

The Making of a Messiah



**WHAT SIX HIDDEN WOMEN
CAN TEACH US ABOUT JESUS**

*A Devotional Guide for Advent and Christmas
from Sacredise.com*

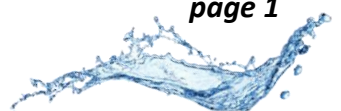
The *Making* of a *Messiah*

*A Devotional Guide for Advent and Christmas
from Sacredise.com*

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Sacredise
Johannesburg



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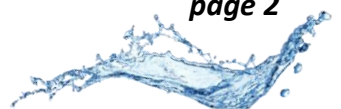
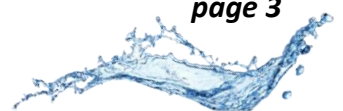


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Introduction

Who is Jesus to you? What informs and shapes your view of Jesus and his work in the world?

These questions are far more important than they may seem at first glance. What we believe about Jesus, who he was, and what his mission means has a significant impact on how we view the world and ourselves, how we behave, what values we embrace, and how we interact and relate with other people. In short, what Jesus means to us matters because it shapes our lives and our world.

We are all the product of our origins. Our ancestors, families, cultures, and historical backgrounds all influence who we are, how we see the world, what we do with our lives, and how we relate to the people around us. If we can accept that Jesus was also fully human, then the same must be true for him.

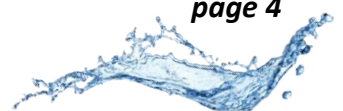
ENCOUNTERING THE CHRIST

When the Gospel writers wrote their accounts of Jesus' life, they turned to the stories of those who had followed him and been touched by his ministry. They turned to the Hebrew Scriptures to grasp the meaning of Jesus' life and work. And they looked back at his ancestry, both to confirm that he could be the Messiah they had been hoping for and to understand the forces that shaped who he was.

It certainly seems that the writer of Matthew believed that Jesus was shaped by his ancestry and background because he began his Gospel with a genealogy—a list of Jesus' ancestors—and included five women, which was extremely unorthodox in his world. Women were not traditionally counted in genealogies and the five women Matthew chose all have questionable reputations. Clearly, the writer believed that these women had something important to tell us about Jesus as Messiah.

The Advent Season invites us to do two kinds of spiritual work. The first and most popular Advent practice is to prepare for the Christmas celebration. The Scriptures we read, the hymns and songs we sing, and the symbols that fill our minds and sanctuaries prepare our hearts to celebrate Christ's birth and open our hearts again for God's Arrival (Advent) in our lives. But the second Advent practice is to place the Christ event in the context of God's much bigger story of Cosmic salvation and restoration. This practice invites us to open ourselves to God's hope, peace, joy, and love and understand the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Christ in terms of these bigger divine activities among us.

I believe that Mathew's genealogy gives us a window into how Matthew connected Jesus' message and mission with God's larger purpose. And that makes it the ideal launch pad to do both kinds of Advent work through this and the Christmas Season. And that's why I am so excited to introduce you to ***The Making of a Messiah***, the new Devotional Guide for Advent and Christmas from Sacredise.



THE MAKING OF A MESSIAH

The Making of a Messiah combines the stories of the five 'hidden' women in Matthew's genealogy with the Lectionary readings for Year B to dive deep into the forces that shaped who Jesus was. I have also included one additional 'hidden' woman from Luke's Gospel for the Sunday after Christmas. While Anna the prophet was not Jesus' ancestor, she did encounter him in infancy and the story of that encounter must have impacted Jesus' sense of identity and purpose as much as the women in his family history. Together, these six women lead us on a journey to encounter Jesus in a new way and understand both who he was and what his life means for us today. I hope ***The Making of a Messiah*** empowers you to follow Jesus more intentionally and inspires you to embody his values, priorities, and life-giving Spirit more fully in your own life, relationships, and world.

The Making of a Messiah is both a guide for personal devotional practice and a manual for following the way of Jesus intentionally and practically. It is both an inspiring journey to prepare for Christmas and a deep exploration of the meaning of Jesus' incarnation and life. And, as the focus of your Advent and Christmas devotions, ***The Making of a Messiah*** sets the course for the entire year ahead.

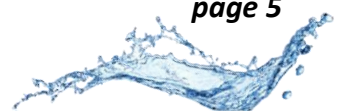
The Making of a Messiah offers everything you need to make your Advent and Christmas spiritual practice engaging, challenging, empowering, and transforming. It includes:

- Preparing, responding, and integrating practices for every day to help you enter into your devotional practice as deeply and mindfully as possible;
- Copies of the Sermon Starters for each week for easy reference while doing your daily practice;
- Daily reflection questions to enable you to listen more deeply to the message of the Scriptures and apply it to your life and relationships.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Spiritual practice works best when we get into a rhythm that includes both repetition and newness. The goal of spiritual practice is to lead us into the abundant life that Jesus promised. This means that we need to learn to live in ways that make fullness of life a reality for us. The small actions, conversations, and decisions of each day add up and together they create our life and the world in which we live. Essentially, our lives are the product of the habits we have developed. So, if we want to experience the life that Jesus offers us, we need to change our habits so that we habitually act, speak, and make decisions that lead us into fullness of life. And there is only one way to develop new habits—we need to repeat the actions that lead us to life over and over until they become 'second-nature'.

For this reason, ***The Making of a Messiah*** includes some elements that repeat through the whole Advent and Christmas journey and some elements that change as we go through the different themes of the season. At the beginning of each chapter, there is a set of Preparing, Responding, and Integrating practices. These are meant to be repeated each day of the week as you explore the theme from the readings and reflection. Then, bookended by these practices, there are reflection questions for each day that will help you to explore the message of the week and how it applies to your life more deeply. I recommend that you give time to the repeated practices and resist the urge to rush through them, because it is that repetition that enables you to engage a little more deeply each day with Spirit and with your own authentic self.



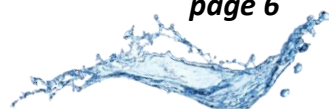
FOR SMALL GROUPS

If you are part of a small group of some kind, then I recommend that you use this **Devotional Guide** together. When you gather, use the Preparation practices as a guide for the start of your time together. Then move to the readings and reflection and use which ever questions you are most drawn to. Or, if you prefer, let these questions lead you into a less structured conversation:

- What stood out for you in this chapter's reading? Why do you think this particularly caught your attention?
- What do these insights mean to you for your spiritual walk in the next week, month, and year?
- How will you work to integrate these insights into your daily living?

I hope that **The Making of a Messiah** will make Advent and Christmas a creative, inspiring, and growthful journey for you. May it lead you to a deeper understanding and experience of Christ's presence and work in your life and may it empower you to embody Christ's values, priorities, and purposes a little more fully in your corner of the world.

John



Advent Sunday

Tamar's

Legacy of Hope



PREPARING

You may find it helpful to have your own Advent wreath with Advent candles on display in your prayer space. You may also want to fill your space with other evergreens and perhaps a Christmas tree as part of your preparation for your devotional practice through Advent and Christmas. Finally, if you are able, you may want to have something in the Advent colour of purple in your space too.

When your space is prepared, it is time to prepare yourself. You may want to have gentle music playing in the background. Close your eyes, deepen your breathing, and hold an evergreen leaf or branch in your hands (if you received one in your worship service, then use it now).

Bring to mind any person, object, symbol, or experience that represents hope for you and hold that image in your mind for a few moments. And then give thanks for any sense of hope that you may be feeling now, no matter how small.

Then, when you're ready, light your first Advent candle—the candle of Hope—as a sign of your hope in Christ.

As you do you may want to use the following prayer, or one of your own:

I thank you, God, for your Advent here with me
and for the hope it brings to my heart.

I open myself to your Spirit of Hope once again
and I offer you my whole self in thanksgiving and worship.

Amen.

If you have any personal prayers on your heart, feel free to offer them now.

REFLECTING

Listening to Scripture

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Mark 13:24-37

Matthew 1:1-3

Genesis 38:1-26

Engaging with Scripture

The following chapter is intended to help you engage more deeply with the readings and theme of this week. But if you attended a worship service and would prefer to use your notes or reflections from the sermon to guide your practice, then feel free to skip directly to the Listening Exercises after the chapter.

The Advent Sunday Contradiction

The first Sunday of Advent is generally built around the theme of hope. But then, in the Lectionary, the Gospel reading always contains Jesus' warnings about the distress that would come on Israel and the need for people to stay alert and aware. It may seem like a contradiction to use a reading about the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple as a basis for hope. The events of which Jesus speaks in his apocalyptic discourse caused many people in his time, both Jews and followers of Jesus, to lose hope—so why should we expect to find reasons for optimism in his words now?

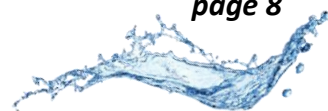
I suspect that the Lectionary creators had two thoughts in mind when they planned the readings for the first week of Advent. The first is that Jesus, speaking in alignment with the prophetic tradition, declared that people would "see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory." The image of the return of Christ is often viewed as the foundation for hope in Christian thinking and so it makes sense for this to inform our thinking about Advent. It also places the incarnation in the context of the greater story of God's saving purpose for all creation. The return of Christ is a prophetic vision of the end of time, the final judgement, and the restoration of the cosmos to unity and wholeness. And it is important that the incarnation be understood in the light of this grand vision.

But, secondly, the whole season of Advent is a reminder that what we will celebrate at Christmas—the birth of Emmanuel, God with us—is true for all people at all times. God did not 'enter the world' just once, at one point in history. Rather, God has always been entering the world to restore and renew it and its inhabitants. God is entering our world even now as we face economic pressures, the growing gap between rich and poor, the climate crisis, war and increasing numbers of people seeking refuge from conflict. And God will always be entering our world, regardless of what chaos or calm may lie ahead. God has come to us, God is coming to us, and God will come to us. This is the message of Advent, and we most need it in times of crisis like those that Jesus described in his time.

We Long For, And Fear, Hope

When things are going well, we hardly need hope. We may look forward to some pleasurable experience or some gift that will make our lives richer and more joyful. But, as much as that gives us a positive feeling about the future, it hardly qualifies as hope. Hope, in its most raw and powerful form, can only really be experienced when our world is collapsing. It is when we are most in danger of losing hope that we most need the resilience, strength, and sustenance that deep and authentic hope provides. That's why, when we face grief, trauma, loss, humiliation, or despair, we long for hope to keep us going.

But we are also afraid of hope. When hope remains unfulfilled, it can break us. As Proverbs 13:12 says, "Hope delayed makes the heart sick; longing fulfilled is a tree of life." When we allow ourselves to hope, we also open ourselves to the grief of being betrayed by hope. We risk growing empty and lost when our hope fails to materialise. And that's why we need a hope that is based on something deeper than a particular set of changes in our circumstances. It is easy to hope when we believe that things will certainly work out in our favour. But what does hope look like when there are no guarantees?



When Israel developed its Messianic hope, part of the problem was that it was understood in terms of military victory, political liberation, and the resurrection of the Hebrew nation. When Rome conquered Israel and destroyed the Temple, it went against every hope that Israelites held. And any Messiah who had failed to win freedom for his Jewish compatriots, was a false Messiah.

The Gospel writers all faced the challenge of proving that the crucified Christ was the true Messiah. And to do that, they had to show that Jesus had not come to fulfil a nationalist agenda. In the case of the Gospel of Matthew, the writer began his defence of Jesus in his genealogy. As he began painting his picture of Jesus as the true Messiah, the symbol and fulfilment of Israel's hope, he chose to include five women, all of whom had tarnished reputations.

As we explore these women, and the reasons why Matthew chose to include them in Jesus' ancestry (which would usually only have included his male forbears) we can find in them a legacy that can help us to experience Christ in deeper and more life-giving ways and inspire and empower us as we navigate the challenges of our time.

The first of Matthew's unlikely women is Tamar and in her story, we find a legacy of hope.

Tamar: Hope in Despair

We meet Tamar in Genesis 38:1-26. It's not really a child friendly story, so if you're going to include families in your Advent services (which I hope you are) you may want to share only the highlights, rather than read the whole passage. (Note: this applies to most of the other chapters too).

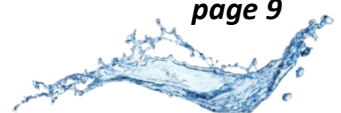
You may remember Judah who was one of the twelve sons of Jacob, the patriarchs of Israel's twelve tribes. Tamar was married to Er, the eldest of Judah's sons. When Er died, Judah followed the tradition that became known as 'Levirate marriage' and insisted that his second son, Onan, marry Tamar. But Onan died as well, which left only the youngest son, Shelah, who was too young to marry. So Judah sent Tamar back to her father's house to wait until Shelah had grown up.

But Judah never sent for Tamar. And so, she had to resort to a desperate and unlawful strategy to get the protection and care she deserved. In a deception that could have cost her her life, Tamar tricked Judah into making her pregnant and then, when he was about to punish her for sexual sin, she proved that he was the father of her child.

Tamar should have found love, protection, and provision in Judah's family, but instead she got abandonment, deception, betrayal and rejection. And yet, somehow, she managed to cling to hope. At first, her hope was expressed in *acceptance*. She couldn't change that she was widowed or that the man who should have become her husband was too young. All she could do was return to her father's house and accept the shame, indignity, and restrictions of being a widow in a patriarchal society. The only future Tamar could have imagined at that point, was for Judah to fulfil his promise and for her to be married to Shelah. And it seems like she accepted her situation and lived as happily and well as she could under the circumstances.

But then, when she realised that Judah had broken his promise, her hope moved from acceptance to action. Her action had to be desperate—there was no other way—but she planned well and made a way for herself to be properly cared for and protected. And in the process, she became one of the Messiah's ancestral mothers.

There is much to learn from the legacy of Tamar—the abandoned widow who found hope in the face of despair by boldly challenging her culture and changing her circumstances.



Jesus: A Messiah of Hope

As we have seen, Matthew's Gospel was written to a people who had many reasons to lose hope. Jerusalem had been sacked. The Temple had been destroyed. They could no longer offer the sacrifices required by the law. And there was no sign of Rome being overthrown and a new Israeli nation established. But the writer of Matthew found hope in Jesus the Christ, and he offered that hope to his readers.

Matthew presents Jesus as the best way forward for a Judaism in crisis. And to do that, he presents Jesus as a new Moses bringing a new law to a new Israel. Or more accurately, Jesus fulfils Moses' prophecy that a prophet like himself would come, he fulfils the Law and the Prophets, and the community he created fulfils Israel's purpose as the chosen nation which was blessed to be a blessing to all nations.

In his birth narrative, Matthew includes Tamar and other marginalised women to express the hope that he saw in the birth of Jesus. He names Jesus as the one who will save and as God with us. And he tells the story of how even in Jesus' birth, those who sought to cling to power through violence and deception, could not destroy the kind of resilient hope that Jesus represented and lived and taught.

Like Tamar, Jesus expressed hope through acceptance, but he also included affirmation. The Beatitudes were not a manifesto for political revolution, but they were revolutionary in showing marginalised, ignored, and vulnerable people that they were blessed. In recognising and receiving the truth about themselves as God-imagined, God-beloved, and God-empowered people, they could find hope and strength to navigate the painful reality of their world.

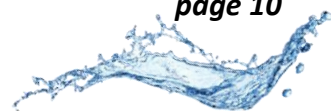
In his own life, Jesus accepted the reality of his world. He did not embrace the rash and impotent attempts to overthrow Rome through violence. He refused the cynical and self-serving collaboration with Rome that the religious leaders had chosen. And he refused to withdraw from society and live as a hermit, detached from the world. Rather, within his reality, he found a way—the way of love and justice—to live well even in the difficult life and world into which he was born.

But then Jesus also offered hope through action. Not the action of political revolution, but the action of revolutionary love. Of living generously, courageously, and authentically, and creating a new world through the way of simple, daily actions of love and justice. Ultimately, Jesus' actions brought healing, restoration, and liberation to many. It also set him free not to be controlled by fear, greed, the adulation or denigration of others, or power games. He was free to act even when he knew that his actions would bring judgement on himself. And he was free to live fully and lovingly even when his life was being taken from him.

Embracing Tamar's Legacy of Hope

As we prepare for and wait for the birth of Christ again, we can find the hope we long for in Tamar's story and in Matthew's promise that the Messiah is the one who leads us into an authentic and empowering hope. This is not a fantastic dream of some future when God will swoop in and fix everything according to our desires and designs. Rather it is a practical offer of simple choices that can connect us more deeply with the God that Jesus proclaimed and empower us to live authentically, courageously, generously, compassionately, and justly right here and right now.

Advent reminds us that God has always been present in our world, always will be present in our world, and is present with us now. And in connection with this God, we have the capacity for deep acceptance of what we cannot change, while learning how to live authentically, courageously, and



fully even in imperfect or painful circumstances. And then, as we learn from Christ and his ancestor Tamar, we can see where action is needed to bring love and justice into our world a little more and respond accordingly.

This may be the action of caring more consistently and compassionately for ourselves. It may be the action of strengthening our relationships and caring more deeply and unconditionally for one another. It may be the action of getting to know our neighbours and learning to support, protect, and care for one another in our neighbourhood. It may be cleaning up our suburb, or raising funds for those in need, or feeding the hungry. It may be the action of voting, or protesting, or petitioning, or writing to local government officials, or engaging in some other civic action that can help to support a more just and loving society.

The Daily Choice to Cling to Hope

When, each day, we can do one thing to express our hope in action, to live now as if we were already in the world we long for, then hope becomes an empowering and transforming force in our lives. That's when we become aware, both consciously and intuitively, of the presence of the God who is always moving in our lives and world, and when we can draw hope and strength from God's presence and purpose.

In her time, Tamar was a person without power who was neglected, dismissed, and forgotten. She was left without honour, without dignity, without resources, without love, without care, without protection, and without a family of her own. She was made to live as a child in her father's house. She had every reason to give up hope. But she didn't. She accepted her reality when there was hope that in time promises would be fulfilled. And, as far as we can tell, she learned to live well in her grief and dependence. But then, when it became clear that promises were being broken and she was not being restored through marriage as she was entitled to, she took action and ensured that she changed her circumstances for herself.

This legacy of hope shaped Matthew's view of Jesus. And now, as we wait to celebrate Christ's birth again in a world of deep inequality, climate crisis, and war and destructive power games, Tamar's legacy of hope can inspire and empower us.

Listening Exercises

Insert the **listening exercises** for the relevant day at this point in your spiritual practice.

RESPONDING

Return to the evergreen branch or leaf that you were holding at the beginning of your practice and consider again the things that help you to find, feel, and share hope. Open yourself once again and allow God's Spirit to kindle a new flame of hope in your heart. Then, when you are ready, imagine planting your evergreen into the soil and see it growing into a large tree that provides shelter and life to so many creatures.

Make a note of any thoughts, emotions, or physical feelings that may arise in you as you do this meditation and open yourself to hear what they may be trying to say to you. Notice any new or particular resistance or openness to hope that you may feel within you. You may want to make some time to journal your reflections and experiences before you move into the rest of your day.



INTEGRATING

Finally, as you end your spiritual practice, make a commitment to plant and nurture hope in your life and world through the day.

Each day consider how well you managed to fulfil this commitment. Consider where you succeeded in nurturing hope in your world and make a note of where you failed—not to judge yourself, but simply to learn. Take some time to explore how you can do better in those areas tomorrow.

End your practice with a short prayer and return to your routine with mindfulness.

LISTENING EXERCISES

Each day, return to the Scripture readings and reflection chapter above. Review any notes you may have taken or insights you may have had as you read the chapter or listened to a sermon based on it.

And then, use the questions for each day to apply what you have received to your life in a deeper way.

When you have worked through the questions, spend a few moments considering how your answers have affected your life. Notice if there is anything you would want to change, and if so, consider what you need to do to change it.

You may want to journal your insights so that you have a record of the spiritual work you've done each day.

DAY ONE (Advent Sunday)

Are there any elements of Tamar's story that resonate with you? How does Tamar's legacy of hope speak to, or challenge, you?

In what ways might Jesus have been influenced by hearing about his ancestor, Tamar? How do you experience Jesus as a Messiah of Hope?

In what ways can you embody the hopefulness of Tamar and Jesus in your own life and relationships?

DAY TWO

What does Advent mean to you? What is the relationship between Advent and Christmas in your spiritual practice?

Where in your life do you need more hope? How do you feel about opening yourself to hope?

How is hope a positive influence in your life? Is there any way that you ever feel afraid of hope? If yes, what is the source of that fear?

DAY THREE

What elements in Tamar's story particularly stood out for you?

How do you feel about Tamar and her strategies for bringing hope into her life?

Why do you think Matthew included Tamar in his genealogy of Jesus?

DAY FOUR

As a Jewish child who was taught the Hebrew Scriptures from a young age, Jesus would have known Tamar's story. What signs do you see in Jesus' life (as Matthew tells it) that he was influenced by Tamar's quest for hope?

Where do you see Jesus bringing hope to others and clinging to hope himself?

How did Jesus' commitment to hope empower him to live freely, generously, and authentically?

What can you do to follow Jesus' example in your life?

DAY FIVE

Where in your life do you need to find hope by accepting things that you cannot change? How can you learn to do this?

Where in your life do you need to find hope through small, intentional actions of love and justice?

What empowerment, inspiration, or internal resources do you need in order to do these actions?

What specific actions can you do to bring hope to yourself and those around you in this Advent Season?

DAY SIX

What 'world' or life for yourself and your loved ones do you long and hope for? Write a brief description of your world as you wish for it to be and take a few moments to visualise that world and imagine what it would be like for you to live in that world now.

How can you begin to live now as if that world already exists for you?

How does Tamar's legacy of hope inspire you to 'live into' the world you hope for?

DAY SEVEN

What primary insights from this week do you want to carry with you into the next weeks and months? Review your reflections from the week and make sure to note any significant insights, questions, or experiences.

How will you keep these truths close to mind so that you can be intentional about applying them to your life?



Rahab's Legacy of Peace



PREPARING

If you need to prepare your space again, make some time to do it mindfully and prayerfully. Before you begin your practice, be fully present to the symbols, colours, sounds, and feel of your space and remember to light the first Advent candle. Even if it is physically prepared, it is important to prepare your space in your mind and heart—or to re-orient yourself to the space.

When your space is prepared, it is time to prepare yourself. You may want to have gentle music playing in the background. Close your eyes, deepen your breathing, and hold a scarlet thread in your hands (if you received one in your worship service, then use it now. If you have tied it around your wrist, then keep it in place as you touch it).

After a few moments, do a silent word association exercise around the word 'peace.' Think of any words, ideas, symbols, images, and experiences that speak to you of peace. And consider what peace means for you. Finally, give thanks for whatever peace you enjoy and offer a silent prayer for peace to grow and expand in your life, relationships, and world.

Then, when you're ready, light your second Advent candle—the candle of Peace—as a sign of your peace in Christ.

As you do you may want to use the following prayer, or one of your own:

I thank you, God, for your Advent here with me
and for the peace it brings to my heart.
I open myself to your Spirit of Peace once again
and I offer you my whole self in thanksgiving and worship.
Amen.

If you have any personal prayers on your heart, feel free to offer them now.

REFLECTING

Listening to Scripture

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Mark 1:1-8

Matthew 1:1-5

Joshua 2:1-21

Engaging with Scripture

The following chapter is intended to help you engage more deeply with the readings and theme of this week. But if you attended a worship service and would prefer to use your notes or reflections from the sermon to guide your practice, then feel free to skip directly to the Listening Exercises after the chapter.

Elusive Peace

Like contestants at a beauty pageant, we all want world peace. And yet, somehow peace remains stubbornly illusive in our human world. As I write this Putin's war against Ukraine is in its nineteenth month. And that's one conflict in a world filled with polarisation and religious conflict. On a personal level, many relationships are breaking as families, friends, and neighbours fight over competing needs, misunderstandings, or opposing views on religion and politics. And to add to our turbulence, many of us are struggling even to find peace within ourselves. A recent [TIME Magazine article](#) questioned why, when so many Americans are undergoing therapy, mental health in the USA is getting worse.

We all long for peace. But it seems that for reasons beyond our control or understanding, peace remains an elusive reality for most of us. Perhaps that's why the second Sunday of Advent is often called the Sunday of Peace. Advent is a season of waiting and there is no question that we are all waiting for peace—including the planet that we call home. In his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul wrote, "The whole creation waits breathless with anticipation for the revelation of God's children." (8:19).

The Gospel reading for the Sunday of Peace in Year B reflects how the people of Israel were waiting for God's liberation and restoration. It is into this climate of longing and waiting that Matthew's Gospel presents Jesus as the Awaited One who would lead us to the peace we seek. And in the genealogy that begins Matthew's Gospel, Rahab is the second hidden woman to be mentioned. While I am quite sure that Matthew had no intention of fitting Rahab into our current Advent traditions, it remains true that she has left us an intriguing legacy of peace that can help us to understand Jesus' message and mission and how it can lead us to the peace we seek.

Rahab: Peace in a Time of Turbulence

Rahab lived in Jericho at the time in the biblical narrative when the Israelites, under Joshua, were invading and conquering Canaan. She is traditionally known as a prostitute, but she could have possibly been just a humble inn keeper (although it was common for inns and brothels to operate together). She clearly was on the outside of Canaanite society since she had no loyalty to her city or leaders. But she kept her word to the Israelite spies and became a respected and honoured member of Hebrew society. Which indicates that she was not duplicitous by nature, but rather because of her circumstances in Jericho.

If I may offer a personal conjecture, the fact that Rahab dwelt on the outskirts of the city, with her house literally on the outer side of the city wall, could indicate the extent to which she was marginalised. In ancient times, the heart of the city, the place where royal palaces were situated and the wealthiest people lived, was in the centre far from the walls. And often people's status was reflected by how close to this centre they lived—which could mean that Rahab, living in the walls of Jericho, was as low in status as it was possible to be.

In the light of her situation, it makes sense that, when the Israelite spies sought lodging with her in Jericho, she seized the opportunity to negotiate a deal. She would keep them safe from discovery



and execution in return for a promise that, when they conquered the city, they would save her and her family. The spies agreed, the promise was kept, and Rahab became part of the Israelite nation and ultimately an ancestor of Jesus.

As William L. Lyons notes, Rahab is now often viewed by those who read Scripture as a great example of hospitality, mercy, faith, patience and repentance. She ended up marrying an Israelite man of the tribe of Judah whose name was Salmon and became the mother of Boaz who was the great grandfather of David.

Rahab's story is a rich and complex exploration of what it means to seek and create peace both for ourselves and for our community. And at the heart of Rahab's quest for peace is her capacity for building relationships. Perhaps today we would call it emotional intelligence, but the key is that she was comfortable and creative both in brokering peace with those who sought peace alongside her and with confronting injustice, violence, and non-peace with those who were not willing to create peace.

There is much to learn from the legacy of Rahab—the marginalised inn keeper who found peace for herself and her family in a time of war by building relationship with the enemy.

Jesus: A Messiah of Peace

In his quest to present Jesus as the Messiah—the fulfilment of Moses' mission, of the Law and the Prophets, and of Israel's purpose—Matthew includes Rahab in his genealogy of Jesus. Her positioning in the genealogy is significant in that she is mentioned as the mother of Boaz (rather than as Salmon's wife). This would have been a deliberate choice by the writer in order to connect her with King David. Although God forbade David from building the Temple because he was a man of war, he did manage to bring the various tribes and factions of Israel together, bringing internal peace and uniting them as a nation.

Building on the foundation of the genealogy, Matthew then portrays Jesus' message and mission as one of peacemaking. In the Beatitudes, Jesus singles out the peacemakers as the ones who will be called God's children. And later in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus speaks those famous words about turning the other cheek, giving both shirt and coat to someone who asks, and carrying a soldier's pack an extra mile. As Walter Wink famously pointed out in his book, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, these were not acts of submission or passivity. They were acts of peaceful, non-violent protest against injustice, oppression, and abuse. Now as we prepare our hearts for the Christmas celebration of the birth of Christ, it is significant to remember that the angelic chorus, witnessed by the shepherds, included the following refrain, "Glory to God in heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours."

Jesus' message of God's reign can be understood in relationship to the Hebrew idea of *Shalom*, which is often translated as peace, but means far more. The concept of *Shalom* includes peace, in terms of the absence of violence or conflict, but it also refers to harmony, welfare, tranquillity, prosperity and wholeness for all. It is a vision of what the world could be if we all followed the ways of love and justice that Jesus proclaimed.

Embracing Rahab's Legacy of Peace

When we celebrate Christmas, then, we are not just giving thanks for the birth of one unique child. Rather, we are celebrating the world order that Jesus' birth represents, that he lived and taught and died for—the world of peace, equality, justice, goodness, truth, and love that we all dream of and long for. This was the world Rahab sought for herself and her family, it was the world David tried to



create for Israel when he united the Hebrew people as a nation. And it was the world that Jesus, the descendant of these peace-seekers and peacemakers sought to bring about through the community which he established and trained.

The challenge of the angelic song about 'peace on earth' is that it won't happen automatically and without effort. Our world will only know peace when human beings choose to become peacemakers rather than conflict creators. Or as Jimi Hendrix famously put it, "When the power of love overcomes the love of power the world will know peace."

The work of peacemaking includes two elements. The first is to confront and challenge those who nurture and benefit from injustice, conflict, war, and the oppression of others. This is what Walter Wink was talking about when he revealed the non-violent opposition to injustice that is contained in Jesus' call for us to turn the other cheek. Peacemaking is not about refusing to confront violence or stand against injustice. On the contrary, we cannot make peace without doing these things.

But the second aspect of peacemaking is to nurture, strengthen, and expand whatever is good, true, and beautiful, whatever fosters reconciliation, forgiveness, and relationship building in our world.

Both of these aspects of peacemaking operate on private, personal, and public levels. In private, within ourselves, we need to stand against the violence we absorb from the world around us and that we often do to ourselves—overwork, lack of empathy for our own weakness, failures, and struggles, judgement on ourselves for not meeting society's standards of beauty, wealth, fame, or power; masking our true selves to fit in with others. On a personal level, in our closest relationships with family, friends, and neighbours, we can stand against manipulation, abuse, and coercion. We can resist the negative patterns that place us against one another and we can nurture the positive ones that draw us closer together—forgiveness, listening, empathy, and celebrating our differences. And then, on a public level, we can use our vote, our voice, and our presence to support initiatives that seek to bring understanding and reconciliation between people and to stop those that divide us and increase polarisation, fear, and conflict.

Becoming Peacemakers

Peacemaking can seem like a huge and exhausting undertaking that requires nothing but a constant commitment of our best resources and energies. But when we think of it this way, we tend to get overwhelmed and then we end up doing nothing. Rather, peacemaking is about the small actions we take each day to support peace for ourselves and those around us. And this is where Rehab's legacy of peace is such a gift to us.

Rahab did not have the power to broker peace between the Israelites and Jericho. She could not stop the leaders of her city from acting in ways that kept their citizens from peace, even if it was only the marginalised like her. But she could resist the non-peaceful ways her city chose to act. And she could seek peace for herself and her family. She may not have had the capacity to address all the issues of violence and conflict in her world. But she did what she could for herself and the people in her circle of influence. And in the end, her commitment to peace ended up echoing through the generations and bringing peace to a nation under David and ultimately to the world through Jesus the Christ.

This legacy of peace empowered Jesus and was part of the heritage that led him to include peacemaking as a central feature of his message and mission. And now, as we wait to celebrate Christ's birth again in a world filled with personal and political conflicts, Rahab's legacy of peace can inspire and empower us.



Listening Exercises

Insert the **listening exercises** for the relevant day at this point in your spiritual practice.

RESPONDING

Hold your scarlet thread again and consider the things that help you to find, feel, and share peace. Open yourself once again and allow God's Spirit to breathe peace into your heart. Then, when you are ready, imagine this thread connecting you to the people around you—your loved ones, your neighbours, and even those who might consider to be your enemies. See these connections strengthening and glowing as they spread peace through the networks they create.

Make a note of any thoughts, emotions, or physical feelings that may arise in you as you do this meditation and open yourself to hear what they may be trying to say to you. Notice any new or particular resistance or openness to peace that you may feel within you. You may want to make some time to journal your reflections and experiences before you move into the rest of your day.

INTEGRATING

Finally, as you end your spiritual practice make a commitment to connect more deeply with others and to foster peace in your life and world through the day.

Each day consider how well you managed to fulfil this commitment. Consider where you succeeded in peacemaking in your world and make a note of where you failed. Take some time to explore how you can do better in those areas tomorrow.

End your practice with a short prayer and return to your routine with mindfulness.

LISTENING EXERCISES

Each day, return to the Scripture readings and reflection chapter above. Review any notes you may have taken or insights you may have had as you read the chapter or listened to a sermon based on it.

And then, use the questions for each day to apply what you have received to your life in a deeper way.

When you have worked through the questions, spend a few moments considering how your answers have affected your life. Notice if there is anything you would want to change, and if so, consider what you need to do to change it.

You may want to journal your insights so that you have a record of the spiritual work you've done each day.



DAY ONE (Advent 2)

Are there any elements of Rahab's story that resonate with you? How does Rahab's legacy of peace speak to, or challenge, you?

In what ways might Jesus have been influenced by hearing about his ancestor, Rahab? How do you experience Jesus as the Prince of Peace?

In what ways can you embody the peacemaking legacy of Rahab and Jesus in your own life and relationships?

DAY TWO

Why do you think we struggle so much to find peace in our lives and world even though we all long for it so much?

Where in your life and world do you need more peace? What would peace look like for you?

Where do you need more peace within yourself? What would this internal peace look and feel like for you?

DAY THREE

How do you feel about Rahab and the way she found peace for herself and her family?

Why do you think she chose to align herself with the Israelites, who were the enemies of her people, instead of exposing them to the leaders of Jericho? How can her actions still be seen as working for peace?

Why do you think Matthew included Rahab in his genealogy of Jesus? Why do you think she has come to be known as an "example of hospitality, mercy, faith, patience, and repentance"?

DAY FOUR

How might hearing Rahab's story as a boy have influenced Jesus' life and ministry and his understanding of peace?

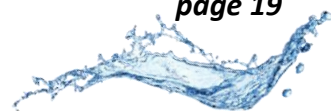
Create a brief list for yourself of examples from the Gospels where Jesus acted as a peacemaker. What can you learn about peace and peacemaking from these stories?

How does the Hebrew idea of *Shalom* inform your understanding of peace? How might it have influenced Jesus' teachings about peace? When we think of the multitude of wars that Christians have fought, both with other Christians and people of other religions, is it still possible to think of Jesus as the "Prince of Peace"? In what ways has Jesus brought peace into our world?

DAY FIVE

What is your response to the quote from Jimi Hendrix: "When the power of love overcomes the love of power the world will know peace."? What does this mean for you as you seek peace in your life? Where in your life do you need to find peace through confronting and challenging those who benefit from injustice and conflict? How can you do this practically?

Where in your life do you need to find peace through nurturing, strengthening, and expanding whatever is good, true, and beautiful? How can you do this practically?



DAY SIX

How do your efforts at making peace operate on a private level within yourself? How do they work on a personal level in your closest relationships? And how can you also contribute to peace on a public level?

What small, peacemaking actions can you commit to so that the idea of peace making does not become overwhelming for you?

How does Rahab's legacy of peace inspire you to be a peacemaker?

DAY SEVEN

What primary insights from this week do you want to carry with you into the next weeks and months? Review your reflections from the week and make sure to note any significant insights, questions, or experiences.

How will you keep these truths close to mind so that you can be intentional about applying them to your life?



Ruthi's

Legacy of Joy



PREPARING

If you need to prepare your space again, make some time to do it mindfully and prayerfully. Before you begin your practice, be fully present to the symbols, colours, sounds, and feel of your space and remember to light the first two Advent candles.

When your space is prepared, take a moment to prepare yourself. Once again, have gentle music playing in the background if it helps you. Close your eyes, deepen your breathing, and hold a small bandage in your hands (if you received one in your worship service, then hold it, or, if it is wrapped around your arm, touch it now).

After a few moments, remember the feeling of pure joy and identify what people, places, experiences, or activities bring you joy. Then consider what joy means and what represents joy for you. Sit with this reflection on joy and connect with any reservoirs of joy you may have within you. Finally, give thanks for whatever joy you may have in your life and offer a silent prayer for joy to fill your world.

Then, when you're ready, light your third Advent candle—the candle of Joy—as a sign of your joy in Christ.

As you do you may want to use the following prayer, or one of your own:

I thank you, God, for your Advent here with me
and for the joy it brings to my heart.
I open myself to your Spirit of Joy once again
and I offer you my whole self in thanksgiving and worship.
Amen.

If you have any personal prayers on your heart, feel free to offer them now.

REFLECTING

Listening to Scripture

SCRIPTURE READINGS

John 1:6-8, 19-28

Matthew 1:1-5

Ruth 1:1-18

Engaging with Scripture

The following chapter is intended to help you engage more deeply with the readings and theme of this week. But if you attended a worship service and would prefer to use your notes or reflections from the sermon to guide your practice, then feel free to skip directly to the Listening Exercises after the chapter.

The Disappointing Pursuit of Happiness

Every citizen of the United States of America is familiar with Thomas Jefferson's words in the Declaration of Independence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men (sic) are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

That phrase—'the pursuit of happiness'—has captured the hearts of human beings across the globe and has become a guiding principle in the lives of many people, particularly in the developed nations of the Western World. Yet, despite it being entrenched in the values of western society, the pursuit of happiness has not made us happier. On the contrary, as a [Guardian article](#) of 10 January 2021 explains:

Over the past 10 years, numerous studies have shown that our obsession with happiness and high personal confidence may be making us less content with our lives, and less effective at reaching our actual goals. Indeed, we may often be happier when we stop focusing on happiness altogether.

It seems that perhaps, in pursuing happiness, we may have set our sights on the wrong thing. We may have become too obsessed not just with happiness, but with the quest for an extreme and constant feeling of happiness that is impossible to attain. And, in our pursuit of happiness, we may even have robbed ourselves of something far more valuable—joy.

It is generally accepted that happiness is rooted in external circumstances and therefore transitory and relatively shallow. Joy, on the other hand, is rooted in our internal world and therefore can be more consistent, secure, and deep. Where happiness is primarily a feeling which changes easily and often depending on what is going on around us, joy is an attitude and a way of being that remains stable and can sustain us even through the worst of times.

In the Gospel reading for Advent 3 in Year B of the Revised Common Lectionary, we encounter John the Baptist. While he may not usually be considered a paragon of joy, there is definitely something deeply joyful in the way he fulfilled his preparatory role in Jesus' arrival. The writer of John states quite simply that John the Baptist was not "the light, but his mission was to testify concerning the light." And then, when the religious leaders interrogate him about who he is, John seems to take pleasure in keeping them guessing. He comfortably acknowledges that he is not the Christ and is completely content to be simply the "voice crying out in the wilderness, make the Lord's path straight."

This willingness to step aside for Jesus reveals that John was not obsessed with his own happiness, reputation, or position. In the verses that follow the account of the religious leaders' questions, John eagerly directs his disciples toward Jesus, which indicates that he found joy in Jesus' appearance and the start of Jesus' ministry.



The third Sunday of Advent is generally seen as the Sunday of Joy, and it is against this backdrop that we turn to the third woman in Matthew's genealogy—Ruth. And her legacy is one of joy.

Ruth: Joy in a Time of Grief

Ruth's story begins in hardship and heartbreak. Naomi, Ruth's mother-in-law, endured famine, the death of her husband, and then a decade later, the death of both of her sons. This left her alone in a foreign land with only her two Moabite daughters-in-law. And so, she decided to return home to Israel. But when she tried to send the young women back to their families, Ruth refused. In spite of her grief at the loss of her husband, she insisted on returning with Naomi to Israel.

What made Ruth choose to leave her home and family to live as a widowed foreigner in Israel with her mother-in-law? Could it be that somehow, she was able to believe that the world still contained possibility, goodness, and beauty? Could it be that she recognised the far greater grief that Naomi had endured and felt compelled to care for her? Could it be that she chose to see Naomi as family and as a beloved companion in their shared grief. Could it be that she saw herself, even in her pain, as still capable of life, and meaning, and joy?

Whatever the reason, there can be little doubt that Ruth's choice to stay connected and to find purpose in caring for Naomi contributed to her courage, to her sense of purpose, and to her capacity to build a new life in a foreign land for herself and her mother-in-law. Rather than be defined by her grief, rather than lose herself in misery, bitterness, and hopelessness, Ruth chose a life of love, compassion, and purpose and in that she found joy.

But the joy that Ruth discovered and embodied was not just for herself. Her commitment to not give up on life, love, and joy, ensured that she was able to bring joy to Naomi too. She gave Naomi a new sense of purpose in being her mentor as she navigated the customs and courting practices of her adopted homeland. And when she and Boaz had their first child, Ruth allowed Naomi to be his guardian and the women of the neighbourhood said that "A son has been born to Naomi."

Grief may have stolen the happiness of Ruth and Naomi, but it could not steal their joy. Together they chose joy, through a life of connection, care, and purpose, that ensured that grief did not have the final say in their lives and did not come to define them.

There is much to learn from the legacy of Ruth—the widowed immigrant who found a life of joy in the face of grief by caring for her grieving mother-in-law.

Jesus: A Messiah of Joy

In his Gospel, as Matthew presents Jesus as the promised Messiah, he includes Ruth—not just as the great-grandmother of David, but also as one who left a legacy of joy. And it was a legacy that shaped Matthew's vision of Jesus as Messiah—and that of the other Gospel writers.

From the moment of his birth, Jesus' life and person radiated joy. In Luke's Gospel, Elizabeth proclaimed that John leapt for joy in her womb at the sound of Mary's greeting and Mary declared that she was filled with joy at being the mother of Christ. And the angel told the shepherds that the announcement of Jesus' birth was "good news of great joy."

In Matthew's Beatitudes, Jesus spoke a blessing over those who are persecuted and invited them to rejoice and be glad in the midst of their pain. And in John's Gospel, Jesus' last words to his disciples contain numerous references to the joy he wants to give them.



The joy in Jesus, and the joy he sought to give to his friends, was unrelated to circumstances. It was far more than a happy feeling. It was a way of being fully alive, connected, and positive even in the face of grief, pain, and struggle. This was the way of joy that Ruth embodied. Like Ruth, Jesus found and shared joy through a life of connecting with and caring for others and helping them to find meaning, joy, and purpose as well. Even as he died in excruciating pain, Jesus was able to share words of joy and comfort with the dying thief on the cross beside him. And as he looked down from the cross, he expressed his love for his mother by ensuring she would be cared for after his death. These are acts of joy and joy-bringing even in the midst of extreme pain and grief.

Embracing Ruth's Legacy of Joy

As we prepare to celebrate Christmas, our focus is not on Jesus alone. Jesus' life and work were all about the reign of God—and that is a reign of Joy. If our faith makes us miserable, angry, and full of hatred or judgement, it's not the joyful and vibrant faith of Jesus. If our faith is only about waiting for life to begin in heaven after we die, then it's not the joyful and vibrant faith of Jesus.

Jesus may have been, as Isaiah says, "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3) but he was also, simultaneously, a man of joy who was acquainted with laughter, beauty, optimism, purpose, and connection with others. And he sought always to bring joy to those around him.

And so, as we sing of joy to the world, as we celebrate the birth of the Christ, let's also embrace Ruth's legacy of joy. Let's embody Jesus' call to be people of joy and let's strive to be joy-bringers to family, friends, and neighbours. Let's not settle for a shallow and temporary happiness. Let's give ourselves to the quest for that deep and lasting joy that comes from an abiding sense of purpose, meaning, connection, and aliveness. And let's believe that joy and life can still exist and thrive and empower us even in our darkest most sorrowful times.

Choosing Joy

Ruth's life could have ended when her husband died and Naomi chose to return to Israel. She could have gone back to her family and hoped for a new husband. Or she could have become a disillusioned and bitter old woman who never let go of the grief life had thrown at her. She could have been defined by her pain, sorrow, and struggle. But she chose differently.

And like her, we can make the same choice. Joy is not just going to happen to us. It is a daily, conscious decision to reject cynicism, despair, and bitterness. It is a choice to be intentional about the words we use and the interpretations we place on the world, on the people around us, and on ourselves. And it is a determination to connect with and share life with others as best we can.

What are the things that could lead you to reject joy? What makes you feel that joy is no longer an option for you? What robs you of life, possibility, and meaning? And what would it take for you to cling to joy and to choose, little by little, day by day, to do the things that keep you alive and filled with joy even in your most sorrowful times?

Embracing joy may not always be the easy choice. It may not be the natural choice. It may not be the choice we want to make. But it is the choice that saves us from the devastation of bitterness, self-pity, and becoming defined and consumed by the pain that we all must endure. There is a cost and a challenge with every choice we make. But the choice for joy is always better than any alternative.

Listening Exercises

Insert the **listening exercises** for the relevant day at this point in your spiritual practice.



RESPONDING

Hold or touch your bandage again and consider what brings you joy. Remember a time when joy has bound up your wounds and healed you. Open yourself once again and allow God's Spirit to fill your heart with joy. Then, when you are ready, hold in your mind any areas of hurt or wounding in your life and in the world around you. Imagine the joy that is deeper than happiness binding up those wounds and bringing healing. Imagine that joy spreading through your world like a clear, sweet, stream of life and wholeness.

Make a note of any thoughts, emotions, or physical feelings that may arise in you as you do this meditation and open yourself to hear what they may be trying to say to you. Notice any new or particular resistance or openness to joy that you may feel within you. You may want to make some time to journal your reflections and experiences before you move into the rest of your day.

INTEGRATING

Finally, as you end your spiritual practice make a commitment to nurture and share joy more intentionally and freely with the people around you through the day.

Each day consider how well you managed to fulfil this commitment. Consider where you succeeded in bringing joy into your world and make a note of where you failed—not to judge yourself, but simply to learn. Take some time to explore how you can do better in those areas tomorrow.

End your practice with a short prayer and return to your routine with mindfulness.

LISTENING EXERCISES

Each day, return to the Scripture readings and reflection chapter above. Review any notes you may have taken or insights you may have had as you read the chapter or listened to a sermon based on it.

And then, use the questions for each day to apply what you have received to your life in a deeper way.

When you have worked through the questions, spend a few moments considering how your answers have affected your life. Notice if there is anything you would want to change, and if so, consider what you need to do to change it.

You may want to journal your insights so that you have a record of the spiritual work you've done each day.



DAY ONE (Advent 3)

Are there any elements of Ruth's story that resonate with you? How does Ruth's legacy of joy speak to, or challenge, you?

In what ways might Jesus have been influenced by hearing about his ancestor, Ruth? How do you experience Jesus' invitation to share his joy?

In what ways can you embody the joy-bringing legacy of Ruth and Jesus in your own life and relationships?

DAY TWO

Are there any areas of your life in which you have become too obsessed with happiness? How successful have you been in achieving the happiness you're striving for?

What do you see as the differences between happiness and joy? Which would you prefer to have more of in your life?

What would a life of joy look and feel like for you? What would you want to do to bring more joy into your life? How effective do you think this strategy would be?

DAY THREE

Take some time to remember Ruth's story again. Take note of the significant grief that she experienced in her life and how it resonates with your own experiences of grief. Sit with that sense of grief for a few moments and ask yourself what it would be like to find joy in the face of such grief?

Why do you think Ruth chose to stay with Naomi rather than stay in her homeland and return to her own family? What role did this courageous choice play in her ability to create a new life of joy out of her grief?

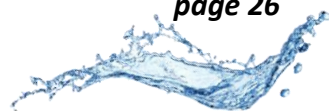
How did Ruth's quest to help Naomi heal and find joy help her to find joy for herself? How did she manage to resist being defined by her grief? And why do you think Matthew chose to include Ruth and her story in his genealogy of Jesus?

DAY FOUR

Do you associate Jesus with joy? Why or why not? What Gospel stories show Jesus experiencing or sharing joy? How did joy influence Jesus' ministry?

What do you think joy meant for Jesus? Why do you think he invited those who are persecuted to rejoice and what did he mean by that?

Would you say that Jesus experienced joy even while he was dying? What would it mean to be joyful in crucifixion, if you believe it's possible? And what can we learn about joy from observing Jesus' actions and interactions on the cross?



DAY FIVE

What is the relationship for you between faith and joy? To what extent do you see joy as a mark of authentic faith? How does your faith empower you to be joyful and to bring joy to others?

What is the relationship between joy and purpose, meaning, and connection? How can these things help you to find joy even in a world that contains so much grief?

What would it mean for you, practically, to embrace Ruth's legacy of joy? What would you need to do to follow Jesus' example of living in joy even in the face of pain and grief?

DAY SIX

How can you be more intentional about making joy a daily choice? How can you use your words and perspectives on the world to contribute to your experience of joy? How do you understand the relationship between joy and connecting with others?

What things could lead you to reject joy? How can you cling to joy even when you feel like joy is beyond your reach?

How does Ruth's legacy of joy inspire you to be a joy-nurturer?

DAY SEVEN

What primary insights from this week do you want to carry with you into the next weeks and months? Review your reflections from the week and make sure to note any significant insights, questions, or experiences.

How will you keep these truths close to mind so that you can be intentional about applying them to your life?



Batusheba's

Legacy of Love



PREPARING

Once again, prepare your space physically if you need to, and also prepare by becoming fully present to the symbols, colours, sounds, and feel of your space. Remember to light the first three Advent candles before you begin your practice.

When your space is prepared, take a moment to prepare yourself. If you enjoy gentle background music, have it playing. Close your eyes, deepen your breathing, and place your open hands in your lap.

After a few moments, consider your experience of love. Reflect on relationships in which you give and receive love and consider what it means for you to love your neighbours, strangers, and enemies. Think about what Christlike love looks like in practice for you. Sit with this reflection for a few moments and enter as deeply as possible into this meditative experience of love. Finally, give thanks for the love you are able to give and receive in your life and offer a silent prayer for love to grow within you and in your world.

Then, when you're ready, light your fourth Advent candle—the candle of Love—as a sign of your love in Christ.

As you do you may want to use the following prayer, or one of your own:

I thank you, God, for your Advent here with me
and for the love it brings to my heart.
I open myself to your Spirit of Love once again
and I offer you my whole self in thanksgiving and worship.
Amen.

If you have any personal prayers on your heart, feel free to offer them now.

REFLECTING

Listening to Scripture

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Luke 1:26-38

Matthew 1:1-6

2 Samuel 11:1-27

Engaging with Scripture

The following chapter is intended to help you engage more deeply with the readings and theme of this week. But if you attended a worship service and would prefer to use your notes or reflections from the sermon to guide your practice, then feel free to skip directly to the Listening Exercises after the chapter.

Coming to Terms With Love

I am a great believer in the power of love. I am convinced that it is impossible to follow Jesus faithfully without making love the foundation of our lives. But I am also aware that we often oversimplify love. We fall into the trap of defining love in purely romantic terms. And we focus far too much on how love is supposed to feel emotionally.

Love is complex. We underestimate it, misunderstand it, and misuse it. The result is that we give the label of love to a lot of things that aren't and fail to recognise love in a lot of things that are. But when we dive into love wholeheartedly it really does transform us and our world in surprising, healing, and life-giving ways.

Love is not specifically mentioned in the nativity narratives in Matthew and Luke, but it is reflected in every element of the story. In Luke 1:26-38, which is set as the Gospel reading for the fourth Sunday in Advent of Year B in the Revised Common Lectionary, we get a glimpse of the love shared between Mary and her older relative, Elizabeth.

After the angel's announcement that she would give birth to Jesus, Mary immediately left for Elizabeth's home. Clearly, the two women shared a close relationship and Mary felt safe with her relative, and Elizabeth's response to Mary's arrival indicates that the feeling was mutual. The biblical narrative gives us few details of their time together, but we know that Mary stayed with her aunt for about three months, and we can assume that the two women cared for and supported each other in this time. Although the circumstances of their pregnancies were very different, Elizabeth's welcome and love for Mary must have been very comforting in the face of the gossip and accusations that Mary would have expected from neighbours in her hometown.

While Luke doesn't mention Joseph's dream or how he came to accept the news of Mary's pregnancy, Matthew does. And he implies that Joseph's love for Mary was a significant factor in how they navigated their difficult journey together.

With this as a foundation, it is not surprising that love was central to Jesus' life and work. It is also a key feature of how Matthew presents Jesus as Messiah in his Gospel. And to support his claim that Jesus was the Promised One, Matthew includes another woman who seems to portray the opposite of love. In his genealogy, she is unnamed, but we know her as Bathsheba.

Bathsheba: Love in the Face of Violence and Abuse

The biblical references to Bathsheba make a point of demonstrating her family background. She is shown to be a good woman from a good family. And the fact that she was bathing and purifying herself as the law required, indicates that she was faithful and innocent. We don't know what her relationship with Uriah was like, but we do know that Uriah was a good man, as seen by his refusal to enjoy the comforts of home when his companions were on the front lines of a war. We also know that, although Bathsheba was born an Israelite, her marriage to a Hittite would have made her a non-Israelite, which could indicate her commitment to Uriah. From this we can assume that they were, if not deeply in love, certainly good to one another and committed to their marriage.



But then David sees her and, according to the biblical account, instructs his messengers to 'take' her and bring her to his palace. This would indicate that what happened was rape. David used his authority and power to put her in a position where she could not refuse him. It is telling that, when Nathan confronted David, Bathsheba was not mentioned or blamed at all, which would certainly have been the case if she was culpable in an act of adultery.

But the situation got worse when David's assault resulted in a pregnancy. David initially tried to cover up his sin by bringing Uriah back from the battle, but when that didn't work, he arranged for the man to be killed in the war. David may have thought that he was committing the perfect crime, but he did not get away with it. His authority declined, and his throne was under attack, from that moment on.

After this account, Bathsheba moves from centre stage in the biblical narrative. But her story doesn't end there. In time, she gave birth to Solomon (who, because of a prophetic message from Nathan, was also called Jedidiah which means "Loved by the Lord") and other children. Then, when Solomon's half-brother Adonijah tried to make himself king, she went to David and held him to his promise that Solomon was to be David's successor.

However, she may have felt about David, she seems to have found the courage and grace to maintain a good enough relationship with him to be able to make this request. She was also a loving mother to Solomon who loved her in return. She defended his right to the throne (in spite of him being way down on the list of successors). And when he did become king, he bowed down before her and had a throne set up for her on his right-hand side, essentially making her the Queen Mother and a trusted advisor.

Later, when Adonijah approached her and asked for her help in convincing Solomon to give him David's virgin caregiver as his wife, she seems to have held no ill feeling toward him and took his request to her son.

All of these incidents suggest that, in spite of the abuse she experienced and the grief of losing her husband, her reputation, and her first child, Bathsheba was still able to keep her heart open to love. It is important to note that her quiet courage and resilience reflects her character but is also a mark of the time in which she lived and her limited options. So, it should never be used as motivation to let abusers off the hook or to silence those who have been abused. Nevertheless, her resilience and determined open-heartedness is admirable and can suggest a possible path to freedom from the imprisoning impact of trauma. And her capacity to not be defined by what had hurt her and to rise above the temptation to close her heart is the key quality of those who are true lovers.

There is much to learn from the legacy of Bathsheba—the victim of rape who found love by defying her trauma and keeping her heart open.

Jesus: A Messiah of Love

Matthew includes Bathsheba in his genealogy, although he doesn't use her name. This may have been to emphasise that the blame and responsibility for what happened was completely David's. It also follows the biblical pattern of referring to Bathsheba as 'Uriah's wife' (or literally, 'she of Uriah'). Nevertheless, by including her, Matthew is telling us something about Jesus—and it is that Jesus is a Messiah of love. Once again, Matthew's inclusion of this hidden woman invites us to think carefully and deeply about our perceptions of Jesus and the kind of Messiah he was.

The Gospels indicate that, much like Bathsheba and Solomon, Jesus and Mary had a relationship of deep love. And Jesus would also have been influenced by the way Joseph, his father, cared for Mary



even when he thought she had committed adultery. Jesus grew up surrounded and shaped by the love of his parents and especially of his mother.

There is no question that Jesus' life and ministry radiated a compassionate, unconditional, healing love. Perhaps it was the story of his ancestor, Bathsheba, that gave him the courage to challenge the religious leaders when they brought to him a woman who, possibly through a set-up, was caught in adultery. (It is certainly strange that there was no sign of the man). Where the woman's accusers showed no compassion, Jesus' response expressed a deep and protecting love.

This same remarkable love is shown again and again in the Gospels as Jesus accepts and embraces the outcasts in his society. His heart remained open to all—even in death and even toward his enemies. Finally, we cannot avoid that Jesus summarised the whole of the Law and the Prophets in the one command to love God and neighbour.

Embracing Bathsheba's Legacy of Love

The story of David and Bathsheba is not an ancient love story over which to get all sentimental. It is a story of the abuse of power and the impact it had on the life of an innocent young woman. But it is also a story of—to refer once again to Jimi Hendrix's famous quote—the power of love overcoming the love of power. It is the story of how Bathsheba, in spite of the abuse she endured, managed to keep her heart open and find a deep and healing love with her son.

The echoes of this legacy of love resonate down through the centuries to Jesus who made love the guiding force in his life. Then they resonate to us as we celebrate the birth of Christ and of his way of love and justice. And finally, this legacy of love calls us to perpetuate it, to continue to share this open-hearted love for family, friends, neighbours, and even enemies.

We do this by rejecting the love of power—even when it is manifest in such seemingly small ways as our determination to control the people around us or always get our own way. We reject the love of power by refusing to support or vote for those who use their power to manipulate and abuse others as David did. And we do it by working daily to open our hearts a little more to the people and the world around us, even when such openness can make us vulnerable to being hurt. By resisting what opposes love and by nurturing the loving relationships in our lives, we are able to 'make the circle bigger' and share love ever more widely.

Keeping Our Hearts Open

Bathsheba could have become a bitter, angry, and violent woman. She could have aligned with David's enemies to exact revenge on him for what he had done. She could have run away and tried to find a safer place to live and maybe rebuild her life.

She should have been able to get justice, to see David held accountable and punished for his violence. She may have found some comfort and closure in watching how David's reign declined after this event. There is certainly nothing in Bathsheba's story that should ever be used to try and silence abused women or make out that it's ok if the perpetrator gets away. But there is hope in Bathsheba's story because she was able to find a safe and healthy outlet for her capacity to love. She was able to break the bonds of her trauma and still live a loving and open-hearted life. And her legacy, at least in Matthew's perspective, was important in shaping who Jesus became.

Now it's up to us to do the work of identifying the traumas and struggles that tempt us to close our hearts. We can nurture our capacity to choose to turn away from hatred, bitterness, and violence and we can allow our safe and loving relationships to help us keep our hearts open and to continue to



live in the power of love. As we celebrate the birth of the Christ, let's remember the importance and power of love in his life and let's recommit to following him in the way of love.

Listening Exercises

Insert the **listening exercises** for the relevant day at this point in your spiritual practice.

RESPONDING

As you respond to your reflection today, begin by stilling yourself again. Make your hands into fists and place them on your lap or knees. Consider any times (including right now) when you have been tempted to choose power over love in your life. Then think about times when you have been affected by someone else's choice of power over love. Take time to consider the impact of these choices and what the results were. After a few moments, open your hands and consider the impact on your life when you (or someone else) have chosen love over power. Allow some time in silence to engage with this meditation.

Finally, open yourself once again to God's Spirit as you offer a silent prayer giving thanks and offering your requests for God's love to fill and shape your life and relationships. Keep your hands open for a few minutes as a sign of your commitment to be an intentional and radical lover of God and of people in your corner of the world.

Make a note of any thoughts, emotions, or physical feelings that may arise in you as you do this meditation and open yourself to hear what they may be trying to say to you. Notice any new or particular resistance or openness to love that you may feel within you. You may want to make some time to journal your reflections and experiences before you move into the rest of your day.

INTEGRATING

Finally, as you end your spiritual practice make a commitment to nurture and share love more intentionally and freely with the people around you through the day. Whenever you are tempted to opt for power over love, try to practice a quick fists and open hands meditation to reset your heart and priorities.

Each day consider how well you managed to fulfil your commitment to love God and others. Consider where you succeeded in bringing love into your world and make a note of where you failed. Take some time to explore how you can do better in those areas tomorrow.

End your practice with a short prayer and return to your routine with mindfulness.

LISTENING EXERCISES

Each day, return to the Scripture readings and reflection chapter above. Review any notes you may have taken or insights you may have had as you read the chapter or listened to a sermon based on it.

And then, use the questions for each day to apply what you have received to your life in a deeper way.



When you have worked through the questions, spend a few moments considering how your answers have affected your life. Notice if there is anything you would want to change, and if so, consider what you need to do to change it.

You may want to journal your insights so that you have a record of the spiritual work you've done each day.

DAY ONE (Advent 4 / Christmas Eve)

Are there any elements of Bathsheba's story that resonate with you? How does Bathsheba's legacy of love speak to, or challenge, you?

In what ways might Jesus have been influenced by hearing about his ancestor, Bathsheba? How do you experience Jesus' love in your life—both in sharing and receiving it?

In what ways can you embody the loving legacy of Bathsheba and Jesus in your own life and relationships?

NOTE: There is only one day of questions with this Chapter because tomorrow is Christmas Day and has a new Chapter.



Mary's Legacy of Incarnation



PREPARING

Once again, prepare your space and become fully present to the symbols, colours, sounds, and feel of where you are. Remember to light the first four Advent candles before you begin your practice.

When your space is prepared, take moment to prepare yourself. If you enjoy gentle background music, have it playing. Close your eyes, deepen your breathing, and hold a seed in your hands.

After a few moments, consider your beliefs and thinking about incarnation. Think about what Christ's incarnation means for you and what your response is to the idea that you too are an incarnation of God's image, Spirit, and life. Sit with this meditation for a few moments and connect with the divine presence in yourself. Then expand your awareness outward and connect with the sense of God's presence and life in the people around you and in the world outside.

Then, when you're ready, light your Christ candle as a sign of Christ's presence with you and within you.

As you do you may want to use the following prayer, or one of your own:

I thank you, God, for your Advent here with me
and for your Divine Presence and Life in my heart.
I open myself to your Spirit once again
and I offer you my whole self in thanksgiving and worship.
Amen.

If you have any personal prayers on your heart, feel free to offer them now.

REFLECTING

Listening to Scripture

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Luke 2:1-20

Matthew 1:1-17

Engaging with Scripture

The following chapter is intended to help you engage more deeply with the readings and theme of this week. But if you attended a worship service and would prefer to use your notes or reflections from the sermon to guide your practice, then feel free to skip directly to the Listening Exercises after the chapter.

Our Struggle With Embodiment

We humans have a very strange and difficult relationship with our bodies. We are embodied beings. We cannot be anything else. And yet many of us find ourselves in a culture that disconnects us from our bodies—and it does this in multiple ways. On the one hand, our bodies are objectified and viewed as functional, to be exploited and used by people who, for whatever reason, have power over us. And on the other hand, we are taught, especially in religious circles, to view our bodies as a temple, which means venerating our bodies for their beauty, perfection, and capability rather than their health and diversity. Then, to add to the confusion, we are taught to deny our bodies or ‘flesh’ and value our minds above all. And the tragic consequence of our struggle with our embodiment is that we end up loathing our bodies and being disgusted by our natural physical desires, functions, and frailties. Even our theology frames our bodies as little more than temporary ‘tents’ in which our souls must live, but that have no eternal value.

And yet, we seem to have forgotten that our two most important festivals, Christmas and Easter, are both rooted in human physicality. Christmas celebrates incarnation, which is the divine presence and life embodied in human flesh. And Easter celebrates resurrection, which is the divine transformation of mortal human bodies into eternal human bodies.

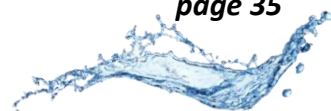
With these foundations to our Christian spirituality, we should have a much better relationship with our bodies. We should value and celebrate our bodies fully—not be suspicious of them; not view them as evil or temporary; not diminish them as ‘not us’. As believers in incarnation and resurrection we should gladly and freely welcome our bodies, accept them, love them, and enjoy them as integral parts of our humanity, our spirituality, our relationality, our creativity, and our eternity.

And that’s why it’s so important that our Christmas story begins with the very physical reality of an unmarried teenage mother-to-be: Mary, the fifth and last woman in Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus.

Mary: The Divine Embodied in Human Flesh

While it is common in religious circles to talk about incarnation, we tend to view both the earth and our bodies as destined for destruction. God, however, is eternal—separate from and above our physicality. God is Spirit and lives in heaven—which is to say, not on Earth. God is not in the physical world, but can break through from the spiritual world from time to time allowing us to connect with spiritual reality. Yet we often deny the role our senses and body play in so-called spiritual experiences. But for Mary, God, Spirit, and flesh were all interconnected and inseparable.

As a young woman of marriageable age, her body would have been an unavoidable facet of her life. As an unmarried virgin, it belonged to her father and had to be kept pure and free from sexual activity. Then when she grew older, it would belong to her husband who would claim her sexuality for himself. She had value because of her body—her capacity to do labour and bear children. Her mind had no value—she was not allowed to study or learn as men were. Her heart had no value—her desires, dreams, and feelings had little role to play in what would happen in her life. Her entire existence was focussed on her physical being and how it would serve other people, especially the men, in her world.



And yet, at the same time, her body was dangerous. It was a snare that could lead men astray. It was not to be trusted. It was unclean. Every month she would have had to wash herself in a ritualised way to purify her from the uncleanness of menstruation (that could also make those around her unclean). And even after the glorious miracle of childbirth there was the contradictory requirement that she would need to take time and observe certain rituals if she was to become pure again.

It is an unlikely and significant thing then that, in classical Christian belief, it is into and through THIS body—this human body, this woman’s body—that God chose to be incarnated. The first step in the incarnation of the *Logos* into human flesh, was for Mary’s body to create and carry the foetus in which, according to the angel’s prophecy, the Christ already dwelt. In a sense, then, the first incarnation was Mary’s pregnancy.

But the revelation that comes to us through Mary is that incarnation is not just about God becoming embodied within human beings. It is that the human beings in whom God is incarnated empower other human beings to experience incarnation too. Incarnation is not an event. It is not even a person. Incarnation is a process. It is a reality of the Cosmos in which we are all invited to participate.

There is much to learn from the legacy of Mary—the unmarried teenager who became the mother of the incarnate Christ.

Jesus: The Incarnate Messiah

As we have seen, Matthew included women in his genealogy to make a point about Jesus. And in the case of Mary, Jesus’ mother, the point is to focus on Jesus as an incarnate Messiah. Immediately after his genealogy, Matthew relates the story of Jesus’ birth, highlighting that Mary’s pregnancy was ‘by the Holy Spirit.’ Right from the start, Matthew wants his readers to know that Jesus is both human and divine, that he is ‘God with us’ incarnated in the man, Jesus.

The birth narrative in Luke’s Gospel is filled with physicality and the union of the divine with the human. There are the shepherds who encounter angels. There are the magi who bring gifts and the king who kills babies to try and get rid of the Messiah. And there is the mother, placing her baby in a feeding trough among animals. The whole birth narrative is earthy, physical, human, and messy. It is the perfect representation of incarnation—of God not separate from, but immersed in, physical human reality.

This is important for Matthew’s case, because he is about to tell the story of a Messiah who would be executed by the Romans—which for most Jews would have automatically disqualified him. He would be claiming that Jesus rose from the dead and ascended to receive ‘all authority in heaven and on earth’ (Matthew 28:18). For Matthew, the incarnation is central to his vision of Jesus as Messiah. And that’s important for us.

For Jesus, incarnation was not a theological concept. It was a reality which defined his life. It began in his experience as a literal human baby with everything which that entails. Contrary to the carol, Jesus would have cried and done all the other things that babies do. And it continued as he grew like other human children into boyhood, through puberty (probably with the usual raging hormones) and into adulthood.

Jesus’ ministry was very much a ministry of the flesh. Jesus ate and drank and shared life’s physical realities along with his disciples—to the extent that the religious leaders condemned him for being a glutton and a drunkard (Luke 7:34). He was not put off by human physicality. Physical touch was an



essential element in his healing miracles. He touched the blind, lepers, and the woman who had struggled with chronic menstrual bleeding—even though it would have made him ritually unclean.

And it was important, in Matthew's presentation of Jesus as Messiah, that he suffered physically, died physically, and was raised physically. For Matthew, and for Jesus as portrayed in Matthew's Gospel, the human body is not sinful, depraved, or temporary. It is the dwelling of the divine. God is not offended by human bodies. God chooses to live in and work through human bodies.

Like Mary, Jesus' incarnation was not just about him. It was not just that he was an incarnation, but that he gave birth to incarnation whenever and however he could. He raised dead bodies, he breathed the Spirit on his disciples and taught them that God's reign was within them and among them. He showed humanity how to look within and remember what had always been true—that we are all carriers of the divine breath, made in the image and likeness of God. And then he called his disciples to continue his work: "Go into all the world and make disciples," he said (Matt. 28:19). "As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you," he said (John 20:21).

Jesus as incarnate Messiah shows us how the process of incarnation works—how we are all little incarnations of God, filled with the Spirit. And he shows us that we are all called to give birth to incarnation wherever and in whatever way we can.

Embracing Mary's Legacy of Incarnation

By including Mary in his genealogy, Matthew expands our understanding of both Jesus as Messiah and of incarnation. He invites us to recognise that incarnation is a reality into which we can enter, and that the reality of incarnation can be shared and nurtured among us. And so now, as we celebrate Christmas, let's begin by recognising and celebrating God's gift of incarnation. Let's rejoice that Mary was human like us and Jesus was human like us, and they both carried the divine presence and life within them. And that shows us that God loves bodies, including yours and mine!

Then let's look within ourselves and recognise the Divine Spirit, the divine life, and the divine image there. Let's nurture our bodies and care for them as the little incarnations they are. Let's stop body-shaming ourselves or others, or viewing our bodies as expendable, temporary things. Let's remember resurrection and know that every part of us matters—maybe in ways we can't really understand now—eternally.

And finally, let's seek to give birth to incarnation whenever and wherever we can. Let's help others to see the divine glory in their bodies. Let's honour and celebrate all the different bodies in our world and help others to recognise the divine life, Spirit, and image in themselves, no matter who they are or how they look.

Reconnecting With Our Glorious Bodies

Mary had lots of reasons to feel shame and disconnect from her body. But thanks to the angel's message, she had to recognise that her body was glorious and was a carrier of God. And then she gave birth to Jesus, whose whole life was lived as an incarnation of God in human flesh. He sought to help others recognise the divine in themselves and then, in resurrection, revealed that our bodies matter not just as a temporary 'tent' but as an essential part of who we are.

Now, as we celebrate and enjoy the physical pleasures of eating, playing, laughing, and sharing gifts, we can live into the reality of incarnation in ourselves. And we can help others to do the same. This is what Christmas is all about. It's not so much a supernatural event that happened long ago. It's a miraculous experience of God and life right here and now.



Listening Exercises

Insert the **listening exercises** for the relevant day at this point in your spiritual practice.

RESPONDING

As you respond to your reflection today, begin by stilling yourself again. Hold your seed in your hands again and reflect on Jesus as a divine incarnation. Then consider the divine life that is lying in wait in your seed. Recognise that same divine life embodied in yourself, in your flesh, and see yourself as an incarnation. Take some time to meditate on these truths and then imagine planting your seed in the soil as a sign of allowing God's life and presence to expand through you to others. (If you would like to, you can literally plant your seed in a pot of soil or in some place where you can nurture it and watch it grow). Reflect on how the Divine Presence and Life within you empowers you to plant seeds in other people which can help those people to experience incarnation in themselves.

Finally, open yourself once again to God's Spirit as you offer a silent prayer giving thanks for Christ's incarnation and opening yourself for God's Spirit to make you more aware of God's Life and Presence within you.

Make a note of any thoughts, emotions, or physical feelings that may arise in you as you do this meditation and open yourself to hear what they may be trying to say to you. Notice any new or particular resistance or openness to the idea that you are also an incarnation of the Divine Spirit that you may feel within you. You may want to make some time to journal your reflections and experiences before you move into the rest of your day.

INTEGRATING

Finally, as you end your spiritual practice reflect on the Christmas gift of incarnation and commit to celebrating, honouring, and revealing the divine in those around you. You may even find it meaningful to use the word 'Namaste' (meaning literally "I bow to you" or more figuratively, "The divine in me honours the divine in you.") as a greeting through the Christmas season.

Each day consider how well you managed to fulfil your commitment to honour the divine in yourself and others. Consider where you succeeded and make a note of where you failed. Take some time to explore how you can do better tomorrow.

End your practice with a short prayer and return to your routine with mindfulness.

LISTENING EXERCISES

Each day, return to the Scripture readings and reflection chapter above. Review any notes you may have taken or insights you may have had as you read the chapter or listened to a sermon based on it.

And then, use the questions for each day to apply what you have received to your life in a deeper way.



When you have worked through the questions, spend a few moments considering how your answers have affected your life. Notice if there is anything you would want to change, and if so, consider what you need to do to change it.

You may want to journal your insights so that you have a record of the spiritual work you've done each day.

DAY ONE (Christmas Day)

Are there any elements of Mary's story that resonate with you? How does Mary's legacy of incarnation speak to, or challenge, you?

In what ways might Jesus have been influenced by his relationship with his mother? What impact might that have had on his understanding of himself and his mission?

How does your faith in Christ help you to connect with your own nature as a divine incarnation?

DAY TWO

How do you feel about your body? How has your faith impacted your relationship with your body?

How do the two Christian festivals of Christmas and Easter speak to your beliefs and feelings about your body?

What would you need to gladly and freely welcome your body, accept it, love it, and enjoy it as an integral part of your humanity, spirituality, relationality, creativity, and eternity?

DAY THREE

Because of her gender, age, and culture, Mary's body would not have been her own. And yet her primary value came from her body even as her body was seen as both dangerous and unclean. What is your response to this? In what ways are women's bodies still viewed in this way?

In the light of the above view of women's bodies, what is your response to the Christian belief that God chose THIS body to be incarnated in and through?

How do you feel about the idea that, in a sense, Mary was the first incarnation in the Christmas story and then in giving birth to Jesus, she helped to bring his incarnation into being? What does this tell you about how incarnation 'works'?

DAY FOUR

How does Matthew's account of Jesus' birth emphasise both the divine and human nature of Jesus? How does this relate to, and support, Matthew's statement that Jesus is 'Emmanuel, God with us'?

How do you respond to the messiness, humanness, and physicality of Jesus' birth? What does this say to you about the meaning of incarnation?

How do you feel about the very physical nature of Jesus' ministry, life, and death? What does this say to you about how God values your body? How do you see Jesus' ministry helping others to recognise the Divine Spirit and Life within themselves and see themselves as 'little incarnations'?



DAY FIVE

Matthew's Gospel invites us to recognise that incarnation is a reality into which we can enter and that the reality of incarnation can be shared and nurtured among us. What does this mean for you? How can you enter into the experience of incarnation and share it with others in your world?

How does the incarnation of Christ show you that God loves bodies—including yours? What difference does that make to your relationship with your body and with how you use your body to experience and share more of God's life? How can incarnation inspire you to care more for your body?

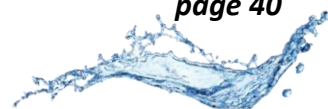
How can you help to 'give birth to incarnation' in others, to help them recognise and experience themselves as little incarnations? How can you honour and celebrate all the different bodies in your world and be more intentional about recognising the Divine Spirit in them all?

DAY SIX

What primary insights from this week do you want to carry with you into the next weeks and months? Review your reflections from the week and make sure to note any significant insights, questions, or experiences.

How will you keep these truths close to mind so that you can be intentional about applying them to your life?

NOTE: There are only six days of questions with this Chapter because Christmas Day was on Monday and tomorrow is the first Sunday after Christmas.



Anna's

Legacy of Presence



PREPARING

As you prepare your space again, remember to be fully present to the symbols, colours, sounds, and feel of where you are. Light all of the candles in your Advent wreath before you begin your practice. When you're ready, prepare yourself. Close your eyes and very deliberately, slow and deepen your breathing.

After a few moments, bring to mind a time when you were fully present to another person and when someone was fully present to you. Give your full presence to this memory and live into it for a few minutes. Then allow some time to consider and give thanks for those who have been a positive and life-giving presence in your life.

Now, return to the candles you have lit through Advent and Christmas. Spend a few moments gazing at the flames and giving thanks for the gift of Christ's presence. And as you meditate on the meaning of these candles, commit to be present and to be a positive presence to others as fully as you can.

As you do you may want to use the following prayer, or one of your own:

I thank you, God, for your Advent here with me
and for how deeply present you are to me.
I open myself to your Spirit once again
and I offer you my whole self in thanksgiving and worship.
Amen.

If you have any personal prayers on your heart, feel free to offer them now.

REFLECTING

Listening to Scripture

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Luke 2:21-24, 36-38

Engaging with Scripture

The following chapter is intended to help you engage more deeply with the readings and theme of this week. But if you attended a worship service and would prefer to use your notes or reflections

from the sermon to guide your practice, then feel free to skip directly to the Listening Exercises after the chapter.

A Crisis of Presence

One of our great crises is that of being present. There are so many things that draw our attention away from the moment we're in, the person we're with, the activity we're doing. As we face another new year, many of us are anxious or hurting. Many of us have unfulfilled longings, hopes for this year to be different, and expectations of what we might encounter. With all of this mental and emotional baggage, we are encouraged to make plans and set resolutions so that we can guarantee a better year.

But in all of this planning, introspection, and determination, we lose our ability to be present. It's not that planning and self-reflection are unhelpful. We need these practices to ensure that we don't drift through life without meaning or connection. But when we become obsessed with constant improvement for improvement's sake and when our quest for 'more' leaves us anxious, depressed, and burned out, the cost is too high. We cannot feel fully alive when we are disconnected from our souls and the values that bring meaning to our lives. We cannot live and love deeply when we are always living, mentally and emotionally, in some other place or time zone. What we need, if we are to make all the qualities that we have celebrated in Advent and Christmas—hope, peace, joy, love, and incarnation—a reality in our lives, is to learn to be present.

Much has been written and taught in the last few years about living in the now. The past is a memory, and the future is a fantasy, we are told. All we have is the present moment. Well, yes and no. I agree that we can only live in the present, but who we are and how we choose to live in this moment is shaped and informed by the past—where we have come from—and the future—where we are headed. And this applies both individually and collectively. So being present is not about rejecting the gifts of the past or the future. It's not about giving up on planning or introspection. It is about not allowing the future and the past to rob us of the gifts that are before us here and now and that can help us to make meaning of both where we've been and where we're going.

The biblical story does not reject the past or the future. 'Remember' is one of the most important words in Christian spirituality. It is a sacramental ideal that ensures we never lose our link to the Christ who showed us how to find abundant life. And the vision of God's reign, of a world of love and justice in which everyone belongs and has enough, is a future hope that frames the entire biblical narrative. But simultaneously, the Scriptures call us to be awake, aware, and fully present to this moment, this place, and this person or these people.

And that brings us to Anna—the old widow who encountered Jesus and his parents in the temple when he was still a baby.

Anna: Presence in the face of life's struggles

The Lectionary reading for the first Sunday after Christmas in Year B is from Luke's Gospel and contains the account of Jesus' parents taking him to Jerusalem to be dedicated. While they were in the temple, they were approached by an old man named Simeon and by the old widow, Anna. The Gospel gives eleven verses to Simeon, but only three to Anna, and so we usually focus on Simeon when reading this passage, with Anna as an afterthought. But, in my opinion, Anna is the more interesting of the two, and, while she is not included in Matthew's genealogy for obvious reasons, I believe that she may also have left a significant legacy that influenced the life and message of Jesus. And her legacy is one of presence.



We know very little about Anna. But what we do know raises some fascinating and important questions. Luke mentions that she was the daughter of Phanuel, but this name only appears here in the Bible. Since the name means 'Face of God,' Luke may have mentioned it as a device to represent Anna's devotion. There is also a Phanuel in the ancient apocryphal book of Enoch who is one of the four angels who stand before God, along with Michael, Raphael and Gabriel. Whatever Luke had in mind, it seems that he wants his readers to associate Anna with being present with God—standing before the face of God, if you will. This would support his statement that she never left the temple but worshipped God with prayer and fasting day and night.

We are also told that Anna was only married for 7 years before her husband died and that, when she encountered Jesus and his parents, she was either 84-years-old, or she had been a widow for 84 years (which would have made her around 105 at least). We know from the New Testament that widows were among the most vulnerable people in Israel in Jesus' time. A widow without a male family member to care for her would often end up destitute. Could it be that this is why Anna spent all her time in the temple? Was she homeless and relying on the goodwill of the priests and temple visitors to provide her with her basic needs for food and lodging? While this isn't specifically mentioned in the text and I haven't encountered any commentators that mention this, it does seem like a possibility. I can't help but wonder why the writer of Luke chose to mention that Anna was from the tribe of Asher—one of the ten lost tribes of Israel that no longer existed as a tribe in Jesus' day. Could it be that he was trying to make the point that she was truly without a tribe, family, or home?

What this means is that Anna had lived a difficult life. She clearly had no family to protect and care for her and so she was left to face her grief and struggle alone. In a situation like this, her anxiety, grief, and vulnerability could easily have left her disconnected from herself and her community. She could have ended up bitter and lost. But instead, she turned toward her community and to the God she relied on. She found a place in the temple and lived her life before 'the face of God.' She obviously stayed connected with people and became known for her spirituality and wisdom because Luke calls her a prophet.

In Jesus' time, the temple was not just a place of worship. It was the centre of the community. Anna could have ignored all the news and opinions that were shared and the transactions that were carried out around her. She could have kept to herself and focused only on her worship, finding comfort and refuge in being detached and removed from the chaos in her world. But she clearly didn't do that. She stayed present, listened, and engaged in conversation—if she hadn't, she could never have come to be known as a prophet.

I suspect that her difficult life and her humble circumstances must have given her a particularly insightful and challenging perspective on the events of her time. Those who are able to stay present in suffering tend to see more of the world, and see it more clearly, than those who are sheltered by their wealth or who choose to dissociate and detach from reality. By staying present, Anna clearly had a feel for the temperature in Israel, the expectation that the Messiah would soon arrive, and the longing for liberation. And so, when she saw the young couple and their baby in the temple she saw what others didn't—the fulfilment of a divine promise and a new possibility of liberation. And having seen, she then proceeded to share her experience with others, inviting them into the joy of the moment, the hope for what lay ahead, and the new energy for living fully that meeting Jesus had given her. By staying present to God, to her world, and to her community, Anna became a source of life and love to others.

There is much to learn from the legacy of Anna—the homeless widow who found fullness of life by staying present to her world and becoming a life-giving presence to those around her.



Jesus: A Messiah of Presence

I often wonder whether Mary told Jesus the stories of the people and events that surrounded his birth. I wonder how much of what she experienced differs from the accounts in the Gospels and how much the writers adapted these stories for their purpose. Whatever the case, there is no question that Jesus grew into a man with an extraordinary capacity to be present to the moment and place in which he found himself, and to the people to whom he ministered.

The beginning of John's Gospel shows that when disciples like Andrew, Peter, and Nathaniel first met Jesus, they were struck by how present he was to them and how clearly and deeply he saw them. The people to whom Jesus ministered commented often on the authority in his teaching and the religious leaders found it impossible to trip him up in debate. And all four of the Gospels demonstrate how Jesus' presence made it seem that Pilate was the one on trial.

This quality of being present was the reason that so many of the unseen and ignored people loved Jesus while so many of those in power felt threatened by him. It also explains why the movement Jesus started continued to grow after his death.

Jesus did not lead his followers away into some hidden enclave separate from the rest of the world. He did not teach them how to shape-shift to fit in to gain favour through being whatever those in power needed from them. He did not call them to a violent revolution in which they would lose themselves in service of building a new Israelite nation. Rather, he invited them into the liberation of a life of presence. He challenged them not to deny, run from, or fight against life's struggles, but rather to stay present in the pain and choose life anyway. And he showed them how, even when it hurts, staying present can bring healing, connection, hope, joy, peace, and love into their lives.

Embracing Anna's Legacy of Presence

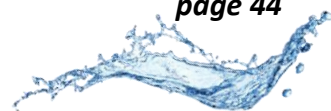
Both Anna and Jesus lived with a strong capacity to be present to the people, places, and times in their lives. None of their past suffering, anxiety for the future, or struggles in the moment were enough to make them check out. And that legacy of being present empowered them to be a presence in the lives of the people around them. Their presence was intentional and wholehearted, and it was compassionate, encouraging, and inspirational. They both committed to staying fully alive and in so doing, they brought life to others.

Now, as we face what for many of us will be another challenging year, we have a choice to make. We can allow our anxiety, hurt, and insecurities to shut us down and lead us to check out. We can live in a constant state of fight, flight, freeze, or fawn. Or we can embrace the difficult but life-giving practice of being present to ourselves, to one another, to our world, and to God.

Staying present isn't easy. It takes intentional work, practice, and commitment. And we won't always get it right. But when we find ourselves checking out, we can give ourselves the care we need and then find ways to slowly but deliberately bring our presence back to the people, experiences, and places that are our current reality. We can exercise our capacity to look around us more intently, listen more deeply, connect more wholeheartedly, and act more thoughtfully. We can use practices like journaling and meditation to call ourselves back to the present moment. And we can choose to be a presence of comfort, compassionate, and connection to those around us.

Being a Present and Positive Presence

Anna had plenty of reasons to shut down, keep to herself and check out of the world. But somehow, she found the capacity to stay present enough that the people around her saw her as a prophet. When she encountered Jesus, she saw that God was present and active in and through him and she



enthusiastically shared the news with those who would be encouraged and empowered by it. She was present to God, the world, other people, and herself, and so she was a positive presence in the lives of those around her.

Whether Jesus grew up knowing about Anna's legacy is impossible to know. But we do know that Jesus lived with a similar capacity to stay present, to see, hear, understand, and respond to people and events mindfully and intentionally. And he too was a positive presence in his world.

Now, as we finish our meditations on Advent and Christmas, and as we prepare to enter a new year and a new season, we are challenged to follow Anna and Jesus into a life of presence. In choosing to stay present no matter what, we nurture our capacity for hope, joy, peace, and love. We open our eyes, hearts, and minds to the divine incarnations in ourselves, others, and our world. And then we can bring all of these gifts and qualities into our relationships and activities in our world.

It can be tempting to check out. There are so many good reasons not to stay present. But when we choose not to close ourselves off, when we choose a life of presence, then the presence of God becomes something we no longer wait for but experience here and now and the incarnation becomes the lived reality of our lives. And then we become part of God's Christmas gift to the world. What more could we ask for?

Listening Exercises

Insert the **listening exercises** for the relevant day at this point in your spiritual practice.

RESPONDING

As you respond to your reflection today, begin by stilling yourself again. Spend a few moments holding your breath and becoming aware of your presence in this place and moment. Then release your breath and allow your awareness to expand out to the environment around you. Imagine being fully present to the people, place, and life around you in this moment.

Take time to dwell in this experience of presence as you continue to breathe deeply and slowly. Then take one more deep breath in as a sign of opening to God's presence and committing to be more fully present in your world, your life, and your relationships.

Make a note of any thoughts, emotions, or physical feelings that may arise in you as you do this meditation and open yourself to hear what they may be trying to say to you. Notice any new or particular resistance or openness that you may feel within you to being more fully present. You may want to make some time to journal your reflections and experiences before you move into the rest of your day.

INTEGRATING

Finally, as you end your spiritual practice commit to being a positive presence in the lives of those around you. Each day consider how well you managed to fulfil this commitment. Consider where you succeeded and make a note of where you failed. Take some time to explore how you can do better tomorrow.

End your practice with a short prayer and return to your routine with mindfulness.



LISTENING EXERCISES

Each day, return to the Scripture readings and reflection chapter above. Review any notes you may have taken or insights you may have had as you read the chapter or listened to a sermon based on it.

And then, use the questions for each day to apply what you have received to your life in a deeper way.

When you have worked through the questions, spend a few moments considering how your answers have affected your life. Notice if there is anything you would want to change, and if so, consider what you need to do to change it.

You may want to journal your insights so that you have a record of the spiritual work you've done each day.

DAY ONE (Christmas 1)

Are there any elements of Anna's story that resonate with you? How does Anna's legacy of presence speak to, or challenge, you?

In what ways might Jesus have been influenced by hearing about his childhood encounter with Anna? How do you experience Jesus' presence in your life?

In what ways can you practice being present to, and a positive presence in the lives of those around you in the way that Jesus and Anna were?

DAY TWO

How have your anxieties and longings, and all the things that call for your attention, prevented you from being more present to your life and to the people around you? What impact do your planning and resolutions have on your ability to be present?

How has a constant pressure to do more and be more, disconnected you from your soul and the values that bring meaning to your life?

How can you remember and honour your past, cling to hope and expectation for the future, and still stay awake, aware, and fully present in this moment?

DAY THREE

Anna was widowed as a very young woman and spent her life in the insecurity that all widows of Jesus' time experienced. We don't know if she had any children, but if she did, it seems strange that they were not caring for her. And yet, even in her homeless state, relying on the goodwill of the priests and visitors in the temple, she was deeply devoted to God and very aware of, and present to, her world. What is your response to this story? Why do you think Anna became known as a prophet, especially after such a marginalised life?

What are the signs that Anna was particularly insightful about what was happening in her world? How could her suffering have given her a clearer and more detailed understanding of the realities of her time?



Why do you think Anna would have been drawn to Mary, Joseph, and Jesus? And why would she have responded in praise and in telling everyone who would listen? What does this say to you about being present to your world and being a life-giving presence to the people around you?

DAY FOUR

In what ways do you see Jesus as a man of extraordinary presence? How might the stories of his childhood encounter with Anna have influenced him in his growing years?

How was Jesus especially present to his world and to the people around him? Why do you think he was so present?

Why did Jesus' ability to be present win him the love of the marginalised and the anger of the powerful? And how did Jesus teach others to live a life of presence even when it hurts to do so? What can you learn about being present from his teaching?

DAY FIVE

How did Anna and Jesus manage to stay present even in the face of suffering and anxiety for the future? And how did their ability to resist checking out help them to be a more life-giving presence in the lives of those around them?

What can you learn from Anna and Jesus about staying present even as we face what will probably be another challenging year? What intentional work can you do to nurture your capacity for presence and to learn to stay more present to your world and relationships?

How might your choice to work on staying present allow you to experience more of God's presence in your life? What difference might it make to your life to have a deeper and more consistent sense of living in the presence of God? How might your presence in the lives of your loved ones, and your ability to be present to your world, be a gift to those around you?

DAY SIX

What primary insights from this week do you want to carry with you into the next weeks and months? Review your reflections from the week and make sure to note any significant insights, questions, or experiences.

How will you keep these truths close to mind so that you can be intentional about applying them to your life?

NOTE: There are only six days of questions with this Chapter because Saturday 6 January is the Epiphany and begins a new season.



Conclusion

You have now reached the end of your **The Making of a Messiah** journey. Tomorrow we enter a new season which begins with the Epiphany, the celebration of the magi's journey to visit the Christ Child. In this season we open ourselves to new insights and experiences of the God who is revealed in Jesus.

If you would like to continue the journey with a new Devotional Guide, you are welcome to visit [Sacredise.com](https://sacredise.com) and purchase a guide for what I call the Epiphany season.

I hope you have found this journey meaningful and challenging. If you have managed to work intentionally and mindfully with the practices in this guide, you will have encountered Jesus in a new way and begun your year with a new vision for how to embody Jesus' message and mission in your life.

Thank you for sharing in **The Making of a Messiah**.

John

PS. If you find my writing and resources helpful, I invite you to consider signing up to [Sacredise Your Life](#)—my Substack channel in which I explore making sense of Jesus, the Bible and Life. Signing up is free, or you can support my work by becoming a paid subscriber.

