations' hearts are moved.

*Rejoice! Rejoice! God's justice is at hand
to liberate the people and the land.*

O come, o bright and ever-burning star;
bring Gaza comfort from afar!

Dispel from her the shadow of death
that murders dignity and chokes out breath.

*Rejoice! Rejoice! God's justice is at hand
to liberate the people and the land.*

O come, O Wisdom from on high,
take up the outcast's cause, the captive's cry.

Guide us to build your kingdom on earth
where all faiths flourish, and the last are first.

*Rejoice! Rejoice! God's justice is at hand
to liberate the people and the land.*

O come, O King of Peace and Justice, break
all weapons down, and from them ploughshares make.

Let all tears dry, all peoples respond:

"We are each other's neighbour and bond."

*Rejoice! Rejoice! God's justice is at hand
to liberate the people and the land.*