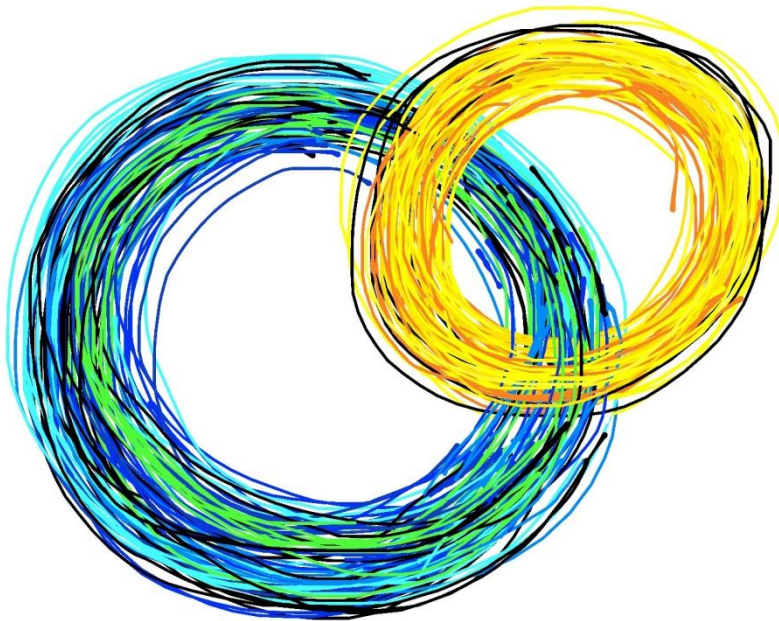


God with Humanity

A time of Advent reflection

Advent 2022



GOD WITH HUMANITY

Introduction

The guided meditations in this book create a reflective journey from Advent to the end of the year. They have been written to help the reader slow down for a few minutes each day and find a time for silence and reflection.

The centuries old pattern for guided meditations known as “Lectio Divina” meaning “Divine Reading” forms the frame for the meditations. They follow the four stages for silent meditation: **Reading** the Text; **Reflecting** on a key word or sentence; **Responding** with mind and heart to the written reflection; **Praying** “God & I”.

Each meditation takes about 10 minutes out of a 24 hour day (which has 1440 minutes in it). Clear a little space each day and let silence flow through as you reflect. Although the meditations are seasonal the reflections raise issues that we encounter throughout the year. Therefore there is no reason as to why they cannot be used out of season as well.

The meditations can also be used at group meetings. By following the same process a group can become centered in quietness before a main activity begins. Members of the group may take turns to read aloud the Scripture portion, the reflections and the prayer. They may be encouraged to share some of their insights or thoughts that were triggered by the reflective segments.

The Bible passages used are from the Contemporary English Version (CEV). The language is user-friendly and can be understood by readers and speakers of English as well as by those to whom English is a second learned language.

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For a number of years, our dear friend Ranjini Rebera wrote Biblical reflections for the use of Gungahlin Uniting Church and others, usually for Advent and Lent. We were privileged to receive these, as Ranjini had a working history of writing and teaching on a global stage. Each time she completed the considerable work on one of these studies for us she would announce firmly, ‘That’s it. That is the last one I’m writing. No more. End of story!’ But as Advent or Lent came around again she would start hinting that she’d had an idea for a reflection - and she would write another one.

When she completed a Reflection for Lent 2021, we were not to know that this really was the last one. Ranjini died on 13 October 2021. We miss her intellect, her leadership, her vivid personality, her artistic gifts, her deep faith and her pastoral heart. We have lost some colour from our world.

The Gungahlin Uniting Church Worship Team, where Ranjini served for several years, offers Ranjini’s study material, first produced in 2015, as we give thanks for her life shared among us.

Sunday 27 November: First Sunday in Advent

PREPARATION

God sent the angel Gabriel to the town of Nazareth in Galilee with a message for a virgin named Mary.

"The Holy Spirit will come down to you, and God's power will come over you. So your child will be called the holy Son of God. Your relative Elizabeth is also going to have a son, even though she is old. No one thought she could ever have a baby, but in three months she will have a son. Nothing is impossible with God!"

Luke 1:26, 35 – 37

Reflect on the word **ADVENT** for a few moments.

Does Advent get lost as we prepare for celebrating Christmas? Why does Advent not become a priority in churches as they prepare for Christmas celebrations? We prepare lists of things to do, things to buy, names for sending greeting cards. We prepare to decorate our homes, trim a tree, plan a Christmas dinner. We spend hours of time in preparation.

Preparation is also a time for anticipation. What went through Mary's mind as she anticipated the months ahead while waiting for her baby to be born?

A pregnant young woman standing at a bus stop – how is she preparing for the birth of her baby? A family struggling to make ends meet since the wage-earner was retrenched months ago and Mum is expecting her third child any day - do they dread these months when signs of celebrations are everywhere?

Advent is a time for waiting, for preparing and for anticipation. Do I have time to wait in quietness to hear God's voice? In the noise and activity around me, where would I find stillness and silence, to wait?

God of my quiet-times, you know how difficult it is to be still when I am busy preparing for the celebration of Christ's birth. May I have the will to create quiet spaces every day, as my days get busier.

Monday 28 November

GIVING THANKS

Shout praises to the Lord! He is good to us, and his love never fails.

You should praise the LORD for his love

And for the wonderful things he does for all of us.

To everyone who is thirsty, he gives something to drink;

To everyone who is hungry

He gives good things to eat.

Psalm 107: 1, 8-9

Reflect on the word **THANKSGIVING** for a few moments.

I stand before you, God, in wonder!

You created the heavens and the earth. You created humankind to experience the richness of relationships with each other and with you

Alone by choice or circumstance, I realise that there is power when breaking bread at a table. My table is always laden with food and often surrounded by family and friends. Sometimes I don't pause long enough to give thanks for your provision and goodness to me.

I wonder if into all your goodness we have introduced greed and need. Have we created economic structures that drive people to be lonely, hungry and isolated? Is it hard to give thanks when someone has so little or nothing to be thankful for?

I take so much for granted when I walk through a supermarket with a laden trolley, when the huge malls lure me with dazzling buys, when Internet shopping makes it so easy for me. I am thankful for the resources I have and yet, sometimes there is a nagging doubt in my mind. How can I offer the gift of thanksgiving to those who seem to have so little?

God of Broken Bread, I stand with thanksgiving and love for all you have given me. May I not lose sight of those who have been pushed to the edges of society.

Tuesday 29 November

TAKING GOD FOR GRANTED

Celebrate and sing!

Play your harps for the LORD our God.

*He fills the sky with clouds and sends rain to the earth
so that the hills will be green with grass.*

He provides food for cattle

and for the young ravens, when they cry out.

The LORD doesn't care about the strength of horses or powerful armies.

The LORD is pleased only with those who worship him and trust his love.

Psalm 147: 7-11

Reflect on the word **GOODNESS** for a few moments.

How much I take for granted each day!

The sun and moon keep their appointed way. Clouds cause rain to drench the earth. Birds and beasts, flowers and trees always color the world. The seasons follow each other. The rhythms of creation are not dependent on human inventions.

Why then do we build more technology that destroys creation? Arm nations to conquer through violence and power? Pollute our environment? Go to war over the ownership of land and water?

Do I recognize your goodness each day? Or worship you as my God if I do not honor the work of your hands? Or walk past the person sleeping on the pavement while I stay preoccupied with my own needs? Can I sing of your goodness and love when I take you for granted most of the time?

And yet you continue to create and re-create, to heal and make whole, to care abundantly for us.

God of all creation, my God and my Creator, forgive me for taking you for granted and for failing to honor your Holy Name!

Wednesday 30 November

THE WORD IS LIGHT

In the beginning was the one who was called the Word. The Word was with God and was truly God. From the very beginning the Word was with God. And with this Word, God created all things. Nothing was made without the Word. Everything that was created received its life from him, and his life gave light to everyone. The light keeps shining in the dark, and the darkness has never put it out.

John 1: 1-5

Reflect on the word **LIGHT** for a few moments.

The news media seems to have perfected the art of packaging violence to grab attention. We see human faces contorted with grief and hear the gun shots that pursue them. We see fear on the face of an unarmed suspect gunned down by sharp shooters. We can recall the devastation of a fire started by an arsonist as it ravages a city block or engulfs farms and bush.

Yet we know that darkness can never extinguish the light. There is light in the face of a rescue worker, a police officer taking risks to protect a bystander, a fire fighter walking out of the flames with a child in her arms, a light shining from the open door of the Shelter welcoming the abused woman to safety. No. Darkness cannot extinguish the light.

We need to see beyond the darkness of the violence that seems to engulf our world to the light of compassion, mercy and courage that can never be extinguished.

With your Word you created the world, God. Let me be upheld by the light you shine that penetrates darkness.

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Thursday 1 December

A LIVING ROCK

*I love you, LORD God and you make me strong.
You are my mighty rock, my fortress, my protector,
The rock where I am safe, my shield,
My powerful weapon, and my place of shelter.*

Psalm 18: 1-2

*You are the living LORD! I will praise you.
You are a mighty rock.
I will honor you for keeping me safe.*

Psalm 18: 46

Reflect on the word **ROCK** for a few moments.

A rock brings many memories to mind:

I remember little rocks on the edge of the school playground; the stinging pain when one was thrown at me; the rocks over which I tripped when camping in summer and the bruises that needed band aids when I was pushed.

Years later I learned to see rocks differently. I now know that rocks contain a beauty of their own. The minerals and the energy that live in them are essential to the environment. They give balance to the ecology and provide a place of safety for many creatures in forests and waterways. They are an integral part of Planet Earth.

My childhood perceptions of God have changed. Knowledge gives me strength. Yet sometimes I wonder if I understand and honour God as an adult should, or is it with the lingering perceptions of a child.

God of Strength and Energy, you are sometimes referred to as a Rock and a Refuge. I pray that I will remember to “honour you for keeping me safe.”

Friday 2 December

PROOF OF IDENTITY

Then I said: listen every one of you in the royal family of David. You have already tried my patience. Now you are trying God's patience by refusing to ask for proof. But the LORD will still give you proof. A virgin is pregnant; she will have a son and will name him Immanuel. Even before the boy is old enough to know how to choose between right and wrong he will eat yogurt and honey and the countries of the two kings you fear will be destroyed.

Isaiah 7: 13-16

Reflect on the word **IDENTITY** for a few moments.

The courteous attendant at the desk greeted him.

"Good evening, sir! How may I help you?"

"Good evening! I'd like a room for three nights please."

"Certainly sir! Could you please fill this form for me? And if you would, could you please give me your credit card so I can complete your check-in?"

"I am sorry, but I don't use credit cards. I will pay in cash."

"Oh! Well, sir, then may I see some identification? A driver's license, perhaps? Or an identity card?"

"I don't drive. We just got in on the Inter-State bus. Don't you believe me when I say that I will settle my account with cash before I leave?"

"Well Sir, I am sorry but the Management does require proof of identity if you don't have any credit cards or acceptable identification. Perhaps a smaller motel may accommodate you. I am sorry sir."

The Attendant looked across at the next customer.

"Good evening sir! How may I help you?"

No one paid much attention to the man as he walked out into the street with his pregnant wife beside him. No one offered to help them.

Proving our identity is normal in our technologically savvy society. When God offers us proof of identity do we continue to ask for more proof?

You never question my identity, God. You never ask for proof of who I am. I accept and celebrate your presence.

Saturday 3 December

HOPE

God cannot tell lies! And so his promises and vows are two things that can never be changed. We have run to God for safety. Now his promises should greatly encourage us to take hold of the hope that is right in front of us. This hope is like a firm and steady anchor for our souls. In fact, hope reaches behind the curtain and into the most holy place.

Hebrews 6: 18-19

Reflect on the word **HOPE** for a few moments.

“I so hope it won’t rain!” “Hopefully we’ll find a space to park” “Let’s hope we have sufficient food for everyone” “I hope God will heal me soon” “Be careful what you hope for!” and so the list goes on. Hope slips easily into wishful thinking.

What do we hope for in today’s world without borders? Where is hope found by?
Thousands fleeing their homelands to be safe?
Asylum seekers outside island nations which are protected by fences?
A mother and child squatting on an unsafe boat carrying them away?
The wage earner made redundant in the name of economic rationalisation?
A family grieving for their teenage child killed in a drug-induced brawl?
A person who is diagnosed with a terminal illness?

Where do we find hope in times of depression, uncertainty, fear, feeling lost or when we get disturbing news? Does it become a distant dream, wishful anticipation or an achievable reality?

God can be trusted. This is the basis for hope. God is faithful and encourages us to reach out to the hope that is often within our reach, but that we do not see.

Lord All-Powerful, I need to know you through your presence in my life that gives me hope when I am in need.

GOD'S SACRED PROMISE

*Our God has given us a mighty Savior
From the family of David his servant.
Long ago the Lord promised by the words of his holy prophets
To save us from our enemies and from everyone who hates us.
God said he would be kind to our people and keep his sacred promise.
He told our ancestor Abraham that he would rescue us from our enemies.
Then we could serve him without fear, by being holy and good as long as we live.*

Luke 1: 69-75

Reflect on the word **PROMISES** for a few moments.

How often do we look back and recall the “good old days”!

As people of ancient times waited for the birth of a Messiah they looked back and wondered if it would occur in their lifetime. Would God honour the promise of a Saviour made to the Jews?

When I recall childhood promises I sometimes wonder if they did come true. Have I replaced them with new promises believing that I can do better now? I wonder how often I've forgotten obligations attached to promises I've made. Do 'sacred' promises still take place or is it another memory from the good old days?

I read of promises God made to save and protect those who were called “his people” and to those who had faith in him. Are there parallels in our time, when God makes promises to rescue us from our enemies, to heal our world so we can live without fear? Or, am I asking the wrong questions or looking in the wrong direction for answers?

Holy God may I accept and honour your promises as long as I live.

Monday 5 December

THE GIFT OF COMPASSION

The Spirit of the LORD God has taken control of me!

The LORD has chosen and sent me to tell the oppressed the good news,

To heal the brokenhearted, and to announce freedom for prisoners and captives.

This is the year when the LORD God will show kindness to us and punish our enemies.

Isaiah 61: 1-2

Reflect on the word **COMPASSION** for a few moments.

In worn and threadbare clothes he shuffled his way along the busy street. Sometimes he'd pause to gaze at a brightly decorated shop window. He'd shuffle quickly past people dressed in designer clothes. Sometimes he'd stop and look into the lifeless eyes of figures in an illuminated nativity scene. The holiday season meant nothing to him. The slogans "goodwill" "peace on earth" "have a merry Christmas" floated past him unheard. The holidays were to be endured before the streets came back to normal. Like a bent reed he stumbles in silence along the brightly lighted streets, and disappears into anonymity.

Why is it so hard to respond when people blend into the anonymity of hopelessness? What can we do to help? Perhaps we feel sorry when we watch a news item on TV and look into the eyes of displaced people, especially the eyes of children. Does it prompt us to send a contribution to one of the agencies doing relief work? Do our feelings of compassion evaporate when we get caught up in daily routines?

I remember reading somewhere that there is grace in compassion. I need to think about that. Perhaps God is asking me to show compassion as a gift I can offer to those I know who need my help. I wish I knew what to do.

God of Caring and Compassion, touch me and show me your compassion that I may learn to care.

Tuesday 6 December

LISTENING IN SILENCE

*I will listen to you, LORD God,
Because you promise peace to those who are faithful and no longer foolish.
You are ready to rescue everyone who worships you,
So that you will live with us in all of your glory.
Love and loyalty will come together;
Goodness and peace will unite,
Loyalty will sprout from the ground;
Justice will look down from the sky above.*

Psalm 85: 8-11

Reflect on the word **SILENCE** for a few moments.

It is hard to listen. My world is full of sounds:

The alarm clock waking me to a new day; the kettle whistling with hot water for my cup of coffee; weather reports, traffic reports, news reports, TV talk shows. Voices questioning, commenting, talking, filling the air with sound bites that drown the silence of the new day. How can I possibly listen in silence when there is so much happening around me?

Am I afraid to listen? If I do listen will I hear the Psalmist's words echoing 'loyalty will sprout from the ground'? Or see justice looking down from the sky? Do I really want to know how love and loyalty come together? Or experience the uniting of goodness and peace? Am I afraid of being silent in case I feel uncomfortable with what I hear? Or if I am challenged to act?

The sound of my front door closing tells me that I am being pushed into a world of busyness. Perhaps I will be drowned in a sea of sound that makes it hard for me to hear God.

It is hard to listen.

God of Goodness and Peace, help me to learn to listen.

Wednesday 7 December

THE LORD GIVES JUSTICE

The LORD said: I made a wonderful promise to Israel and Judah, and the days are coming when I will keep it. I promise that the time will come when I will appoint a king from the family of David, a king who will be honest and rule with justice. In those days Judah will be safe; Jerusalem will have peace and will be named "The LORD Gives Justice."

Jeremiah 33: 14-16

Reflect on the word **JUSTICE** for a few moments.

Every three years we prepare to elect leaders for our nation who we hope will be honest and govern with justice. I hear leaders speak of our being a just society. They claim that right values form the basis of who we are. Yet our leaders form policies that create injustice in the name of peace and justice.

Shouldn't we find ways for spending our dollars in the pursuit of justice? While we deplore and condemn violence and injustice in other lands and societies, shouldn't we deplore and condemn injustice in our own land and commit ourselves to working for peace with justice in our country?

Working for justice is not easy. It requires us to:

- Listen and not dismiss voices calling for justice.
- Respect genuine differences and see them as strengths.
- Bring healing to the memory of scars.

"The LORD Gives Justice". Can we believe the words of the prophet Jeremiah in this 21st century?

Lord of Unbroken Promises, give me the wisdom to discern how to make the world safe for our children.

Thursday 8 December

POWER IN PEACE

*This king won't judge by appearances or listen to rumors.
The poor and the needy will be treated with fairness and with justice.
His word will be law everywhere in the land,
And criminals will be put to death.
Honesty and fairness will be his royal robes.*

Isaiah 11: 3b - 5

Reflect on the word **PEACE** for a few moments.

The teacher looked across the classroom of bent heads. She moved between the rows as the children painted their understanding of PEACE. She saw many landscapes in colors of gentle blues, greens and yellows. She wondered about the gentle images she saw. Landscapes devoid of humanity. She reflected on the images of destruction that filled TV screens every day. Did young people believe that there would be peace if there were no human beings?

She wondered if she should begin to guide her students into putting people into the beautiful landscapes. Show them the need for people to be instruments for peace. That it takes people to demonstrate that peace is more than an absence of war and violence.

She paused. She smiled as she acknowledged that perhaps she needed to start with herself.

Lord All-Powerful, I don't always make the connection between power and peace. Make me a builder of peace that the whole of creation may become a Temple of Peace to you.

Friday 9 December

PARTNERS FOR PEACE

*Bethlehem Ephrathah, you are one of the smallest towns in the nation of Judah.
But the LORD will choose one of your people to rule the nation
Someone whose family goes back to ancient times.
Like a shepherd taking care of his sheep,
This ruler will lead and care for his people
By the power and the glorious name of the LORD his God.
His people will live securely, and the whole earth will know his true greatness,
Because he will bring peace.*

Micah 5: 2, 4-5a

Reflect on the word **PARTNERSHIP** for a few moments.

Across the world people march for peace, pray for peace, campaign for peace.
We invite warring parties to round-table conferences for peace.
World leaders jet across continents in missions for peace.

There is a yearning for peace among the people of the world.

But can there ever be peace, if justice is not established? Can there ever be justice without equality and freedom? Can there ever be peace unless we become partners with God in making peace happen?

Being a partner for peace confronts us with the cost of risk. It challenges us to be active participants in the struggle for justice, in the restoration of dignity and truth. It is a powerful force for reconciliation and renewal.

God's peace can be achieved when we recognize our call to work in partnership with God, to heal creation.

As I prepare for the celebration of the birth of the Prince of Peace, may I walk in the security of God's promise for peace.

Saturday 10 December

WHO AM I?

Our LORD and Ruler, your name is wonderful everywhere on earth!

*I often think of the heavens your hands have made,
And of the moon and stars you put in place.
Then I ask, "Why do you care about us humans?
Why are you concerned for us weaklings?"*

Psalm 8: 1, 3-4

Reflect on the word **ME** for a moment.

Each morning as I get ready for the day I look into my mirror and see myself – and wonder. What did I look like the moment I was born? Did my mother smile to see me or were there other emotions?

I've heard words such as: "God loves you", "God cares for you" through my growing years.

Really??

Reflected in the mirror I see times when I looked obnoxious, hurtful, manipulative, stubborn and the words go on. At other times I see a caring, happy, compassionate and sometimes sorrowful face. Who am I? Which of these faces is the real me?

The phone rings. Someone wants to connect with me. I move away from the mirror and pick up the phone. I wonder which "ME" is connecting with the caller.

Outside my window a king parrot looks at me for seed. The first spring daffodils sway in the wind. The rhythms of the day never change. It tells me that the rhythms of my life do not change and that all the "faces" in my mirror blend to make ME.

Thank you for making me who I am and loving me warts and all, God.

Sunday 11 December: Third Sunday in Advent

YOUR GOD IS HERE!

*There is good news for the city of Zion.
Shout it as loud as you can from the highest mountain.
Don't be afraid to shout to the towns of Judah,
'Your God is here!'
Look! The powerful LORD God is coming
to rule with his mighty arm.
The LORD cares for his nation,
Just as shepherds care for their flocks.
He carries the lambs in his arms,
While gently leading the mother sheep.*

Isaiah 40:9-10a, 11.

Reflect on the word **GENTLE** for a few moments.

"Your God is here!"

Who would believe such a headline?

Perhaps journalists would have to be assigned to writing a small column for an inside page; or spin-specialists would have to generate stories that make it controversial and sensational. Unsourced leaks would be used to make the news marketable to an over-informed age who would find it hard to consider it as credible news.

What sources do we look for to validate such a headline? Would we accept the words of the writer of Isaiah who depicts God carrying a lamb and gently leading a mother sheep?

No trumpets. No cataclysmic occurrences. No cosmic revelations, earthquakes, tidal waves or tsunamis.

A mother sheep. A baby lamb. And our God.

Dare we believe such a headline?

Help me God not to be afraid to shout the good news: "You are here!"

Monday 12 December

A GOOD PLACE TO LIVE

*People of Jerusalem, open your gates!
Repair the road to the city and clear it of stones;
Raise a banner to help the nations find their way.
Here is what the LORD has said for all the earth to hear:
"Soon I will come to save the city of Zion, and to reward you.
Then you will be called,
'The LORD's Own People, The Ones He Rescued!'
Your city will be known as a good place to live and a city full of people. "*

Isaiah 62: 10-12

Reflect on the word **REPAIRING** for a few moments.

Many workers are employed in preparing roads and highways. Much planning needs to be done, security precautions need to be put in place, strategies to meet emergencies to be developed, signs and directions to be installed. Despite good construction work, roads need constant monitoring and repair.

Our own roads through life need constant monitoring and repair. We may develop pot-holes in attitudes to racial and ethnic differences, roadblocks to the cries of people in need in our own neighborhood. Become blind to signposts of sexism, racism, discrimination and exploitation. Take deliberate detours to avoid the scourge of violence against children and women.

Preparing to celebrate Christ's incarnation is also about preparing and repairing our own pathways of life. Whenever we recognize the presence of God another pathway has been prepared. How long will it take me to prepare for the birth of Christ in my life?

Give me the vision and commitment, God, to be diligent in preparation and faithful in waiting for you.

Tuesday 13 December

A MIGHTY GOD

*A child has been born for us. We have been given a son
Who will be our ruler.
His name will be Wonderful Advisor and Mighty God,
Eternal Father and Prince of Peace.
His power will never end; peace will last forever.
He will rule David's kingdom and make it grow strong.
He will always rule with honesty and justice.
The LORD All-Powerful will make certain
That all of this is done.*

Isaiah 9: 6-7

Reflect on the word **MIGHTY** for a few moments.

"A mighty God."

What does it mean to be mighty in this 21st century?

- mighty space explorations; mighty global enterprises;
- mighty political power; mighty military arsenals;
- mighty technological achievements.

How mighty is "mighty"?

As I prepare to celebrate the birth of the Christ-Child who bears the titles "Prince of Peace", "Wonderful Advisor", "Mighty God" I need to examine honestly the implications of my allegiance to such a Savior.

God, incarnate as Peace, Honesty, Justice and Power, is my God and as well as the Creator of the universe. A truly mighty God who cares for the universe and me. It is difficult for my mind to wrap itself around such an awesome idea.

Mighty God, may I always be aware of the consequences of my allegiance to you.

Wednesday 14 December

DON'T BE AFRAID

One day Zechariah 's group of priests were on duty and he was serving God as a priest. All at once an angel from the Lord appeared to Zechariah at the right side of the altar. Zechariah was confused and afraid when he saw the angel. But the angel told him: "Don't be afraid Zechariah! God has heard your prayers. Your wife Elizabeth will have a son, and you must name him John. His birth will make you very happy, and many people will be glad. Your son will be a great servant of the Lord. He must never drink wine or beer, and the power of the Holy Spirit will be with him from the time he is born.

Luke 1: 8, 11-15

Reflect on the word **FEAR** for a few moments.

"Don't be afraid!"

Perhaps we freeze with fear when we hear the sounds of footsteps following us, or when we hear strange noises at night. Perhaps we freeze with fear at the sound of the phone ringing when waiting for disturbing news. Or at the sound or sight of violence

Fear is a personal experience. Differentiating between imagined or irrational fear and rational or paralyzing fear is not easy.

But faith can free us from fear as it did for Zechariah and Elizabeth to raise a child in their old age. Mary and Joseph to walk with their Son from Bethlehem to Calvary. Shepherds to run, without looking back. Three wise men to defy Herod.

Do we remain frozen with fear, or learn to fly with the freedom of faith?
Moving from fear to faith requires courage, commitment and continuing belief in God's promise to us. "Don't be afraid!"

God of Unbroken Promise, may I know your presence in my life as Faith and not fear.

Thursday 15 December

MUTUAL CARING

A short time later Mary hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea. She went into Zechariah 's home, where she greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting her baby moved within her.

The Holy Spirit came upon Elizabeth. Then in a loud voice she said to Mary: "God has blessed you more than any other woman! He has also blessed the child you will have. Why should the mother of my Lord come to me? As soon as I heard your greeting, my baby became happy and moved within me. The Lord has blessed you because you believed that he will keep his promise".

Luke 1: 39-45

Reflect on the word **CARING** for a few moments.

In times of joy, in times of uncertainty, in times of trouble we need someone to turn to. Mary and Elizabeth turned to each other. They gave and received care from each other.

Giving and receiving is more than gifts placed under the Christmas tree. It is more than careful budgeting and clever "sales" shopping, or hospitality to family and friends during the holiday season.

Giving and receiving touches the center of our response to discipleship in Christ. It celebrates the gift of caring. It requires honesty and truth about our love for others and for self, the acceptance of others and of self, without being judgmental. It requires sensitivity to what is happening to others and to self in the present moment

Caring is a living process that is based on mutual giving and receiving.

God cared and God gave.

How do we receive from God, and how do we give back to God?

Caring God, make me aware of caring as a living process as I continue to care for others and myself.

Friday 16 December

WHAT IS GOD LIKE?

John spoke about him and shouted, "This is the one I told you would come! He is greater than I am, because he was alive before I was born". Because of all that the Son is, we have been given one blessing after another. The Law was given by Moses, but Jesus Christ brought us undeserved kindness and truth. No one has ever seen God. The only Son, who is truly God and is closest to the Father, has shown us what God is like. '

John 1: 15-18

Reflect on the word **GOD** for a few moments.

"Mum, what is God like?"

The mother paused and looked into the face of the five year old.

"I am not sure dear. Do you know what God is like?"

"Sure! God makes me feel all warm and safe and happy. So I guess God looks warm and safe and happy! Got to go Mum. See ya!"

The mother smiled and continued her interrupted task.

How do we know what God is like? Do we look for answers in our church traditions and liturgy? In sermons and religious writings? In our own feelings of religiosity and spirituality?

Do we look for answers in attitudes that sanction what is right and lawful? Do we try to impose our understanding of God on others, without pausing to hear another point of view?

When we look at Jesus do we see who God really is? Or do we see Jesus and continue to see God as we think God should be like? How do we know what God is like?

Living God, let me not confuse your revelation through Christ with my limited human understanding of who you are.

Saturday 17 December

YOU ARE BLESSED

One month later God sent the angel Gabriel to the town of Nazareth in Galilee with a message for a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to Joseph from the family of King David. The angel greeted Mary and said, "You are truly blessed! The Lord is with you".

Mary was confused by the angel's words and wondered what they meant. Then the angel told Mary, "Don't be afraid! God is pleased with you, and you will have a son. His name will be Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of God Most High. The Lord God will make him king, as his ancestor David was. He will rule the people of Israel forever, and his kingdom will never end." Mary asked the angel, "How can this happen? I am not married!" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come down to you, and God's power will come over you. So your child will be called the holy Son of God. Your relative Elizabeth is also going to have a son, even though she is old. No one thought she would ever have a baby, but in three months she will have a son. Nothing is impossible for God!" Mary said, "I am the Lord's servant! Let it happen as you have said. "And the angel left her.

Luke 1:26-38

Reflect on the word **BLESSED** for a few moments.

A scene such as this is played out across the country every day. Perhaps it may reflect some of the emotions Mary must have felt.

She sits alone in silence and waits. The curtains part and a white-robed doctor appears. She knows her worst fears are realized. She is pregnant. She walks into the street with fear in her heart. To whom would she go? Who would want to take her in? How would she manage? She is confused. She is afraid. Why did she let this happen? Will she be another number in the statistics for single mothers? Did she have the courage to be different?

Mary's submission was not an easy way out for her. Her submission was a choice she made. It led her through the joy of birthing, contentment in nurturing, confusion in parenting a child who was different, and finally the pain and agony of a crucifixion.

"And the angel said "You are truly blessed!"

Give me courage God, to claim your blessings because I hear you say again: "Don't be afraid!"

A SONG OF SALVATION

Mary said:

With all my heart I praise the Lord, and I am glad because of God my Savior.

God cares for me, his humble servant.

From now on, all people will say God has blessed me.

God All-Powerful has done great things for me, and his name is holy.

He always shows mercy to everyone who worships him.

The Lord has used his powerful arm to scatter those who are proud.

God drags strong rulers from their thrones and puts humble people in places of power.

God gives the hungry good things to eat, and sends the rich away with nothing,

God helps his servant Israel and is always merciful to his people.

The Lord made this promise to our ancestors, to Abraham and his family forever!

Mary stayed with Elizabeth about three months. Then she went back home.

Luke 1:46-56

Reflect on the word **SALVATION** for a few moments.

Why did the writer of Luke's Gospel place such extraordinary words on the lips of a young woman who had just received some astounding news? The opening lines of the hymn echo the prayer of Hannah [1 Sam. 1:11] who was barren and who longed for a son.

It also echoes the words of Mary's cousin Elizabeth [Luke 1:25] when she knew she was pregnant in her old age. Mary belongs to neither category. Yet she gave to the world a legacy to live by: Salvation is here. It is not to be found at some time in the future. She sang of salvation (liberation) as:

- a personal experience: recognizing God's presence and care
- a moral experience: acknowledging God's challenge to make right choices
- a social experience: discerning God's power to change oppressive social orders
- an economic experience: discerning God's call to care for those in need.

A new social order. Is it here? Do we see it reflected in Australia's social order? Or are we looking to some distant future to see it happen?

Dare I sing Mary's song, God? Dare I make it my own song too?

Monday 19 December

GOD'S INITIATIVE

About that time Emperor Augustus gave orders for the names of all the people to be listed in record books. These first records were made when Quirinius was governor of Syria. Everyone had to go to their own hometown to be listed. So Joseph had to leave Nazareth in Galilee and go to Bethlehem in Judea. Long ago Bethlehem had been King David's hometown and Joseph went there because he was David's family.

Mary was engaged to Joseph and travelled with him to Bethlehem. She was soon going to have a baby, and while they were there, she gave birth to her first-born son. She dressed him in baby clothes and laid him on a bed of hay, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Luke 2: 1-7

Reflect on the word **INCARNATION** for a few moments.

Soon Christians will celebrate the day when God took the initiative to enter the human race in the form of a baby named Jesus. Incarnation happened when the Divine took on all the attributes of being human, in the life of Jesus. God ceases to be distant and becomes a presence in the world.

We hear sermons about an Incarnate God. We've read the words. We sing the words. We become filled with excitement as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ.

Do we pause long enough to sense God's presence when we see a social worker giving a child a toy as his mother watches in tears; an elderly person helping someone in need; a bruised child in a school yard sharing lunch with another; a blanket being placed over a homeless person on a winter night; a son visiting a mother in an aged care facility.

Does Incarnation become a process that is up close and personal? Or an event celebrated once a year in cathedrals, churches and Christian gatherings?

God in Christ is with us just as we are and where ever we are.

Incarnate God, whether I always recognize your presence or not, I know that I can see you in the life of Jesus. Thank you

Tuesday 20 December

I WILL REMEMBER

*Our LORD, I will remember the things you have done,
Your miracles of long ago.
I will think about each one of your mighty deeds.
Everything you do is right,
And no other god compares with you.
You alone work miracles,
And you have let nations see your mighty power.*

Psalm 77: 11-14

Reflect on the word **REMEMBERING** for a few moments.

Today's Christmas cards lay unopened as she looked around the room. She thought of her family and friends who had sent her cards. Each card reminding her of friendships or family occasions: Wendy's photograph of her new house – she had never been to it yet. Alex and Mandy's enclosed newsletter sharing happy moments from their overseas holiday – she had never liked newsletters much. Rosemary – her niece- sending mushy words and a childish colouring reminding her of times when she baby-sat – she had never had a baby of her own.

Christmas is always difficult for her. Pushing herself to look happy, wearing silly caps, overeating to please her hosts who feel that she shouldn't be alone on Christmas day. Finally returning to her flat and shutting out the world.

She picks up the unopened cards and checks the senders' names. There it was – the card and enclosure she waits for every year. She sits down and opens it as she recalls the Gospel stories she reads at this time of year, when she is alone.

She reads this year's reflection written by her friend. She sits quietly and remembers.

God of the Christ-Child and my God, thank you for the Bible and its record of the birth of Jesus.

Wednesday 21 December

HE IS COMING

*Announce to the nations, "The LORD is King!
The world stands firm, never to be shaken,
And he will judge its people with fairness."
Tell the heavens and the earth to be glad and celebrate!
Command the ocean to roar with all of their creatures
And the fields to rejoice with all of its crops.
Then every tree in the forest
Will sing joyful songs to the LORD.
He is coming to judge all people on earth
With fairness and truth.*

Psalm 96: 10-13

Reflect on the word **ANTICIPATION** for a few moments.

There always seems to be something special in the air the days before Christmas. Children are too excited to go to bed. Parents are rushing to complete unfinished tasks.

People are frantic with last-minute shopping. The sounds and songs of Christmas fill the air on busy streets and secluded homes.

Anticipating Christmas day is anticipating celebration! What signs of anticipation color this time for you? What memories from the past surface as you anticipate the next few days?

- LISTEN to the song of the birds calling
 SENSE the winds blowing through bush and tall grasses
- FEEL the movement of the rivers and the seas as planet earth moves to the rhythms of creation.
- IMAGINE yourself waiting with anticipation when you read the words of the Psalmist.

The Psalmist celebrates God. It is not a private, personal celebration. It overflows and spills into all of Creation! A human celebration caught in the exuberance of Creation's celebration! Our God is indeed here!

God of all our celebrations, let me also overflow with gladness and rejoicing that surrounded the birth of Jesus.

Thursday 22 December

FREEDOM IN AGEING

The prophet Anna was also there in the temple. She was the daughter of Phanuel from the tribe of Asher, and she was very old. In her youth she had been married for seven years, but her husband had died. And now she was eighty-four years old. Night and day she served God in the temple by praying and often going without eating. At that time Anna came in and praised God. She spoke about the child Jesus to everyone who hoped for Jerusalem to be set free.

Luke 2: 36 – 38

Reflect on the word **AGEING** for a few moments.

Anna was a prophetess, widowed at a young age. At 84 years she was a committed worker in the temple to which the young boy Jesus was brought by his parents. Anna, one of the very few women named in the Bible, prophesies that Jerusalem will be set free, because of the birth of Jesus.

Different cultures recognize ageing as a time of wisdom, respect and the time for passing on beliefs and history to the next generation. Today, consumerism uses ageing as a profitable market for selling anti-ageing products. Loss of youth is portrayed as a loss in image; changes in appearance are seen as a loss in identity; change in reproductive functions is portrayed as a loss of sexuality; change in economic status is portrayed as a loss of independence.

Ageing is a natural process of life. It celebrates remembrance, wisdom and maturity. Age did not determine Anna's response to God or limit her obedience. Age enhanced her commitment and her faith. It gave her the wisdom to recognize the child Jesus and the freedom to declare her perceptions to all who would listen.

God of the young and the aged, teach me to respect and value each stage of my life's journey.

Friday 23 December

POWER

When Jesus was born in the village of Bethlehem in Judea, Herod was king. During this time some wise men from the east came to Jerusalem and said, "Where is the Child born to be king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him". When King Herod heard about this, he was worried and so was everyone else in Jerusalem. Herod brought together the chief priests and the teachers of the Law of Moses and asked them, "Where will the Messiah be born?" They told him, "He will be born in Bethlehem, just as the prophet wrote, 'Bethlehem in the land of Judea, You are very important among the towns of Judea. From your town will come a leader, who will be like a shepherd for my people Israel'".

Matthew 2: 1-6

Reflect on the word **POWER** for a few moments.

Power is both a personal and a political experience. It can be both positive and negative. It is the manner in which we chose to use power that makes it abusive or life-giving.

Abusive power is justified in many ways:

- An abuser will use violence to prove control.
- A co-worker will withhold information to protect personal power.
- A Board of Management or CEO will structure regulations to maintain authority as power.

Abusive use of power creates isolation. God's use of power creates community.

A few people saw a star, heard God's message and chose to respond with the power of wisdom. A powerful King heard God's message, was threatened and chose to respond with the power of protectionism.

How do we choose to respond to the power God gives to each of us?

God of Wisdom and Power, give me the assurance I need to use your power for the good of others. Empower me with your power that I may empower others.

Saturday 24 December: Christmas Eve

A SAVIOUR IS BORN!

That night in the fields near Bethlehem some shepherds were guarding their sheep. All at once an angel came down to them from the Lord, and the brightness of the Lord's glory flashed around them. The shepherds were frightened. But the angel said "Don't be afraid! I have good news for you, which will make everyone happy. This very day in King David's hometown a Savior was born for you. He is Christ the Lord. You will know who he is, because you will find him dressed in baby clothes and lying on a bed of hay." Suddenly many other angels came down from heaven and joined in praising God. They said: "Praise God in heaven! Peace on earth to everyone who pleases God".

Luke 2:8-14

Reflect on the word **BIRTH** for a few moments.

“You will find him dressed in baby clothes and lying in a bed of hay.”

How much more mundane and familiar could it have been? No elaborate nurseries with color-coordinated accessories, or video cameras or flash bulbs exploding to record the birth. No text messages, phone calls, Face book or Twitter announcements.

Just a baby, in baby clothes, lying on a soft bed of hay.

Just angels and shepherd sharing the news.

How would such news be received today in the bush and the outback? This is our time for floods and fires, thick smoke shutting out the sun, frightened animals racing to safety and floods sweeping away homes and cities. Extraordinary acts of heroism, compassion and caring take place. Rescue workers, unafraid, respond to calls for help. Police men and women walk the street to keep them safe. Doctors and nurses work tirelessly in hospitals.

AND Babies continue to be born.

God says: Don't be afraid. The Christ Child is born!

God of the Outback and the City, let me not be afraid. Let me hear your words again: “Peace on earth to everyone.”

Sunday 25 December: Christmas Day

GOD IS WITH US

This is how Jesus Christ was born. A young woman named Mary was engaged to Joseph from King David's family. But before they were married, she learned that she was going to have a baby by God's Holy Spirit. Joseph was a good man and did not want to embarrass Mary in front of everyone. So he decided to quietly call off the wedding. While Joseph was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord came to him in a dream. The angel said, "Joseph, the baby that Mary will have is from the Holy Spirit. Go ahead and marry her. Then after her baby is born, name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. So the Lord's promise came true, just as the prophet had said, "A virgin will have a baby boy, and he will be called Immanuel which means "God is with us." After Joseph woke up, he and Mary were soon married, just as the Lord's angel had told him to do. But they did not sleep together before her baby was born. Then Joseph named him Jesus.

Matthew 1: 18-25

Reflect on the word **IMMANUEL** for a few moments.

Immanuel - God is with us.

As we re-tell the stories of Christ's birth, as we listen or sing familiar carols and songs, as we gather round a festive meal or when we attend a worship service it is easy to feel that God is with us. Families and friends gather round BBQs in celebration. Children race around in excitement, shrieking and laughing in backyards and homes. "It's Jesus' birthday and we're celebrating!"

Some sit alone in a rented room, in a shelter or on a street corner. Do they feel that God is with them?

Some make their way to Soup Kitchens, thankful that they are not forgotten on Christmas Day. Being politically correct in our secular society the word "Immanuel" and its meaning may not be talked of here.

"A virgin will have a baby boy, and he will be called "Immanuel, "which means "God is with us".

The message of Christmas brings good news to all the world. I praise and thank you, Immanuel: God is with us!

Monday 26 December

ANOTHER ROAD

Herod secretly called in the wise men and asked them when they had first seen the star. He told them "Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, let me know. I want to go and worship him too." The wise men listened to what the king said and then left. And the star they had seen in the east went on ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. They were thrilled and excited to see the star. When the men went into the house and saw the child with Mary, his mother, they knelt down and worshiped him. They' took out their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh and gave them to him. Later they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, and they went back home by another road.

Matthew 2:7-12

Reflect on the word **COURAGE** for a few moments.

The wise men walked away. They didn't stop to confer, take a vote and look for consensus before they took another road. They had the courage to take a risk. They risked angering Herod when they disobeyed his orders.

Risk-taking needs wisdom, courage and action. Would we have the courage to act when we hear cries for help coming from a neighbor? Have the wisdom to speak the right words when we find ourselves in a sexist or racist conversation? To offer our help to a young mum at her wits end with a distraught child in a shop? Often we do know what we should do, or what action we'd like to take. Taking the first step could be a risk, so we hold back or look the other way.

The wise men listened to the words of Herod and took a risk, so a baby and parents would be safe.

Give me the wisdom, God, to know what risks I should take for you. Give me the courage to act according to your will.

Tuesday 27 December

NO ONE KNOWS HIM

*The true light that shines on everyone was coming into the world.
The Word was in the world, but no one knew him,
though God had made the world with his Word.
He came into his own world but his own nation did not welcome him.
Yet some people accepted him and put their faith in him.
So he gave them the right to be the children of God.*

John 1: 9-12

Reflect on the word **RECOLLECTION** for a few moments.

Another Christmas is over and I am exhausted, Lord. There was so much food — and so much left over. Gifts — some still lie unopened. There was so much energy — now it feels so flat. And I am alone.

I am thankful for the memories that will last me till the next Christmas season and I am filled with warmth when I think of the stories that were shared. I can't help wondering if it was unfair for us to have so much yesterday when I didn't give a thought to the migrant family who moved into the street. I wonder what they did yesterday. Then again, would they know what Christmas is about?

As I sit and reflect I wonder: Did you sit at my table on Christmas day? Did you wish to share your story as we told our own? Did we miss being aware of your presence Lord?

I wonder

God of the Living Word, forgive me when I don't hear your voice. Forgive me for making time to celebrate Christmas, yet forgetting you.

Wednesday 28 December

I HAVE GUIDED YOU

My child, if you listen and obey my teachings, you will live a long time. I have shown you the way that makes sense; I have guided you along the right path. Your road won't be blocked, and you won't stumble when you run. Hold firmly to my teaching and never let go. It will mean life for you.
Proverbs 4: 10-13.

Reflect on the words **A JOURNEY** for a few moments.

Another year draws to a close. Sometimes it's been a smooth journey and sometimes it has taken me over rocky places, detours and hidden pathways. There have been days of excitement and celebration. And then there were days when storm clouds shut out the sun and the song of the birds was lost in the sound of thunder.

I can recall travelling alone at times, but then memory brings to mind family and friends who accompanied me. I can recall different points in my journey over the year, experiences and events that were different, yet were necessary to bring me to where I am today.

Spend a few more moments reflecting on what you brought along on your journey and what you remember leaving behind.

Pause to ponder and marvel at the ways God has walked with you through the past year.

Could this be a moment of Epiphany – or an 'ahha' moment - for you?

God of my life's journey, I reach out my hands to you and invite you to continue journeying with me into the year ahead.

Thursday 29 December

BE GLAD AND CELEBRATE!

*Tell the heavens and the earth to be glad and celebrate!
Command the ocean to roar with all of its creatures
and the fields to rejoice with all of their crops.
Then every tree in the forest will sing joyful songs to the LORD.
He is coming to judge all people on earth with fairness and truth.*

Psalm 96: 11-13

Reflect on the word **PRAISE** for a few moments.

My pulses join in a dance of praise! My senses feel celebration! Excitement makes me smile!

The North wind dances through wattle and gum.
The dry red earth sends spirals of dust whirling
The Kangaroo and the dingo forage for food.
The sight of birds flying to nest for the night brings me peace.

There is a calmness in the air as parrots and cockatoos, billabongs and bushlands, gardens and paddocks settle down for the night. There is the sound of traffic carrying people home. Tempting smells from a BBQ. A dad calling his children in for dinner. The burst of myriads of colours from fireworks. The year draws to a close.

I will welcome the New Year and rejoice!
I will reach out to opportunities and experiences with joy!
I will know that God walks with me!

Whether I am alone or in a crowd I worship you and celebrate all that you are to me. Thank you God!

SELECTED BIBLE PASSAGES.

The Bible passages used in the meditations form the basis for each day's reflections. A brief insight into the background of each book from which passages were selected remind us that the Bible spans the understanding of time and space. It reveals the God of history and the God for today.

THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES.

Proverbs: The Book is a collection of sayings used in ancient Israel to teach God's people how to live right. One of its main teachings is that all wisdom is a gift from God.

The Psalms: Psalms are similar to hymns of praise, thanksgiving, celebration, sorrow and the desire to understand the God of history. The selected verses prepare us for the coming of the Messiah – the Christ Child.

Isaiah: The Book of Isaiah is sometimes referred to as 'The Gospel within the Old Testament'. The utterances read as pointers to the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus. Selected verses are read aloud during Advent services of worship.

Jeremiah: The prophet Jeremiah was one of the leading prophetic voices in the Kingdom of Judah. He challenged Judah on political, social, economic and religious injustices. He also spoke of a time when there would be peace and justice in the Kingdom. The selected verses predict the choice of a king from the family of King David, who would rule with honesty and justice. These predictions are echoed in times of preparation for the birth of Jesus.

Micah: The Book of Micah is the sixth book in a collection of twelve prophetic writings by a group known as Minor Prophets. Micah lived around the 745 BCE. He writes of a time of peace with justice, led by a shepherd who will come out of Bethlehem. Gospel writers quote Micah when writing of the birth of Jesus.

THE NEW TESTAMENT

Matthew: The writer places the birth of Jesus within a historical perspective, beginning with a genealogy of the house of Abraham and David. Writing for a Jewish audience he includes events that are not recorded in Luke. By reading the differences between these two Gospels, there is a more rounded account of the events relating to the birth of Jesus.

Luke: The Gospel of Luke was written many years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Infancy Narratives used in the meditations reflect the significance of the birth of Jesus in a growing Gentile world.

John: This Gospel records the birth of Jesus from a theological perspective. Within images of light and darkness, the metaphysical and the physical, the writer creates a theology for the arrival of the Messiah, which resonates to this day.

Hebrews: The Letter to the Hebrews was written in the first century after the birth of Jesus. The writer addresses the many questions raised by both Jews and Gentiles relating to their new faith as Christians. The central theme in the letter is faith in Jesus, who offers hope and proof of things to come that cannot be seen.

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