Living the Dream

A Devotional Advent Journey through Isaiah & Matthew

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Sacredise
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Introduction

Advent is more than just a time of preparation for Christmas. It is a season of remembering in which we are reminded of the great saving arc of God’s dream for the universe. In four short weeks, we look ahead to the time of consummation in which God’s purposes for the cosmos will be fulfilled and completed, and all things are made one and whole in Christ; we look back to the preaching of the prophets, right up to John the Baptiser; we look into a moment in history when Jesus lived and preached as a sign of God’s Reign; and we look into our own hearts to discover how the ordinary details of our lives can reveal God’s dream in our own time and place.

In the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A explores, in the Old Testament, the preaching of Isaiah, and in the New Testament, the Gospel of Matthew. Using Isaiah as the springboard, this resource brings the Old and New Testament together to explore the meaning and impact of God’s dream for our world in the 21st century.

This resource is designed for use by individuals and/or small groups who want to journey through Advent in a mindful way, opening hearts and lives to God’s transforming Spirit. It is a companion to the Living the Dream ebook for congregations which includes Sunday liturgies and talking points for sermon preparation (and is available at Sacredise.com).

My prayer is that, through the use of this resource, you will delve more deeply into the meaning of Advent, and will begin to live the Advent message in the small, practical, daily details of your life. May God inspire and strengthen you on this journey.

John
Week One

Catching the Dream
Advent Sunday 01 December

Read:
Isaiah 2:1-5

Reflect:
If you were to describe your picture of a perfect world, what would it look like? If your life was exactly the way you wanted it, with nothing missing, nothing added that shouldn’t be there, and nothing to disturb its perfection, how would you describe it? Take a moment to imagine this world and this life. You may even want to write your description down.

The Old Testament has a word in Hebrew for the kind of world that Isaiah describes in today’s reading: *shalom*. This simple word refers to the well-being of all things. It describes a world of connection, peace, equality, security, joy, love and justice, which allows God’s life to flow unhindered through all of creation. At the heart of this vision of *shalom* is the presence of God. God’s house - the place where women and men are able to encounter God’s presence - is lifted up and all nations stream to it in order to learn to live God’s ways of *shalom*. Notice how in this vision, the ways of God spread throughout the world, bringing peace and reconciliation and an end to violence and war. This is God’s dream, and we are invited to share it.

Do:
Today, try to keep this vision of God’s *shalom* always in your mind and heart. In every situation, and every interaction, try to identify ways that you see God’s *shalom* already at work, and notice where it is missing. Try to imagine how different this moment would be if God’s dream was fully visible, and ask yourself if there’s anything you can do to let it be seen a little more.

Pray:
Fill my heart with a vision of your *shalom*, O God.

Monday 02 December

Read:
Isaiah 2:1-5

Reflect:
Every choice and every action has a consequence. Sometimes we are aware of the results of our decisions, and sometimes the effects remain hidden to us, but there is always a chain reaction that is set in motion by what we do. Take a moment to think about a time in your life when something you did had an unexpected consequence.
Now, read the last verse of today’s reading again. Remember that, in the previous verses, Isaiah described God’s dream of a world of *shalom*. This last verse is both an invitation and a warning. The invitation is for God’s people to recognise that God’s dream will only come into being through the actions and attitudes of human beings. Therefore, the prophet calls them to walk in the light of God because this is how the dream of *shalom* can be made a reality. But, if you were to read the next verses, you would see what the consequences are of failing to walk in God’s light. When people choose idolatry, greed, injustice and self-centredness, then any chance of peace and justice breaks down. This is not just about the large movements of nations and communities. *Shalom* is primarily built in individual lives. When we choose to lay down our swords of anger, bitterness, hatred, unforgiveness, and self-protection, and take up the peaceful implements of forgiveness, reconciliation and love, we contribute to making God’s dream of *shalom* a reality in our own small corner of the world.

**Do:**
Take a moment to identify any “weapons of war” that you continue to carry. Against whom do you harbour anger or unforgiveness? What tempts you to violence, however small or gentle, in word or action? Today, try to be aware of these “swords” and “spears” and whenever you are tempted to take them up, try to “beat” them into “plowshares” and “pruning hooks” - into actions of grace, love and forgiveness.

**Pray:**
Teach me to beat my little swords and spears into plowshares and pruning hooks, O God.

**Tuesday 03 December**
**Read:**
Psalm 122

**Reflect:**
Have you ever noticed how, when people enter a place of tremendous peace and quiet, they automatically become more still and quiet themselves? Conversely, have you noticed how, when we enter an environment where there are loud noises and agitated activities we grow more restless and agitated? This is why it is so important for the well-being of our souls that we make regular time to rest in an environment of peace.

Psalm 122 is known as a “Psalm of Ascendance”. It was sung as pilgrims went up to the temple for worship. In the sanctuary, these worshippers expected to find peace and security in God’s presence, and they knew that these qualities would then overflow into their lives. That’s why they rejoice at the call to worship, and why they pray for the peace of Jerusalem where God’s house was situated.

Worship may not always feel as peaceful as this, but, at its best, our times in God’s sanctuary are intended to fill our souls with a vision of God’s *shalom* and then, through the peace we experience in worship, give us a glimpse into what that *shalom* looks and feels like. Then, as we go out into our daily routines, we are to seek what’s best for God’s house (see verse 9), which means we are to live with the same sense of peace that we
experience within the sanctuary. If we can do this, even just a little bit, the peace in our lives can flow to those around us and help to create a little bit of *shalom* in our world.

**Do:**
Take a moment to be still and open yourself to a sense of God’s presence and the peace it brings. You may want to sing a hymn of worship, or play some quiet, meditative music as you open yourself to God. Resist the temptation to fill this moment with prayers of even Bible readings. Just focus on your breathing, and on the growing sense of peace with you. Now try to carry this with you through the day. If any experiences disturb your peace, try to make a quick moment to be still again, and restore the *shalom* in your heart.

**Pray:**
I am glad to spend time in your presence, O God, and I thank you for the peace it brings.

**Wednesday 04 December**
**Read:**
Matthew 24:36-44

**Reflect:**
Do you like surprises, or do you prefer to know what’s coming? For most of us that probably depends on the surprise. When it’s something good - a gift we’ve been hoping for, the unexpected return of a loved one who has been away, or some recognition at work that we didn’t know was coming - we enjoy being surprised. But, when the surprise is unpleasant, most of us would say we’d rather be prepared. Take a moment to remember a time when you were pleasantly surprised, and reflect on how that felt.

The Bible often speaks of God’s coming as a surprise that is both pleasant and unpleasant - depending on how we choose to live and respond. When Matthew’s Gospel was being written, the people were still reeling from the traumatic surprise of the Roman attack on Jerusalem. As a result of a rebel uprising, the Roman army had sacked Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple. For God’s people, it was hard to understand how God had allowed this, or where God’s presence was in all of the tragedy. But, the writer reminded the Church of the words of Jesus. Jesus had seen this event coming, and had sought to prepare his followers. His words also revealed that Jesus knew that such events would always be part of human history - whenever there is a clash of power, or a struggle for resources, such conflicts always result. But, in the midst of these historical upheavals, Jesus promised that he would always come to his people, in ways that were just as surprising as the events of the world. Even when it seemed like God’s Reign had been defeated, and God’s presence had disappeared, Jesus promised that God would still be at work, and God’s presence would still be accessible to those who knew where to look.

**Do:**
Think about the events that are happening in the world at the moment. Are there any that cause you to fear, or to doubt the presence and purpose of God? Acknowledge these uncertain feelings to God. Then, ask yourself where you can see God at work in the world and in your own life. Where are you experiencing God’s presence right now? Now, go
through the day as an explorer looking for the signs of God’s presence and the coming of God’s Reign in your world.

**Pray:**

Never let me forget that you are always coming to me in surprising, unexpected ways, O God.

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**Thursday 05 December**

**Read:**

Matthew 24:36-44

**Reflect:**

Have you ever been so absorbed in your own thoughts that you’ve missed your stop on the bus, or missed your turn off the highway? Have you ever been in the midst of a conversation and discovered that you’d tuned out and missed a whole chunk of what was said? Have you ever read a book, and had to go back over the last few pages, because your thoughts drifted off and you couldn’t remember what you’ve read? This is what happens when we stop being alert and paying attention. Most of the time this doesn’t really matter, and we can pick up what we’ve missed, or change our route without too much difficulty. But, sometimes our failure to be alert can have significant consequences. Can you think of a time when a lapse in your attention had a big impact on your life, or on those around you?

In today’s reading Jesus indicates that the big challenge for his followers will not be the traumatic events they will endure, but their ability to stay alert through those events. He promised that he would be coming to them, but warned that if their fear or need for self-protection became too strong, this could cause them to miss his presence. Although these words are usually applied to the final return of Jesus, they also apply to all the unexpected ways that Jesus comes into our lives and our world every day. If we are to believe what the Bible says about God’s presence and activity in our world, there is never a time when God is not at work among us. That’s why we need to be ready and alert all the time so that we do not miss the signs and fall into cynicism or despair. No matter what we may face, when we are able to see God at work in the midst of our experiences, we find strength to stay faithful to God’s ways. If we are to share in God’s dream of shalom we will need to develop the capacity to recognise God’s coming and God’s work, and we will need to be alert and ready to participate in whatever small way we can.

**Do:**

Like any ability, our capacity to be alert to recognise God’s presence and work is developed through constant practice. When we take time away from the busyness of our routines, and allow ourselves to become aware of God’s gentle presence, and the promptings of God’s Spirit in our hearts, we are more easily able to identify the activity of God in the midst of our busy days. Start today with a short time of prayer and silence in which you open your heart and mind to become aware of God’s presence with you.
Pray:
May I always be alert to the signs of your presence and work in my life, O God, and ready to participate however I can.

Friday 06 December
Read:
Romans 13:11-14

Reflect:
If you’ve ever been awake just before dawn, you may have noticed how loudly and exuberantly the birds begin to sing before the light breaks through. As Rabindranath Tagore, a Bengali writer and poet who was the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, wrote: “Faith is a bird that feels dawn breaking and sings while it is still dark.” If you’ve ever had a feeling that things were about to change for the better, or that something important was about to happen before it actually occurred, you will know the truth of those words first hand.

This is the spirit in which the apostle Paul wrote his letter to the Romans. We cannot be sure exactly what the details were of his belief that “time was running out” and that the believers’ “salvation [was] nearer now that when we first believed,” but we do know that there was a sense of urgency in which the coming of Jesus was expected very soon. The “night” - the forces of darkness and human Empire that were dominating the world - was almost gone, the apostle proclaimed, and this meant that it was important for followers of Jesus to be careful how they lived. They needed to make sure that there was no darkness in their own lives, and this required them to “remove their dark deeds” - acknowledge any attitudes or actions in their lives that were unChristlike - and “put on the shining armour of right living” - turn away from selfishness, self-protection, and shallow self-gratification and follow the ways of Jesus. The implication here is that, in rejecting their own personal darkness and embracing the light, the believers were helping to dispel the darkness in their world. The same applies to us today. As we acknowledge the attitudes and actions in our lives that hurt others and cause conflict and division, and as we turn away from those behaviours to live the loving, forgiving, reconciling ways of Jesus, we help to dispel the darkness in our world and allow the light of God’s shalom to shine a little brighter.

Do:
The words we usually use for acknowledging our darkness and turning to the light are “confession” and “repentance”. Confession simply means to be honest about those parts of our lives that do not bring light and love to us and those around us. To repent simply means to live differently, to do different things, and to have different thoughts and attitudes. Today, whenever you become aware of “dark” deeds or attitudes within you, confess them to God and change how you behave and think so that the love and grace of Jesus shines through you instead.

Pray:
Show me any dark deeds and attitudes within me, O God, and teach me to put on the armour of light.
Saturday 07 December
Read:
Romans 13:11-14

Reflect:
Sometimes it’s tempting to make following Jesus very complicated and “spiritual”, but when we do this, we miss the simple, practical wisdom of the Gospel in our every day lives. Have you ever been in a situation where action was clearly called for, and someone insisted on praying first (making you suspect they wanted to avoid action)? Or perhaps you’ve experienced a time when someone wisely offered a common sense approach to a problem, but others in the group insisted on waiting for God’s “guidance”? Which course of action did you think was more godly?

The writings of Paul can be deeply theological and spiritual, but they can also be so simple and practical as to be almost disappointing. In today’s reading, after speaking of the spiritual realities of the world in strong and powerful metaphorical terms, Paul moves on to instructions for living in the face of these realities. But his words are not deep and dramatic. They are startlingly simple. We are to avoid excess - in partying, drinking, sex, and conflict - and to live in the presence of Jesus so that we don’t get tempted to think about indulging in evil. Notice that Paul assumes that we will all wrestle with the evil in our hearts in one way or another. But, when we immerse ourselves in the presence and shalom of Jesus, we are liberated from our worst selves, and our best selves - our most Christlike selves - are able to come to the fore. And when we live the simple, practical ways of Jesus, we find that our lives spread light - shalom wherever we go.

Do:
When we recognise how simple and practical Jesus’ way is, we can more easily live it out in our daily routines. One helpful way to learn to do this is to identify one particular area where you wrestle with evil desires in your own heart. Then, commit to one specific action or practice that helps you to avoid entertaining and acting on that evil desire. Do this today.

Pray:
Clothe me with your presence, Jesus, and keep me from indulging my evil desires.
GATHERING:
Begin your time together in prayer, and then sing (or recite) a hymn or Psalm (Eg. O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, Here I Am to Worship, or Psalm 122).

If you decide to have an Advent wreath in your small group through this Advent season, you can light the first candle now. You may want to use this prayer from Sunday’s liturgy (or another one of your choosing):

As light dispels the darkness,
as fire warms the cold,
So the hope of your dream, O God,
leads us out of despair.

Amen.

PREPARING OUR MINDS AND PRAYING:
Take a moment to share any thoughts that may come to mind for any of the group members during the singing, reading or praying up to this point. Then, share for a few moments around the following question:

When have you endured struggle or hardship for the sake of some goal, achievement, purpose or person in your life? What was the result of that experience?

Ask if there are any specific prayer requests or thanksgivings in the group, and spend some time in prayer and thanksgiving. Then sing or recite a hymn (Eg. Joy to The World or Mighty To Save).

REFLECTING:
Read these two passages from Advent Sunday:
Isaiah 2:1-5
Matthew 24:36-44

Discuss the following questions together:
1) What stands out for you in these two readings?
2) What does it mean that the mountain of God’s house will be the chief mountain?
3) How can you beat swords into plowshares and your spears into pruning hooks in your life?
4) When you remember that Jesus words in Matthew refer primarily to the destruction of the Temple, what can you learn about living in “the hour”? What experiences in our world are similar to what Jesus was describing?
5) What one thing can you do this week to allow God’s dream to guide your actions and attitudes?
CLOSING:
Spend a few moments in silent reflection on your discussion. Then pray a prayer of commitment to God’s dream of shalom. Close with the following benediction from Sunday’s worship (and, if you so choose, a hymn of celebration and commitment like *Be Thou My Vision*, or *Everything*):

> God has a dream!
> If we will open our eyes to see it,
> and open our hearts to believe it,
> it will give us a reason to live in hope!

**Thank God for God’s dream of shalom!**
> We have glimpsed it!
> We do believe it!
> And we will seek to live each day in the hope it brings!

_Amen!_
More Sacredise Resources

For more resources to deepen your worship life, visit Sacredise.com.

For free Daily Worship guides, for personal spiritual development, based on the daily readings from the Consultation on Common Texts (who created the Revised Common Lectionary), see the Daily Worship blog (where you can also sign up to receive the guides via email each week).

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