

#adventwonder
from Stewardship



Sermon Outlines for Advent 15



ADVENT WONDER the Generosity of the Nativity

This Advent Wonder series is all about gifts. Why? In 2 Corinthians 9:15 (NIV) Paul expresses it perfectly, 'Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!' Jesus the Son is the ultimate gift, fulfilling all our needs and God the Father is the ultimate giver. When we start to look at the Advent story we notice that it is full of gifts; some are surprising, some are timely, some are overwhelming, but all speak of God's generosity. As we unpack these gifts together we aim to discover their true and lasting value.

These sermons are in outline form by design. Reorganise their order if you desire. Add your own personal anecdotes and illustrations and above all use these outlines freely, as the Spirit leads.

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HOW TO USE THESE NOTES

These notes are divided into sections to provide structure to each talk as follows:

Introduction: *Sets the scene.*

Here, the speaker sets the tone, the expectations of their sermon/talk.

Background: *Provides context.*

We go behind the scenes, focusing on historical facts to see the scriptures in context.

Purpose: *Sharpens the focus.*

What are your two, three, four sermon/talk points? How do they integrate with the scripture? The outline suggests points, such as 'a spiritual journey' in the Magi talk, but these are there as a guide only.

Focus: *Tunes in with scripture.*

A word, an image, a phrase needs to be stated and unpacked here. The focus will vary from sermon outline to sermon outline.

Closing connection: *Makes connections.*

This is the 'how to' part of the talk/sermon. The hardest bit. Now we are in the closing and what should be the most important part—what the listener takes away—and this can feel rushed and incomplete to both the speaker and the listener. American Pastor Rick Warren has moved in his sermons to attaching/aligning a 'how to' application for each sermon/talk point as he is making the point. In effect the 'how to' becomes the purpose. The connection points in this outline are generally in question form so that the speaker can leave the questions open, as a challenge, or even answer them within the sermon/talk. The choice is theirs.

Challenge/additional resources: *Provokes action.*

The focus shifts to the listener with a series of questions; how are they going to act on the message?

There are also some suggested additional resources for each talk which are there for you to make use of as appropriate. They are offered simply as ideas and you may prefer to use others or omit them entirely; it's your choice.



First Sunday of Advent

Mary and Elizabeth's gift

Bible passage: Luke 1:39-56 [contrasts will be drawn between KJV and NIV versions both pre- and post-1983]

Keywords: performance, joy, worship

Introduction

The first gift in the Advent story is a song. As we read about Mary and Elizabeth in Luke 1:39-56 we discover two women who choose to surrender their lives to God's will and to do so in joy. The King James version has Elizabeth introducing Mary's song with these words: 'And blessed is she that believed; for there shall be a *performance* of those things which were told her from the Lord' (v. 45).

The KJV translators chose the word '*performance*' because they deeply understood that this song would be sung through the centuries by all types of people, because it is an expression of joy. It may be more accurate to say, as the 2011 NIV does, '*Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfil his promises to her!*', but this word choice misses the truth underlying Mary's song: the great joy of a saviour, the awaited saviour, being born.

Here is the post-1983 NIV text of Mary's song:

At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfil his promises to her!' And Mary said:

'My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are

proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants for ever, just as he promised our ancestors.' Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

Background

The Advent story is about the completion and fulfilment of God's plan but the King James translation chooses a different way to express the word 'fulfilment'; it uses a phrase that is rich with meaning: '*there shall be a performance*'. There is a beauty in Elizabeth's response to Mary's unexpected entry into her quiet and lonely home. In a prophetic voice she envisions a coming performance. How?

These two women could not be more different. Elizabeth is 'well on in years' and barren; a descendant of Aaron's priestly family; married to the priest Zechariah. They live in a Judean hill community and have been settled for many years. On the other hand, Mary is a teenager from humble origins. Engaged to marry the carpenter Joseph, she finds herself pregnant with a baby that cannot be his—grounds for stoning to death, according to the Torah. Mary is in a precarious place; she couldn't be more unsettled.

These isolated and lonely women aren't brought together by commonalities or differences. What joins them is Spirit-birthed joy. Until they meet, each is troubled, scared. Alone, they are entering places they never imagined. But now they share the experience of an unexpected pregnancy; a first child for each. They spend three months of seclusion together (Luke 1:56).

What did these two seemingly very different women do together for three months? They sang; they worshipped; they studied the word of God in a house that had no male voice (Elizabeth's husband Zechariah, because he did not believe his barren wife would have a promised child, had been struck mute by the same angel Gabriel who visited Mary). Mary and Elizabeth sang in worship and joy—they 'performed'. Zechariah had to listen to them read and sing. He experienced that joy in such a way that when his son John was born he himself broke into song (Luke 1:67-79). Their songs during their time together infected Zechariah in the best



possible way, so that when his voice returned, **he sang.**

Purpose

The purpose of this talk is to understand how contagious joy is. Joy is worship; worship is joyful. So, have either a video or a performance of Mary's song before or after your talk (or perhaps *both*). Allow those present to *experience* the performance. Conveying the joy of a saviour coming, as Zechariah says, '*to give his people knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins*' (Luke 1:77) is a mercy, a kindness, a love that extends to and through eternity. It is a joy that should and must be conveyed at the beginning of Advent.

Focus

God has performed two birth miracles and in response Mary and Elizabeth compose a song. In the midst of uncertainties, they join in worship to God. '*My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour... for the Mighty One has done great things for me—Holy is his name*' (Luke 1:45-46). Their response illuminates a path for our response no matter what we go through. We are called to and made for worship, through the good times and the bad. Contagious joy is looking at Jesus, seeing him through all our circumstances, whether positive or negative, hurtful or happy. He is our joy, our gift for all seasons.

Mary's song—the Magnificat—is our first Advent gift. It is the first gift inspired by the coming of Jesus. It is both a performance in obedience and a response to a special calling to serve her God. It is her response to God's call and will and our gift. It is a generous, overflowing gift for those who come close enough to hear; a celebration of great things done and hope for the future, for Mary and Elizabeth, for you and for me. It is a song of belief. It is holy worship.

Closing connection

The Advent story is wondrously more than a simple performance or an ancient tale to be consumed passively. If over-familiarity or Christmas busyness makes you pass over it quickly, then allow time to reflect on it and let the story come to life. Reflect on Mary's song.

You can't talk about this narrative to others unless you read and experience it yourself. You can't sing without knowing the joy of God's salvation. This is

Advent's story: joyful salvation. In Psalm 51 King David, after his great sin with Bathsheba, sings in prayer, 'Restore to me the joy of your salvation' (v. 12). He doesn't say 'my' salvation; David sings 'your' salvation. David knows there is nothing he can do to obtain salvation. It is a gift from God. He desires joy to return to him as he acknowledges his failings. And it does. Just as Zechariah's voice is restored to him, so is the Shepherd King David's. Separated by centuries, they are connected by songs of joy after failings.



Challenge/additional resources

Questions to consider:

- How often do you stop to celebrate God's goodness in your life? In the coming week, read Mary's song. Make it your own and consider how true it is in your own life.
- Do you 'zone out' from the familiar? This season there are many performances celebrating Christ's birth—Nativity plays and carols are a feature of our Christmas experience. As you watch, listen or sing, tune in to the song that Elizabeth and Mary first sang.
- Elizabeth, Mary, Zechariah and David all sang to express their joy. How can their stories help you to worship in a joyful way? You may want to experience joyful singing for yourself: as an individual, or in community.

Optional video suggestion of Hallelujah Christmas:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=430Q0i0KJC8g>

Optional video suggestion of Mary Did You Know:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ifCWN5pJGIE>



Optional poem by Luci Shaw – Mary's Song

Blue homespun and the bend of my breast
keep warm this small hot naked star
fallen to my arms. (Rest...
you who have had so far to come.)
Now nearness satisfies
the body of God sweetly. Quiet he lies
whose vigor hurled a universe. He sleeps
whose eyelids have not closed before.
His breath (so slight it seems
no breath at all) once ruffled the dark deeps
to sprout a world. Charmed by dove's voices,
the whisper of straw, he dreams,
hearing no music from his other spheres.
Breath, mouth, ears, eyes
he is curtailed who overflowed all skies,
all years. Older than eternity, now he
is new. Now native to earth as I am, nailed
to my poor planet, caught
that I might be free, blind in my womb
to know my darkness ended,
brought to this birth for me to be new-born,
and for him to see me mended
I must see him torn.



Second Sunday of Advent

Angels: reflecting the gift of light

Bible passages: Genesis 3:24-25; Luke 2:8-10; Luke 2:13-14; 2 Corinthians 3:12-13; 1 Peter 1:12

Keywords: light, joy, gospel

Introduction

So GOD expelled them from the Garden of Eden and sent them to work the ground, the same dirt out of which they'd been made. He threw them out of the garden and stationed angel-cherubim and a revolving sword of fire east of it, guarding the path to the Tree-of-Life. Genesis 3:24-25 (MSG)

The first time in the Bible we see angels, or cherubim, is in this passage. An angel's purpose is to magnify the holiness and power of God. When sin is especially onerous, they appear here to protect the Garden of Eden. 'Cherubim' is plural in Hebrew; there was a host of angels sent to forcibly remove Adam and Eve. Sin separated humanity from the presence of a holy God.

From the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah to the night of the exodus of the Hebrew people from slavery to freedom, to Peter's rescue from prison the night before his trial in Jerusalem, angels arrive to serve and protect.

Rarely do they get 'a night off', a time for rest and rejoicing on and for the earth. The earth and humanity are so under attack, so broken by sin, that angels experience very little joy. They have a tough day job.

Oh, angels worship and have much joy in heaven (Isaiah 6)—after all they are in the presence of God—but most of their travels and duties on earth are in response to sin and suffering. That is, until the night of Jesus' birth. This night, Luke tells us, is different. It is a night when they reflect his joyous light on earth. This night they are bathed in heavenly light.

Background

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. Luke 2:8-10 (KJV)

This night is different from other lonely dark nights: it is a night of joy and celebration, a night when the angels look deeply into the beauty and good news of a promised salvation.

1 Peter 1:12 (Weymouth New Testament translation) describes their deep desire, their looking, that 'Angels long to stoop and look into these things.'

The scripture tells us that the field shone with the glory of God when the first angel appeared. This angel of the Lord speaks of 'good news of great joy' of a Saviour's birth and then:

Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.' Luke 2:13-14 (NLT)

Purpose

The Advent season announces the coming celebration of a Saviour's birth. It also heralds days with less light, the coming of shorter days and enveloping darkness. The purpose of this week's notes is to bring a deeper understanding of God's light, and the beauty of what he has done. Jesus, the son of God, has come into our earthly world.

Begin with a brief introduction that today you are going to speak about God's gift of dazzling light. Someone may wish to read Luke 2:8-10 and there is an optional video clip (see link in additional resources).

Focus

This vast host of angels are not the source of the light; they reflect God's light. This is their honour: to be a mirror for God's glory. Paul, in his first letter to Timothy (6:16), describes this light as 'unapproachable'. Moses' face was veiled after he had experienced the glory of God (Exodus 34:29-35).



But on this night, the angels help make the unapproachable approachable and they share this shimmering, dazzling, blinding light with shepherds, and, by song and story, with us. Paul contrasts Moses' position, as a symbol representing the law, with our own unveiled faces.

Therefore having such a hope, we use great boldness in our speech, and are not like Moses, who used to put a veil over his face so that the sons of Israel would not look intently at the end of what was fading away. 2 Corinthians 3:12-13 (NASB)

The shepherds are the first to visit this Saviour King. They have great boldness in their speech and their eyes. They run and tell what they have seen.

They can't help themselves. They could not stop if they wanted to. This joyful news is no longer private, once spoken to individuals: Mary and Joseph, Elizabeth and Zacharias, even from God to Gabriel. This message of 'great joy' is now publicly sung in a field to a group of shepherds by a vast army of angels. All are bathed in the Lord's overflowing light and glory which overpowers the darkness.

A new community is being born; a community of joyful shepherds and angels, all of whom reflect God's light. This light is the good news, the glad tidings, the gospel.

At Advent we, too, are invited, as shepherds, into God's light.



Closing connection

The writings of Luke, Mark, Matthew and John were not intended to be a biography of Jesus. They are called Gospels—a word that literally means 'good news'—because they are a setting out of the facts of Christ's ministry. And Jesus' ministry begins

with his coming from heaven to earth as a baby. He came to show us light, so we can share in, walk in and point to his light. Ephesians 5:8-11 describes us:

For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. (ESV)

At this time of year, when days are getting shorter and light is precious, use it as an opportunity to point others to God's light. After all Jesus said:

'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.' John 8:12 (ESV)

Challenges/additional resources

Questions to consider:

- To what extent are you reflecting God's glory in different areas of your life?
- What opportunities are there for you to be light for others and to point to his light?
- We are his representatives on earth; we reflect his light. What aspects of Jesus' life do you look at and really desire to copy? (Of course we desire to be like him as much as possible, but where might you want to start?)
- 'Our lives are a Christ-like fragrance rising up to God' (2 Corinthians 2:15, NLT). How does your life 'smell' to God?
- In John 8:12 Jesus says, 'I am the light of the world.' And in Matthew 5:16 he says, 'In the same way, let your light shine before others...' (NIV). What different areas of darkness and broken parts of our world can you pray for? Commit to pray for a month for one specific area.

Optional video suggestion: 'Unto us'// The Shepherds

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vn4OAvYyKm0>

Optional video suggestion:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_gwlpdABY-0



Additional reflection

Sometimes we feel too damaged and therefore unworthy to reflect God's light.

We now have this light shining in our hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves.

2 Corinthians 4:7 (NLT)

Consider the Japanese art form, Kintsugi.



At one point this was a broken tea bowl. How it got smashed doesn't matter very much. What counts is what happened to it once it did. An artist took the chunks of pottery and, using a Japanese method called Kintsugi, carefully repaired them. The artist mixed gold into a lacquer and made the bowl something far more beautiful than it was originally.

The chips and cracks, the let-downs and break-ups, the mistakes, griefs and tragedies that will inevitably visit some among us this year don't have to destroy us. We don't have to ignore them or sweep them aside. We can accept them, acknowledge them and play our small part in helping God to turn them into something truly beautiful.



Third Sunday of Advent

Gold, frankincense and myrrh—gifts of faith

Bible passage: Matthew 2:9-11

Keywords: belief, faith, worship

Introduction

Matthew's Gospel is the only one that mentions the Magi. Their number is unknown and so is their method of travel. Matthew 2 tells us the story of wise Magi (leaders, from honoured families and astrologers) from the East searching for a Messiah king, a baby whose birth had been foretold for centuries. Why did these men journey from their homes, faiths and countries? Why bring these particular gifts? The first century's images of the Magi give an answer: belief.

Background

Surprisingly, early Christian art of Jesus' nativity is almost entirely focused on the Magi. In tombs they represent the journey of faith for the first Christians as they passed from life to a heavenly afterlife. As time passed and Christianity grew, this art moved from tombs to large public spaces. The Magi began to appear above ground in church basilicas. In these later narrative pictures, their robes flow in a mosaic of colour, their ages change, their gifts become grander.

But the original representations of the Magi appeared in tombs and here they speak of a new faith's understanding of the nativity: a message of hope, of a journey beyond death. The Magi were the first to believe in Jesus as the Messiah. Their gifts of frankincense and myrrh point to the promise of bodily resurrection for all who believe. In the Catacomb of Priscilla, the following inscription can be read: '*Severa in Deo vivas*' – Severa (a person's name) may you live in God. Images of the Magi are next to these words.

The early Christians decorated tombs with Magi images because they recognised the Magi's journey as their own: from pagan origins to Christian belief, from overwhelming death to eternal life. This is every believer's path and the Magi led the way. This is their gift to the early Christians, and to us today: a gift of faith, a gift of belief.

Purpose

The Magi chose their gifts in faith:

- gold to honour a king—both earthly and divine
- frankincense—a priestly offering to the divine
- myrrh—to anoint in death.

These carefully chosen gifts indicate that the Magi were the first to glimpse the promise of eternal life through the resurrection of the body. Hebrews 11:1-2 describes faith this way:

The fundamental fact of existence is that this trust in God, this faith, is the firm foundation under everything that makes life worth living. It's our handle on what we can't see. The act of faith is what distinguished our ancestors, set them above the crowd. (MSG).

The Magi had to journey by, in and with their faith in a child Messiah king. Somehow, somehow, perhaps through their studies, perhaps through the star that led them, they knew that this Messiah's death would lead to life. And that was a child's gift to them: faith.

Focus

Yet, overcome, they kneeled and worshipped him.
Matthew 2:11 (MSG)

The Greek word for worship in Matthew 2:11 is *proskuneo*. This word indicates the relationship of a servant to a master. Its Greek root describes a dog serving his master. The Magi's faith increases as they journey from their homes after years of waiting, to Herod's Jerusalem and finally to Bethlehem. We have their story of a dream warning them not to return to Jerusalem **after** they worship Jesus in his temporary Bethlehem shelter/home as an indicator that they are on a journey of faith. Only they could have told others about their dream; only they could have described how they worshipped; only they could have told others about this child king.

The fact that they listen to the angel's warning and do not return to Herod suggests that the alternative route they took home had to be filled with the telling and retelling of the events they'd witnessed. Just like the shepherds who visit Jesus on the night of his birth, they would be compelled to speak



about all they'd seen when they returned home. Why? First, because after the Magi's long journey the people of their community would have had to ask: What did you see? What did you hear? Where did the star lead?

But, second, and more importantly, they had seen the truth, the Messiah King, and they were changed forever. They had to tell their story of worship and how their gifts would serve a child king.

Closing connection

As intentional as the Magi were in choosing their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, they could not possibly have known how we would continue to retell the story of their gifts today. These gifts were very practical for a family soon to go into exile in Egypt: easy to transport; rich in value for resell or barter; and a sign of encouragement to a soon to be homeless family with a young child that God was with them on their journey.

Yet, as mentioned above, these gifts are also symbolic and point beyond the practical to both the multiple roles of the child Messiah (priest, prophet, king) and to Jesus' death and the anointing gifts the women bring, needlessly, to the tomb after Jesus' resurrection.

When they gave they could not have known the far-reaching effects of their generosity. Their journey suggests a journey of generosity for all of us today: give and become rich in ways you can never predict. Just believe and give.

Challenge/additional resources

The Magi were purposeful about their gifts, as well as using them as an expression of their faith in the new-born Messiah. Nothing stopped them on their journey; not the distance; not an evil King Herod; not the humble home of this child king. They had purpose and passion.

- Does your giving reflect such purpose and passion?
- Think back over your giving in the last year. To whom and how much have you given?
- Take some time and list them. Then pray and consider what changes might be needed to re-energise your giving for the year to come, in line with God's purposes.

Optional poem by T.S Eliot - Journey of the Magi

'A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.'
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
And running away, and wanting their liquor and
women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of
shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.

Then at dawn we came down to a temperate
valley,
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;
With a running stream and a water-mill beating the
darkness,
And three trees on the low sky,
And an old white horse galloped away in the
meadow.
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the
lintel,
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of
silver,
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.
But there was no information, and so we continued
And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth
and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.



Fourth Sunday of Advent

Frankincense and myrrh—available gifts

Bible passages: Matthew 2:11; Luke 23:55-56; Luke 24:1-2; Luke 22:39-46; Hebrews 4:1-2

Keywords: availability, faithful service

Introduction

Their gifts were not needed; Jesus had risen.

What started in a cave ended in a cave. When Joseph of Arimathea gave his personal cave tomb for Jesus' burial, he gave up a precious possession. And he was no different from the unnamed person who gave Joseph and Mary a cave for the birth of their child. This first cave was a gift to a powerless child and a family in need. The second was a gift to a deceased, penniless man. Neither gift could be repaid by the recipient. They were given freely, lovingly, and without expectation. They weren't asked for, but they were needed. Jesus needed them because he was fully human and being human means there is need. For at least two crucial and powerless points in life, our birth and our death, we will need someone to give to us. We can never repay or give back these gifts. At these moments, we will need generous gifts. So did Jesus.

Background

After Jesus' birth the Magi brought gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. These gifts were of great use to a family going into exile, refugees in Egypt. Easy to carry and to barter, the Magi's gifts are practical, useful and valuable.

Like the wise men, the women at the tomb prepared and brought their gifts to Jesus. In the early morning, they approached Jesus' crucified body with prepared spices and perfumes. They wanted to anoint his body before it started to decay.

But their gifts were not used. His body was never anointed by human hands. It didn't need to be, because it was healed, anointed, perfumed by the Spirit. God the Father embraces his Son. Human healing and human gifts are no longer needed.

The gifts of the women of Luke 23 and the Magi of Matthew 2 appear on the surface to be similar:

frankincense and myrrh are perfumes and ointments.

There are significant differences between these two small groups. The Magi were learned male leaders and rulers from their respective cultures and families; the women at the tomb were at the lower end of their societies, marginalised and not well-educated. One group travelled very far; the other lived close by the tomb they would visit early one morning. Each group expressed and gave their gifts differently and at different points in Jesus' life.

Purpose

However, what connects them is that both the Magi and the women at the tomb are available; they are servants who come to worship. The Magi come at Jesus' birth; the women at Jesus' death. These willing servants frame his life at his birth, death and resurrection. And their gifts come from the same root: faithful service. The ways in which their generosity is expressed may be different—by men or by women, by the learned or by the humble—but they all serve generously as they give. And as they give their gift of faithful service to him, both groups are given a great gift. One group are the first to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah to others (the Magi proclaim this child king to Herod, Jerusalem and their home community as and when they return). The other group—the women at the tomb—proclaim the bodily risen Saviour Jesus to the disciples first and then to all who would hear.

Both groups are the first to deliver the Good News at different times to their different communities. It is the same news: a Saviour has come. This is the gift they receive for having a servant attitude of being available: they proclaim the Good News of Jesus, our generous 'indescribable gift' (2 Corinthians 9:15, NIV).

Focus

In contrast to the behaviour of these two groups is that of the disciples on the night of the last supper. Jesus has one request this night of the disciples: come to the Mount of Olives and pray with me. The disciples fall asleep. They are not available this night.

Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives, and his disciples followed him. On reaching the place, he said to them, 'Pray that you will not fall into temptation.' He withdrew about a stone's throw



beyond them, knelt down and prayed, 'Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.' An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.

When he rose from prayer and went back to the disciples, he found them asleep, exhausted from sorrow. 'Why are you sleeping?' he asked them. 'Get up and pray so that you will not fall into temptation.' Luke 22:39-46 (NIV)

Unfortunately, Jesus does not find comfort from those closest to him, his disciples. They have fallen asleep. Luke's phrase here is *exhausted* (*koimao*—sleeping) from sorrow. They, too, are suffering grief, Greek *lupe*, which means *deep grief, sorrow, pain of mind or spirit; affliction* (v. 45).

The women at the tomb can rest after they help carry Jesus' tortured body to his tomb. They must have been quite anxious to anoint their master's torn body. But they rested (Luke 23:56).

By contrast, the disciples can't rest. They are exhausted and in deep sorrow. Why? And what does being able to rest have to do with availability?

Closing connection

Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. For we also have had the good news proclaimed to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because they did not share the faith of those who obeyed. Hebrews 4:1-2 (NIV)

The women at the tomb had a deep faith, a faith that enabled them to rest. All the disciples slept when asked to pray; all at first ran away when Jesus was arrested. The women obeyed the laws of the Sabbath. They had faith and were available; the disciples did not have this type of faith till after the resurrection. Then, like Peter in John 21, they were restored, were healed and became available to proclaim the word. When the disciples obeyed the command of Jesus and stayed in Jerusalem, they were able to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Now they were available for his use.

We are all designed to receive gifts, of words and time, monies and objects, affections and love. And

some gifts we can't repay—like the generous unconditional love of God. We need the Holy Spirit. That is our design.

But we are also designed to give. This is the greatest, the most indescribable gift the baby Jesus points to during Advent: that we can all be used by God to give. We just have to be available and once we are available he promises to overflow into our lives.

In John 10:10 Jesus says, 'I came that they may have and enjoy life, and have it in abundance (to the full, till it overflows)' (Amplified version).

Challenge/additional resources

Questions to consider:

- How easy do you find it to 'rest' in Jesus?
- The disciples were afflicted by pain or stress. What gets in the way of your ability to draw near to God?
- The women's faith allowed them to become available. How can you make yourself available for God's use?
- What gifts might you offer in his service?

Optional video suggestion: Angels at the tomb (1½ minutes)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n5acal4c_Ak&app=desktop

Optional poem by Mary Elizabeth Frye:

Do not stand at my grave and weep
I am not there. I do not sleep.
I am a thousand winds that blow.
I am the diamond glints on snow.
I am the sunlight on ripened grain.
I am the gentle autumn rain.
When you awaken in the morning's hush
I am the swift uplifting rush
of quiet birds in circled flight.
I am the soft stars that shine at night.
Do not stand at my grave and cry;
I am not there. I did not die.