



WHAT ARE YOU  
*waiting*  
FOR?

LISTEN TO  
YOUR LONGING

*An Advent and Christmas Guide  
for Community Worship  
from Sacredise.com*

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for Community Worship  
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Johannesburg



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# Introduction

When the world is in turmoil and we become weary, we often begin to feel off-balance and insecure. We want to hope, but we're not sure we can because our hopes have been dashed so many times. We long to go back to a life that feels more 'normal'. We want to relax and laugh. We want the freedom of not having to be always on alert as we navigate the stress.

The last few years have been a very difficult season. And many of us have found that our faith has come under pressure in ways we've never experienced before. We have learned that we need a stronger, more resilient, and more sustaining spiritual practice.

Advent and Christmas are wonderful opportunities to connect more deeply with the God who came in human flesh. They are designed to lead us into a deeper and richer experience of God's abundant life—if we will just learn the lessons they offer. And if we enter into these seasons intentionally, we can set ourselves up for a richer and more vibrant life in the year ahead.

Advent is a time of waiting and longing. It's a time when we connect more deeply with God's saving purpose. And it's when we place the incarnation of Christ in the context of God's eternal work in our world and our lives. This is the key to unlock the treasures of these seasons.

One of the most important things we can do to maximise the opportunity for growth and health that Advent and Christmas offer is to listen to our longings. When we listen to our hearts, we get in touch with what we really want in our lives. We connect with what would make us feel more fully alive and connected. We discover what really matters to us and what gives our lives a sense of meaning and purpose. And when we've taken note of what our longings tell us, we can then turn to the incarnate Christ to find out how to fulfil those longings! The Jesus who comes to us in Christmas shows us what we need to do to find the abundant life he promised.

## WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?

That's why I'm so excited to share this new Guide for Worship with you! *What Are You Waiting For?* is designed to lead you and your community on a worship journey through Advent and Christmas. Each week you will explore one of your primary longings and allow Christ to show the way to fulfilment and abundant life.

Based on the Lectionary readings for Year C (the Gospel of Luke), *What Are You Waiting For?* will take you deeper into the incarnation story and offer practical ways to plan for a deeper and richer life in the year to come.

## FOR PERSONAL DEVOTION

*What Are You Waiting For?* offers two options for a personal devotional practice to accompany the community worship experience.

The first is as follows:

- Create some way for your congregation to remember the message they will hear in church. You can encourage them to take notes, or give them a summary of the sermon, or have a recording of your message posted on social media.
- You can also make the response and integration practices in this resource available for people to make use of through the week.

A better approach would be to make use of the accompanying personal spiritual practice guide that has been developed to work alongside this guide for community worship.

- The personal spiritual practice guide offers a specific practice for each day of the Advent and Christmas seasons.
- Each day builds on the previous practice, and is based on the sermon content from the relevant Sunday.
- In addition it includes preparation, responding, and integrating practices to ensure that people can easily apply the message of each week to their own lives.

This guide is available separately in the Sacredise Store, or can be purchased in a bundle which includes the community worship guide, the personal spiritual practice guide, and a license for the daily practices to be distributed to congregation members via email, messaging, print, or on your church's website or social media channels.

## FOR SMALL GROUPS

I believe that small groups work best as a bridge between Sunday worship and personal spiritual practice. For this reason I would recommend connecting your small group work with both Sunday's worship—encouraging the groups to repeat the call to worship, response, and integrating practices—and the daily practice guides—inviting groups to share their personal insights and experiences as they've worked with Sunday's message.

The following questions can be used as a helpful guide to sharing and conversation:

- What stood out for you in this week's reading, and in the message that was preached? Why do you think this particularly caught your attention?
- What does this 'word' mean to you for your spiritual walk in the next week, month, and year?
- How are you working to integrate this 'word' into your daily living?

It is my hope and prayer that *What Are You Waiting For?* will not only be meaningful for you and your community, but that it will be transforming. I believe that a mindful and intentional use of the Advent and Christmas seasons can set us up for a more intentional and meaningful life in the year to come. And that is what I hope this guide will do for you!

May God guide and bless you as you listen to your longings through the twin seasons of Advent and Christmas with *What Are You Waiting For?*

John

# We Long To Be Alive

Advent 1

## GATHERING

### CALL TO WORSHIP

We dream of a world where everyone can live fully and freely.

***But that is not yet our world.***

We long to be free of the anxiety and struggle that robs us of life and to hope with confidence that our hopes will be fulfilled.

***But that is not yet our world.***

Christ has come into our world and shared our grief, our struggle, and our frail humanness.

***Christ is with us now bringing the abundant life we seek.***

Christ will continue to enter into our joy and sorrow, our pain and healing, until the world becomes the world of our dreams.

***We cling to our hope in Christ and we open ourselves to the Spirit of Life again.***

***Amen.***

### PRAYER OF PRAISE AND CONFESSION

God, we see your life in the trees and flowers,  
we hear your life in the birds' song,  
we feel your life in the wind that rustles the leaves;

***We know you are within it all.***

Today we recognise that your life is also within us,  
that we are part of your created world.

In the same way that your life is felt in the rain that quenches our land,  
we feel your life sustaining us during the tough times,  
the painful times.

***We thank you for your sustaining life.***

But there are days when we struggle to see you,  
hear you, and feel you.

***We are sorry for letting these days get the better of us,  
for letting them dull our hearts.***

We try to cope with the chaos and heartache by numbing ourselves to it,  
by pretending it doesn't and can't hurt us.

The darkness drains the light of life from within us,  
it seep into our lives and relationships,  
it leaves us feeling tired and empty.

***We know we can't keep this up,  
so we come to you.***

We open ourselves to your word of life and light.

*Speak to us today we pray.*

*Amen.*

## LISTENING

### SCRIPTURE READING

Luke 21:25-36

### REFLECTION

How alive are you in this moment? How attuned are you to the thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations happening within you? How connected do you feel to the world around you? How attentive are you to your loved ones? Take a minute or two and allow these questions to heighten your awareness of yourself and of the life pulsing within you.

If you find yourself feeling vibrantly alive, to what do you attribute that sense? Most of us associate feeling alive with feeling good, energised, inspired, and happy. We love feeling this way and miss it when it's gone. We may even give lots of time and energy to preserving this sense of aliveness. But we all know what it feels like to be less than fully alive. In one sense we need times when we feel sad, tired, or depressed in order to know what aliveness feels like. But it isn't healthy to remain in a perpetual state of lifelessness. We know this and that's why we long to feel alive as much as we can.

There is no shortage of things that can rob us of our most alive and engaged self. The last two years have given us a close up look at many of these things: isolation, insecurity, polarisation, financial stress, misinformation, and threats to our health, to mention a few. We tend to take it for granted that certain events or experiences that we call 'negative' will leave us feeling deadened. But does life have to work that way?

I'm not saying that we can always live in a state of bliss. No one gets through this human experience without tragedy, suffering, and failure. But I do believe that it is possible to navigate life, with all its joys and sorrows, in a way that keeps us alive, alert, and engaged most of the time. And the key to sustaining our aliveness is our miraculous human capacity for hope.

When Jesus' disciples applauded the magnificence of the Temple, they were expressing more than amazement at great architecture. The Temple was not just a building, and it was not just the home of their religious life. It was a symbol of their national identity and a reminder of the time when Israel was a free and prosperous nation under King David. When the disciples praised the Temple they were giving voice to their hope that Roman occupation would end, that a new, free Israelite nation would be established, and that they would return to the glory days of the past. You can imagine how shocked they must have been when Jesus started describing the destruction of the Temple that would surely come.

The disciples must have wondered why Jesus was so callously dashing their hopes. Perhaps they questioned his patriotism and his faith in the God who had promised to deliver God's people from oppression. But Jesus knew that their hope was misplaced. The Temple could not save them. They would find no life by clinging to symbols of a glorious past. Jesus could see the

trajectory the nation was on, and he knew that Rome would not deal kindly with rebellion. And so he challenged them to see the coming struggle and to prepare for it well. He invited them to place their hope in something that gives them a full and vibrant life event in the darkest and most painful times.

As Jesus described the destruction and suffering that would come, he also described another reality that would be at work even in the troubles. Using an image from Daniel's prophecy, he painted a picture of the victorious Messiah returning in glory to the throne room of God. He invited his friends to become aware of God's presence and life permeating their world, unaffected by the machinations of human empires and conflicts.

And then he challenged them to be careful about how they would respond to their changing world: "Don't let your hearts be dulled by carousing and drunkenness, and by the worries of this life." Jesus knew that, when faced with turmoil, we have a tendency to numb ourselves out or get overwhelmed by our anxiety. We are very good at avoiding or denying our pain and losing ourselves in mind-altering substances or momentary experiences of pleasure. Or we allow our fear of suffering to overwhelm us to the extent that we become paralysed. But neither of these strategies lead us to life. And, since we all suffer, we all need to learn more effective ways to live fully even in the midst of our pain. But Jesus didn't just warn against letting our hearts be dulled. He offered some simple, but effective, ways to stay engaged with life even in the face of death.

The first thing Jesus recommends is that we stay alert. It doesn't help us to deny the difficulties we're facing or the disruption in our world. It is useless to embrace a blind optimism that pretends everything is fine even when it clearly isn't. What we need is to observe, listen, and take note of what is happening. We need to understand our reality in order to know how to respond well. And that takes attention and work. It requires us to avoid numbing out or freezing in fear and be intentional about staying alert so that we find the wisdom we need to navigate the chaos.

The challenge of staying alert is that it can overwhelm us when we see the truth of our situation, especially when it is extreme. And so the second strategy that Jesus recommends is to stand and look carefully for the other reality—the presence of God's reign of love and the beauty, truth, and goodness that continues to be revealed around us—in the midst of the upheaval. When we can remember that evil, violence, corruption, chaos, and death do not have the final word in our universe we can cling to hope even in seemingly hopeless circumstances. And we can resist the temptation to give in to the forces of darkness and join the polarisation, hatred, anger, and self-protectiveness that we see around us. When we stand tall and remember the Reign of Love, when we open ourselves to experience the Divine presence and goodness in our toughest times, then we free ourselves to choose a different way. We provide fuel for our hope and we empower ourselves to continue to live in grace, love, and kindness.

But Jesus also knew that we can't respond to crises in the most creative way unless we are prepared. Tragedy almost always strikes unexpectedly and we find ourselves reacting instinctively. In our pain-avoidant world it is unpopular to think about preparing for tragedy. We go through life expecting the best at all times and when turmoil comes we are surprised and convinced that something is wrong with the world. The result is that our responses to turmoil are usually thoughtless, self-protective, and shrouded in fear and negativity. But when we recognise that suffering is an integral and even necessary part of our human existence, we can prepare ourselves for the worst before it happens. We can free ourselves from the false belief that pain shouldn't

happen unless something is wrong and we can teach ourselves to slow down, consider our options, and respond with creativity, compassion, and hope.

Jesus taught that when we try to save our lives we will lose them. This is just the inevitable consequence of allowing our anxiety and fear to keep us from living fully. This is what happens when we become obsessed with protecting ourselves and defending ourselves against people and events that we perceive as threatening. But when we are willing to lose our lives—to risk living fully and releasing our self-protectiveness even when life is tough—then we remain open to hope and love. And that’s when we discover that we are truly, vibrantly alive even when our eyes are filled with tears and the world around us is in chaos.

This is not easy. But neither is the alternative. It takes work to stay alert, remember our hope, and prepare well for the struggles ahead. But if we make this work part of our daily spiritual practice—as it should be in any authentic spirituality—then we will find that our longing to be alive can be richly satisfied. And that is a goal worth pursuing.

## RESPONDING

### PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING AND INTERCESSION

God, you have expressed your longing  
for a world living by your Reign of Love.

***Thank you for making your longings known to us.***

Jesus, you knew you couldn’t avoid the pain of death,  
yet you remembered the hope found in God.

***Thank you for showing us how to cling to life.***

Spirit, you have enlivened and empowered us to stay alert,  
to keep watch for the signs of God’s Reign of Love among us,  
to prepare for the worst even as we hope for the best.

***Thank you for bringing us back to life.***

We ask for the strength to resist the temptation  
to numb ourselves out to the chaos and heartache of the world.

***May we remain open hearted.***

We think of those who feel overwhelmed,  
and do not have the capacity to stay alert  
and live fully in the face of their pain

***May they feel calm and peace.***

We pray for survivors of trauma,  
those without adequate income and shelter,  
those who suffer from mental illness,  
those who grieve a life or a loved one that is now lost

***May they experience love and acceptance.***



We pray for our world to become increasingly a more compassionate,  
just, welcoming, and loving place

**May we be brave enough to make this a reality  
today and every day.**

**Amen.**

## RESPONSE RITUAL

*The Advent Candle is lit:*

As we light this candle we express our longing for full and vibrant life

**And we cling to our hope in the Presence and Life of Christ.**

*As the people gaze at the flame, they may be invited to close their eyes and become aware of the life within them—the breath entering and leaving their bodies, their heartbeat pumping life-giving blood through their veins and arteries, the synapses in their brains giving them thought and imagination. In a few moments of silence they are invited to immerse themselves in this awareness of their aliveness—however frail or difficult it may be.*

## INTEGRATING

### BENEDICTION

Word of blessing:

May our eyes and heart be opened more and more to see and receive God's life-giving Spirit.

Greeting one another:

May God's life and hope be with us and be shared among us always. Amen

### SENDING RITUAL

*The people are invited to pause before they leave and think of one thing they can do this week that will make them feel more abundantly alive. After a few moments of silence, the people are sent out with the following encouragement based on Howard Thurman's famous words:*

*Whatever gives you hope, whatever brings you to life, go into this week and do that. For the world needs people who are fully alive.*

