# Advent Worship Sermon Sparks

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## Advent 1C

## **Sermon Topic 1**

### Happy New Year! Ancient-Future Advent Hope

Jeremiah 33:14–16

This OT prophetic text plays with several different layers of time. 33:14*a* reads “the time is coming, declares the Lord,” which would have been in the future tense for Jeremiah’s listeners but it is a historical fact for us as postmodern followers of Christ. Similarly, 33:14*b*–15 gives two divine promises for the future: “when I (the Lord) will fulfill my gracious promise with the people of Israel and Judah. In those days and at that time, I will raise up a righteous branch from David’s line, who will do what is just and right in the land.” Jeremiah’s audience could only anticipate the fulfillment of that prophetic promise, while your twenty-first century congregants are familiar with the incarnate Jesus as the cornerstone of their spiritual history.

We do still anticipate the second coming of Christ, and that anticipation allows the preacher to speak of the past (ancient prophecies such as Jeremiah 33:14–16 have been fulfilled in Christ), the present (living with the hope that Christ extends to us, and to all believers each and every day as we journey through the Advent season), and the future (anticipating the glorious return of Christ when time itself will end, and God will make all things new). Offering illustrations from physics (string theory, the multiverse) or from popular TV shows/movies such as *Avengers: End Game*, *Stranger Things*, *Star Trek*, or *The Three Body Problem* could help familiarize congregants with the interplay of time, especially the differences between *chronos* and *kairos* time. See also 2 Peter 3:8–9, where the writer explains that for God, one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like a day, that God is patient toward humanity, not wanting anyone to perish, and then describing what will happen on the “day of the Lord.”

Other Scriptural resources about time:

* Colossians 4:5–6 (how Christians ought to use their time on Earth)
* Ecclesiastes 3:11 (God as the author of time, God putting a longing for eternity into the hearts of humans)
* 1 Thessalonians 5:1–3 (times and seasons, the day of the Lord being unexpected)
* Psalms 39:5–6 (the fleeting, temporal nature of human life)
* Acts 1:7 (the authority over knowledge, history, and even time itself is ascribed to God)

Advent is the liturgical season of the church calendar that asks us to focus on both actively remembering what God has done for humanity in the past (Greek: *anamnesis*) and what God has promised to do for us in the future (Greek: *prolepsis*). As Christians, we are called to “make present” or “make real” what God has done. As Robert Webber writes, “Biblical remembering is much more than an intellectual recalling. Biblical remembering brings God’s saving events to mind, body, and soul. Biblical remembering makes the power and the saving effect of the event present to the worshiping community.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Anticipating God’s promised actions in the future (*prolepsis)* is one of the key themes of Advent, and this eschatological focus is a fitting entry point for proclamations of Advent hope, grounded in the grace of Jesus. God has been faithful to humanity in the past, offering us salvation through the Incarnation, and showing us the way of Love through the life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Son. God will be faithful to humanity in the future, when Christ returns and God rescues the entire created order, establishing the kingdom of God over all of heaven and earth. We live in the liminal space of our contemporary “now”, as people who were born in-between these two times, already claiming the space for grace that has been offered to us in Jesus, but also living in the not-yet of his future return, and longing for the completion of God’s kingdom on earth. One possible framework for us, then, would be to imagine the eschaton as that future place and time when the Lord’s prayer is fulfilled, and God’s will is completely done, “on Earth, as it is in heaven.”

According to Fleming Rutledge, Advent is “the *apocalyptic season par excellence* because it is grounded in this essential affirmation: God is the active agent in creation and redemption.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Contemporary illustrations about apocalyptic living abound (for example, movies and TV shows like *The Walking Dead*, *Anna and the Apocalypse*, *The Book of Eli*, *The Day After Tomorrow*, *Greenland*, *Fallout*, and *Snowpiercer*) and share a common theme, unveiling the character of the protagonist as they face catastrophic difficulties at the hands of natural or human-made climate disasters, plagues, zombies, or aliens. How might you relate these fictional human struggles to the unveiling of God’s biblical apocalypse at the end of time (the root of the Greek term for apocalypse means revelation, to uncover, lay bare, or to disclose).

Advent marks the beginning of the church calendar year. Discuss New Year’s resolutions we make on January 1st, (to lose weight, to focus on physical fitness, to take time for self-care, to be kinder to our spouse or children, to finally “get organized,” to write in a reflective journal on a daily basis, to drink more water or less alcohol, etc.), and how the vast majority of resolutions we try to achieve by willpower alone are abandoned after a week or two. What are the spiritual resolutions we might want to make as Advent begins? (Deepen our prayer practices, making more space for God’s grace in our lives, living out the United Church call to deep spirituality, bold discipleship, and daring justice, doing an accessibility audit—not just of our physical building, but also our programs and outreach priorities?) What resources might we put into place to help us fulfill our spiritual resolutions? What faith-based tools can empower our efforts?

“Hoping against hope means trusting in the God who raises the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist(Romans 4:17). This is the truly radical nature of the Advent promise, which sweeps away cheap comforts and superficial reassurances and, in the midst of the most world-overturning circumstances, still testifies that Behold, I am coming soon! … I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end (Revelation 22:12–13).”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Jeremiah’s audience were in exile. God promises to restore the people, speaking words of hope and promise to them in the midst of their disappointment, disruption, difficulty, and perhaps even despair. Hope is possible for us as believers (despite the most difficult of circumstances individually and collectively) because the One in whom we hope is faithful and compassionate.

## Sermon Topic 2

### Hanging In, Hanging On (to Hope)

Scriptural Focus: Psalm 25:1–10

The first ten verses of Psalm 25 offer us words of petition, praise, and promise. This psalm has historically been categorized as a lament because it expresses grief in the presence of God, however, the text also reflects meaningfully on God’s goodness. The psalmist is very honest about their individual needs, and this text provides a clear entry point for the preacher to address the unrealistic social expectations for North Americans throughout the month of December, and the variety of falsehoods and idolatries we are invited to participate in (spending more money than we, or the planet, can afford, pretending that we love the festivities of the season when we don’t, overscheduling ourselves, trying to attain status with just the right outfit, haircut, or date for the office Christmas party, etc.). The Advent season invites us to be truthful, to be taught by God, and to be led into truth with humility and according to God’s steadfast love, mercy, and faithfulness. What might it look like to keep a “holy Advent” with penitential hearts, this year? Historically, Advent was a reflective season of preparation (much like Lent).

Psalm 25 gives us an example of a God-follower who is honest about their needs, and who doesn’t pretend that all is well when it isn’t. How honest are we with God about our needs? Are we willing to be vulnerable before our Maker? What conditions did we attach to our answer?

Verse nine of the text expresses confidence that God will “lead the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way”.People who live with disabilities are often trapped in poverty; how might the church respond to the practical needs of these people? If those who live in humble physical, intellectual, and/or financial circumstances are led by God, what spiritual insights might congregants with disabilities share with the church, especially among congregations that consider themselves to be largely able-bodied, healthy, and financially comfortable? How might these spiritual insights be shared without becoming “inspirational porn”[[4]](#footnote-4)? What kind of preparatory work (both practical and spiritual) may be needed for healthy sharing to happen?

I am often asked by those who have prayed for me, or those who know that I am chronically ill, how I am feeling. I want to be truthful with people, but I also don’t want to share every detail of my health or symptoms, so most times, I will reply with something like “I’m hanging in, thanks.” For me, this response offers three advantages: first, it gives the inquirer a truthful, but suitably vague report of my health, allowing me to retain some privacy. Second, it allows me to psychologically maintain a stance of reasonable hope (rather than a pseudo-Pollyanna, super-saccharine perkiness) instead of invoking the feelings of despair that sharing the progression of my multiple chronic, degenerative diseases repeatedly might promote. Third, it reminds me that I am not alone in my difficulties, and that my circumstances, whether comfortable or challenging, are not the final arbiter of my worth or value. I’m *capable* of “hanging IN” (enduring) despite constant, gradually worsening, severe pain and suffering over the span of many years, *because* I am “hanging ON” to God. I’m clinging to the promises of Scriptural texts just like Psalm 25:1–10, and it is the *hope* that I have received through my new life in Jesus that keeps me moving forward each day, no matter how tough my situation becomes.

Walter Brueggemann comments on Psalm 25, writing that “humanness is pervasively hope-filled, not in the sense of buoyant, unreflective optimism, but in a conviction that individual human destiny is powerfully presided over by this One who wills good and works that good …. Yahweh is not *instrumental* to the hope of Israel, but Yahweh is in fact the very *substance* of that hope.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Romans 5:1–5 offers an instructive word about hope from the New Testament. We do not “glory in our sufferings” for their own sake, as if a “gold star” could be given to the person with the most traumatic personal circumstance or the most painful medical diagnosis! We glory in our sufferings because those difficulties can lead us further on the path to spiritual maturity, through the development of perseverance, character, and then to the kind of hope that does not disappoint us, no matter what happens, because it is hope that is grounded in, and fulfilled by Jesus. The preacher might consider beginning with the psalmist’s expression of hope in God, and then locate the fulfillment of our hope in Emmanuel.

## Sermon Topic 3

## Waiting with Hope, Waiting in Prayer”

1 Thessalonians 3:9–13

Biblical scholars believe that this was likely Paul’s first letter, probably written after his journey to Thessalonica in 49 CE.[[6]](#footnote-6) Because it is such an early written record, it gives preachers a fascinating glimpse into a fledgling Christian community “as it struggled to grasp the wonderful and bewildering future inaugurated by the risen Christ … (1 Thessalonians) provides a view into the witness, proclamation, and practice of the nascent Christian church.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

This community was expecting that the second coming of Christ was imminent. Paul offered them an expression of compassion and love, grounded in the Lord’s love (vs 12) as a model for the community to emulate while they waited with expectant hearts for Christ’s Parousia.

Just like our United Church congregations during Advent, the first century author of this letter was also waiting. Paul’s first visit to Thessalonica was mixed, at best (see Acts 17), so he sent Timothy back to the community to check in on them, and then Paul had to wait to hear Timothy’s report of their spiritual progress. Timothy shares a positive report, and Paul responds in his letter by praising God and by offering continual prayer for them (1 Thessalonians 3:9–10).

Praise and Prayer are two effective responses that we can draw on when facing many different kinds of difficult circumstances, whether it’s an adult who is anxiously waiting for the results of a suspicious biopsy or a disabled child waiting to be included in their elementary gym class, a university student waiting to see if their desperately needed student loan was approved or an elder waiting for a memory care unit bed for their spouse, a job applicant waiting for an interview, agonizing over their decision not to disclose their diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder because they fear they’ll be discriminated against, again … whether we are able-bodied or physically disabled, sick or healthy, young or old, economically disadvantaged or comfortable, we are going to encounter difficulties in this life, and responding by praising God and abiding in prayer can help us keep our human problems in proper (temporal) perspective.

Hope in Christ is the foundational spiritual gift that renders us capable of waiting with expectant, hopeful hearts, whether that waiting is for Advent, for a difficult circumstance to end, or waiting *in,* and faithfully bearing witness to God’s goodness *through* seasons of intractable suffering, illness, caregiving, and pain.

1 Thessalonians 3:12 illustrates the spiritual fuel that Paul believes will animate the growth of the church and expand the believers’ capacity for love - not only for one another, but also for everyone in their community (“for everyone”), and that spiritual fuel is not located in self-confidence or self-discipline, nor can it be found by “living our best lives now” or any other pseudo-psychological self-help program. No! For Paul, the spiritual fuel that makes disciples of Jesus *capable* of the kind of love that expresses “deep spirituality, bold discipleship, and daring justice” (see the United Church [Call and Vision](https://united-church.ca/community-and-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/our-call-and-vision)) is the very love *of* Christ himself. We cannot manufacture this kind of love ourselves, no matter how many church programs we attend or how many self-help books we read! The power of transformative, church-building and world-healing, “capital L” Love can only come from the Lord. That’s very good news for us, however, because God delights in sharing that divine Love with us!

It is the Love we encounter in Jesus Christ that causes our hearts to be strengthened (vs 13*a*) and that same Love that makes it *possible* for us to be “blameless in holiness before our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his people” (vs 13*b*).

There have been some toxic ideas about “works righteousness” in our pews and pulpits over the last couple of centuries, and whether you blame our Protestant work ethic or the Enlightenment, our consumptive habits or our late capitalist societal pressures for our poor theologies, it might be helpful for the preacher to emphasize that the concept of being “blameless in holiness” does not depend on the productivity or socioeconomic status of their congregants! People with disabilities may feel particularly unable to reach Paul’s lofty goal, but the idea of attaining perfect holiness is also likely to make many “healthy and wealthy” people feel uncomfortable or wholly inadequate to the task, at least, in their own strength and power.

Thank God, this is where Jesus “makes space for grace!” We can live and move and have our being in the confident hope that Jesus does not condemn us when we fall short of the glory of God and stumble in our daily attitudes and actions (see Acts 17:28, Rom 15:13, and Rom 3:23–24). We are empowered by the Holy Spirit, who fuels our growth in holiness and who encourages us through the gift of hope, in Christ.

This gift of hope is nurtured in our hearts and minds by the giving of thanks and praise to God, and by the habit of constant prayer (day and night). This spiritual fuel is available to all congregants, at all times, but it is especially powerful and effective during seasons of suffering. The preacher might speak about prayers of lament as an important part of praise (see the notes about Psalm 25 above; you might consider using the musical setting of the Advent 1C Psalm “In You, We Hope, We Trust” by Lisa Waites during the sermon or as a prayer response.

Verse 13c describes the coming of the Lord Jesus “with all of his people.” This idea of the great cloud of heavenly witnesses (see Hebrews 12:1–2) could be tied in with All Saints/Reign of Christ Sunday, drawing on the concept that, as Christians, even when we feel lonely or anxious, we are never alone, never separated from the saints, and never forsaken by God, who has promised to remain with us until the end of the age (see Deuteronomy 31:8, Psalms 46:1, Matthew 28:20, Hebrews 13:5). This companionship allows us to wait for Christ’s return with hopeful, prayerful hearts.

## Sermon Topic 4

### It’s the End of the World as We Know It (Kingdom Living in Troubled Times)

Luke 21:25–36

Consider playing a clip of the R.E.M. song “It’s the End of the World as We Know It (and I Feel Fine)” to begin the sermon, then connect our current angst about the climate emergency, the intensification of conflicts in Ukraine, Gaza/Israel, and elsewhere with the “troubled times” illustrated by the gospel text.

This Advent text opens with a scene of apocalyptic terror; Jesus declares in vs 26 that “People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.” I’ve never encountered “Faint with Fear and Foreboding” as the text on the front of a seasonal greeting card, but I guess it *could* work, especially if the sentiment on the inside of the card was “Have a Holy Advent” instead of “Merry Christmas!” The cognitive dissonance and distress provoked by this text is valuable to explore, and humour is one possible entry point into the conversation.

The connections between this gospel passage and our current environmental destruction/the effects of the climate crisis are both obvious and urgent. Stats could be shared about the “excess deaths” already impacting human populations, the rising global extinction rates, habitat disruptions, and reproductive harms affecting animals and insects, and the geo-political and socio-economic turmoil that is already affecting Canadians (illustrations from the news in 2024 include catastrophic forest fires and mudslides, floods, droughts, and intensifying rain events, hailstorms, tornadoes, and hurricanes) and there are also plenty of international examples.

Noticing the present acceleration of climate crisis effects can be compared to vs 29–31 of the gospel passage, where Jesus compares the fig tree leafing out in season to the signs of the coming kingdom of God; the government of Canada has a practical checklist that details disaster preparedness for citizens (72 hours of food, water and medication, important documents, supplies for infants and elders, vulnerable persons and pets, etc.); what might we include on our “spiritual preparedness” list so that we are ready for Christ’s second coming?

Verse 28 commands believers to “*stand up and raise your heads*, because your redemption is drawing near.” Verse 36 offers a similarly ableist instruction, telling Christ’s followers to “be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place and to *stand* before the Son of Man.” What do these two texts imply for persons who are unable to physically stand, or those who lack the muscle control or physical strength to “raise their heads?” Persons living with disabilities have been excluded from biblical texts for centuries, and, as a denomination committed to becoming anti-ableist, preachers within the United Church of Canada can model a more inclusive approach by either substituting other words that aren’t so explicitly ableist, or by expanding on the biblical text. Verse 28 could be rendered as “be alert, pay attention” and vs 36 could be changed to “to bear up” or “to be found acceptable.”

Both here in Canada[[8]](#footnote-8), and around the globe, most people who live with disabilities earn substantially less than their non-disabled peers, and many disabled workers struggle financially. Canadians with moderate or severe disabilities live in poverty at more than twice the rate of non-disabled or mildly disabled Canadians.[[9]](#footnote-9) Given the barriers to employment, the reduced earning potential of disabled workers, and the high rates of poverty among disabled youths and adults who are trying to subsist on inadequate long-term disability payments from employers or the pittance provided by provincial social assistance plans, it seems impossible for Christians living with disabilities to NOT have our “hearts weighed down” or to not be concerned about “the worries of this life” (vs 34). How can UCC communities of faith offer meaningful support[[10]](#footnote-10) to disabled congregants who are living in poverty? Have you considered practical, financial, and spiritual options? How might you reduce barriers to employment?

People with disabilities belong in the Kingdom of God, but we have not always been welcomed in our local church communities. Consider the Body of Christ imagery in 1 Corinthians 12, particularly vs 22–23, where the parts of the body that “seem to be weaker are all the more necessary” and “our less presentable parts are treated with greater propriety;” how can we identify and offer meaningful support to people with disabilities in our communities of faith? How might we also identify and receive meaningful support *from* people with disabilities in our communities of faith? We are not solely human containers of neediness! People with disabilities also enter United Churches all across this country with a vast array of gifts to offer and talents to share. Please don’t overlook our practical and spiritual gifts!

# Advent 2C Sermon Sparks

## Sermon Topic 1

### Jesus, Our Living Laundry Detergent

Malachi 3:1–4

Biblical Scholars describe the book of Malachi as being from the “Second Temple period,” which has also been commonly referred to as “postexilic times.” Although the authorship and age of the book has not been unambiguously established, there is consensus that the writer was a minor prophet, and that the intended audience was a community of postexilic Jews who had returned to the land of Judah.[[11]](#footnote-11)

There are two broad themes addressed in this brief pericope: first, the writer addresses God’s judgment, the “Day of the Lord,” and a brief explanation detailing the nature of God’s justice, and secondly, the ways that God will purify God’s people.[[12]](#footnote-12) Notice that throughout both interwoven themes, the focus is always about the actions of the Divine, i.e., God’s righteous judgment of the world, God’s absolute and unerring justice, God’s purification of God’s beloved people … the response of the community to these Divine actions occurs at the very end of the text (vs 4).

Verse 2 describes a mixture of human anticipation and apprehension at the prospect of that great and terrible day; there are some aspects of Malachi’s message that sound like good news to us, but other parts seem downright *apocalyptic* (from the Greek, meaning “unveiling” or “revealing”) in a terrifying, zombies-and-aliens and R.E.M.’s song “It’s the End of the World as We Know It” sort of sense (and the text writer is definitely NOT feeling fine!) “*But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap...”* (Malachi 3:2–4)

“Enduring” the day of the Lord does not sound like there is much cause for celebratory worship; to put it in contemporary terms, it sounds more like the writer was describing an impending pap smear or colonoscopy—these are important, perhaps even life-saving medical procedures, and we know that they’re “good for us,” but most of us would say that we *endure* these sorts of appointments, that we view them as procedures to “get through,” not something we look forward to with happy anticipation!

There is an overtly ableist comment in vs 2*b* (“who can **stand** when he appears?”*).* What message does this text convey to worshipers who are unable to physically stand? Persons living with disabilities have been excluded from biblical texts for many centuries. As a denomination committed to becoming anti-ableist and fully accessible, preachers within the United Church of Canada can model a more inclusive approach by either substituting words that aren’t ableist, or by expanding on the biblical text to include those with physical differences. This phrase in Malachi 3:2*b* could be rendered as “who can ***withstand it***when he appears?” One non-physical alternative that could be substituted in vs 2*b* is “But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can ***tolerate God’s presence*** when he appears?”

Verse 2*c—*“For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap”—needs some contextualization, particularly for Western Canadians who endured a summer filled with air quality advisories, evacuation orders, and losses of homes and churches due to out-of-control wildfires. A refiner’s fire is not at all like a wildfire! It is contained and properly ventilated, it is under the direct control of the metallurgist at all times, and is meant only to improve the metal being worked on; it burns away only the impurities of the precious metals, and when the process is complete, the gold or silver item is of greater worth, value, and purity than it was before being refined. When God refines our hearts, it is a similarly precise, well-controlled process that has been designed to improve us through the power of the Holy Spirit, increasing our worth and beauty, transforming us into better images of Christ, and purifying our hearts and lives, for the glory of God, the health of the church, and the peace of this world that God so loves, and is working in and through us (and others) to restore.

God’s refining power is described as being like fullers’ soap, an agent that cleanses us and removes the spiritual “dirt” that we’ve accumulated. When we act like reluctant (but filthy) children who do not want to have a bath (despite desperately needing one after a week-long off-grid camping trip), what are saying about our relationship with God? Are we expressing a lack of trust in God’s gentleness or faithfulness? Do we think that we’re going to get shampoo in our eyes? Do we fear our “Heavenly Fuller” because we know we’ll be brought to account, that we’ll have to face up to the condition of the bathwater after God has finished scrubbing us clean, and we secretly think that we’ll be ashamed of how “dirty” our lives have become, how stubborn the ring around the tub seems, even after we let the water go down the drain?

Or maybe we are offended by the idea of NEEDING a bath in the first place! Maybe we think we look and smell perfectly fine, that we’re clean enough through our own human efforts at righteousness, and we think that’s sufficient; perhaps we are content with our comfortable spiritual lives too, and we don’t think we need or want God’s radical cleansing, either. Perhaps we’ve adopted Queen Elizabeth I’s view about personal hygiene, who was often quoted as saying, “I take a bath once a month, whether I need it, or not.” It does take a certain measure of humility for us to admit that we have all “sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (See Romans 3:23–24), that we actually DO need God’s cleansing and grace, which we receive through Jesus, who is our divine laundry soap. Emmanuel, God-with-us, the source of all grace and truth, is the source of our human sanctification.

Christian leaders like Michael Hodgin (and others) have adapted a traditional Jewish folktale that offers a relevant illustration for this sermon topic. In the Christian version of the story, a minister (originally a rabbi) and a soap maker are taking a walk together, wandering through the streets of their city. The soap maker is feeling discouraged about his faith, and the state of the world, and he says to the minister, “Crime rates are up, and morals are down; people seem to do whatever they want, whenever they want! Just consider all of the violence and brokenness in our own neighbourhood! I’m telling you, people are rotten, and the world is filled with suffering even after 2,000 years of Christianity. I’ve got this nagging question keeping me awake at night: what’s the use of the gospel?”

The minister didn’t reply for a few minutes, until the pair walked past an utterly filthy young child who was covered in mud from her head to her toes as she happily made a row of mudpies lined up beside a large puddle. Seizing the opportunity, the minister turned to her friend and said, “Just look around at all this dirt and mud! Did you notice how filthy that child is, the one we just walked past? Well, your family has been manufacturing soap for hundreds of years, yet that child is still absolutely covered in dirt and mud! I’ve got this question bothering me: what’s the use of soap?!” The soap maker immediately protested, saying “Wait a minute, that’s not fair! Everyone knows that soap is only effective when it’s used!” “Exactly,” said the minister. “Exactly.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

The anticipation mixed with apprehension that we may feel about the Day of the Lord can be illustrated by comparing it to the anticipation mixed with apprehension that expectant parents feel for the nine months (or more!) that it takes to gestate a human baby. Even though pregnancy is considered a positive source of stress (referred to by sociologists as *eustress*, rather than *distress*)[[14]](#footnote-14) the birth of a child still ranks second **highest** on the “top ten” list of major life stresses, and only the death of an immediate family member is more stressful than the birth of a child. Other major life stressors include starting a new job (or losing your current one), getting married (or divorced), moving into a new home/community (or being evicted/shamed into leaving your current address), having a chronic illness yourself, or providing care to someone who is ill, injured, and/or disabled.[[15]](#footnote-15)

If you’d like to make an explicit connection between the anticipation/apprehension of pregnancy, labour, and childbirth with the deeply entrenched ableism in Canadian society, ask your people to finish this sentence by filling in the blank: family members, friends, coworkers, and congregants alike will frequently ask the expectant couple the following question: “Are you hoping that the baby will be a boy, or a girl?” and at least nine times out of ten, the answer will be “Boy or girl, we don’t care, as long as the baby is \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_! (healthy) Now stop and imagine how that ableist sentiment feels for parents who have given birth to children with spina bifida, cerebral palsy, Down’s Syndrome, or pulmonary valve atresia. If a healthy infant is thought to be the “gold standard,” the “most desirable” outcome, then it certainly is logical to conclude that infants who are born ill or injured are clearly considered less valuable than their healthy peers. Even the medical terms used to describe such conditions suggests that interpretation: a baby with “birth defects” is considered “defective” in some way.

Just like many congenital disorders are outside of the parents’ direct control, no matter how well the mother-to-be eats and drinks, no matter how optimal their stress levels are throughout the gestational period, no matter how detailed their birth plan, so it is true for Malachi’s original audience (and also for us as contemporary believers) that God’s promise of covenantal restoration on the Day of the Lord is outside of our control. Both the promise and its’ eventual fulfillment (now, for those of us who live after the incarnation of Christ, and also in the future (when Christ will return and time itself will end) belong *to* God, not to us!

What needs refining/cleansing in our own personal lives? What about in the life of our local congregation? What might God want to refine/cleanse in our geographical region? How about in the national church? The global Body of Christ? In what areas are we feeling convicted?

For additional resources related to this topic, consider using the responsive reading that Amanda Udis-Kessler has written for Advent 2C, “Come, Peace, to an Unpeaceful World” (see attached Advent Unwrapped 2024 Prayer Resources) and/or “A Liturgy for Disability*”* by Stephanie Tait, in Sarah Bessey, ed. *A Rhythm of Prayer: A Collection of Meditations for Renewal* (New York, NY: Convergent Press, 2021), 78–82.

Sermon Topic 2

### Darkness, Death, Destruction and God’s Path of Peace

Luke 1:68–79 202

This canticle from Zechariah offers thanks to God for John the Baptist. The scriptural text is divided into two main sections, starting with *praise* (vs. 68–75) and then finishing with *prediction* (vs. 76–79).[[16]](#footnote-16) This canticle can function as a celebration of the fulfillment of God’s promises to God’s people as a collective whole, and/or a celebration of an individual’s life (specifically, John the Baptizer’s birth).

Called “The Benedictus,” Zechariah’s very well-known hymn describes the deep peace and wholeness (shalom) of God, the kind of peace that both instantiates and fulfills God’s peaceful purposes for humanity; it’s the creation-healing, passes-all-understanding, child-leading-the-community, wolf-and-lamb-taking-a-nap-together kind of peace that only God can provide.

One creative application of Luke 1:76–77 would be to have an older, male congregant take on the character of Zechariah, reading (or reciting these two verses from memory, “by heart”) from the church lectern as a Sunday School-aged child or youth processes up the aisle toward the chancel, “leading” the adult choir, who follow the child/youth to the front of the church as the Scripture is declared: “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.” Once the adult choir is in place, all children present could be invited to join the adult choir members, making one intergenerational choir facing the congregation, who could then lead the people together, teaching and then singing the Advent 2C Children’s Hymn “God, We Pray for Peace” by Lisa Waites, © 2024[[17]](#footnote-17)

Just like Zechariah’s original audience, we live in a time of global geopolitical upheaval and unpredictability; we may deeply long for peace, but in our heart of hearts, we may expect an outbreak of World War III more than a widespread outbreak of God’s abiding, radical peace. You might give examples of political conflict, such as the events and pressures surrounding the recent American presidential election, and/or the name-calling and lack of respect being observed among our own Canadian federal party leaders this year, such as Conservative Pierre Poilievre repeatedly calling the Prime Minister a “whacko” during question period, and the Liberal Prime Minister replying that Poilievre is a “spineless leader” who is “courting white nationalist groups.”[[18]](#footnote-18) The decorum and professionalism that used to be expected of our federal and provincial/territorial representatives seems to be slipping, as cursing, name-calling, and other “un-parliamentary conduct” appears to be growing more common among parliamentarians and members of the legislative assembly.

Other international conflicts could be named to illustrate the lack of peace in our world today, and our need for God to act, so that we would be “saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us” (Luke 1:71). The invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2022 leaps to mind, especially since Canada has welcomed tens of thousands of Ukrainian refugees who have settled into new homes in nearly every Canadian province and territory. The ongoing conflict between Gaza and Israel, or the civil unrest in Sudan and The Democratic Republic of Congo are also timely, tragic examples of the misery that war inflicts on God’s children.

The violence in Syria and the desperate actions taken by the Hadhad family to flee the war and rebuild their lives and livelihood offers a heartwarming story with a Canadian connection. The Hadhads left Syria after their factory and home were bombed, first spending three years in Lebanon as refugees, and then coming to Antigonish, Nova Scotia, where they re-established their family business as confectioners, renaming their company “Peace by Chocolate” and opening a tiny storefront in 2016. Demand for their products was strong, and with the help of several Canadian neighbours and community sponsors, the family was able to build a much larger factory in 2017. [Peace by Chocolate](https://peacebychocolate.ca/) is now a major employer in Antigonish, and their chocolates are sold nationally in grocery chains like Sobeys, at specialty stores like Ten Thousand Villages, and online. The Hadhad family donates 3–5% of their annual profits to a charity they founded called “Peace on Earth Society.” In their first seven years of business, they have donated well over $600,000 to support national and global peace initiatives.

Another possible resource preachers could use to illuminate Luke 1:79*c* (guiding us in the way of peace) is the contemporary hymn “He Will Hold Me Fast: Hymn for Peace” by Keith and Kristyn Getty, which you can find on [YouTube](https://youtu.be/ZaHUHgN7smU?si=VMgZZpkjpqMswYnc). This multilingual version of the hymn was recorded in Ukrainian, Russian, and English. One of the singers is a woman named Jodi Eareckson Tada. Jodi is a prominent Christian disability rights advocate who has been a wheelchair user for over four decades. It is encouraging that Getty Music chose to not only include a quadriplegic singer in their video, but have featured her in an active, leadership role.

Zechariah loses his ability to hear and speak during Elizabeth’s pregnancy, as an apparent punishment for arguing with the angel who announced this miraculous occurrence. What challenges and opportunities might this time of extended silence have provided for him, practically and spiritually? How might Zechariah have reflected on his life and service of God as he considered how God could offer light to him through the impending birth of his son, the Baptist (Luke 1:79*b*), while he himself was “sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death.”New diagnoses or the loss of previously enjoyed levels of health or function can sometimes feel like an unending source of grief; the preacher could relate Zechariah’s sudden change in sensory input (going from hearing to deafness, and speaking to muteness in an instant) to the grief and the emotional dysregulation that contemporary people with disabilities often encounter. How does the promise of God’s peace in Emmanuel offer authentic comfort to those of us who mourn the loss of our mobility or immunity, our eyesight or hearing or our ability to speak? What does Emmanuel promise those of us who are facing a future filled with ongoing degeneration, the progression of illnesses, the cumulative loss of functionality and independence? How can the church provide an authentic community of help and hope for sufferers—without sinking into quick-fix pseudo-psychology or “happy-clappy” platitudes?

Zechariah’s life was completely upended by the intrusive Word, the unanticipated interruption of the Holy, and every aspect of his life, from his marriage to his ministry work, his social standing and his community relationships, and even his physical means of receiving and conveying his thoughts were all profoundly changed. Many of us would describe similar circumstances as a period of desolation, perhaps characterized by sadness or even despair, yet Zechariah composes a canticle that bursts forth with barely containable joy.

What is the source of Zechariah’s joy? For this prophet, true peace is found *after* personal control is relinquished, *after*full authority and trust is given to God. When Zechariah’s personal ambitions, ministry projects, social position, and sense of pride are stripped away with his hearing and speech, he learns to depend on God completely. That trusting, intimate dependence on God during a season of vulnerability allows him to fully appreciate God’s faithfulness to God’s people, both in the provision of the ancient covenant, and in the promised birth of Emmanuel, God-with-us, who makes all things new.[[19]](#footnote-19) Zechariah’s own son, John, the Baptizer, will be the bridge between the former covenant and the new one, and this promise to Zechariah and Elizabeth is the source of Zechariah’s joy, and the source of his hopeful song.

Zechariah’s song anticipates the Prince of Peace, who will demonstrate God’s depth of compassion for all people, offering salvation (vs 71, 76), showing mercy (vs 72), rescuing us from enemies (vs. 74*b*) so that we could serve God without fear (vs 74*c*), in holiness and righteousness (vs 75). Christ will rescue the people and forgive their sins (vs 77); that gracious message will be shared through John. Light will shine on those waiting in darkness (vs 79*a*) and those who linger in the shadow of death (vs 79*b*); John will go ahead of the Saviour, preparing his way and telling the people about the path of salvation that is found in Jesus (vs 76).

Sermon Topic 3

### Figuring Out What Really Matters (and What Doesn’t Matter at All)

Philippians 1:3–11

The apostle Paul is writing to the church at Philippi with a tone that suggests both strong emotion and deep intimacy. There are three main theological themes in this pericope that the preacher could use to organize their sermon into three main points, and they are *remembering*, *rejoicing*, and *relationship*.

**Remembering**: Paul’s recollections are rooted in difficult times that he shared with the believers at Philippi. Bible scholar James H. Evans Jr. argues that Paul’s memories are not merely fond reminiscing. They are the basis of the reality that the whole fledgling Christian community, the early Philippian church, was recalling and celebrating, namely, the person and work of Jesus. Evans claims that “the community of faith is a community of memory because the remembrance of Christ becomes real only in a social context. This is why the memory of (Paul’s) time with his readers elicits thanksgiving.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

**Rejoicing**: Despite the difficulties and persecution that Paul suffered while “defending and confirming the gospel” among them, including being imprisoned (vs 7*c*), Paul’s letter has an unmistakeably joyful tone. That joy does not depend on the willpower, the personal strength, or the character of any individual Christian, of any historical age or circumstance (not even the apostle Paul’s, and certainly not our own, which I am profoundly relieved by!). The source of Paul’s ability to rejoice despite difficult circumstances (and our ability to do the same in our own time and place) is connected to memories of shared trials or tribulations. It is the communal nature of our suffering that we do not experience it alone—but rather, for the sake of, and in the name of Christ—that creates a spiritual form of an “unbreakable bond” between Paul and his original readers, and for us, and our local community of faith, too. We celebrate with confidence God’s good work, begun in us and faithfully continuing to work through us, until the day of Jesus Christ.[[21]](#footnote-21) (vs 6*b–*6*c*)

**Relationship**: Paul grounds his relationship with the Philippian believers in “the day of Jesus Christ,” and he develops and sustains a warm, intimate connection with that community of faith, sharing in his letter that he prays fervently on their behalf (vs 4), that he is joyful when he thinks of them, because of their faithful partnership in the gospel (vs 5), that Paul holds them in his heart (vs 7), longs for them (vs 8) and claims that he, Paul, feels the same kind of tender affection for them that Jesus himself feels (vs 8). This is not the kind of letter that you’d send to a casual acquaintance!

Paul knows the community well enough to be able to give them spiritual insight and guidance, like a mentor, a wise professor, or an older sibling might offer: Paul’s advice is that they need the very love of Christ to help them sort out “what really matters” in this life (vs 10), and what doesn’t matter at all.

Related illustration: How many people make a list of “Pros and Cons,” or sketch out a Venn diagram when life presents them with a major decision or opportunity? These tools (or their digital equivalents) are so common because people want to figure out how to “live their best lives now,” how to figure out what really matters, what will benefit them most in any given situation; the flip side, of course, is trying to discern, in advance, what won’t benefit you, and what disastrous decisions should be avoided, at all costs! Similarly, Paul is offering us a kind of spiritual “Venn diagram”, and in the apostle’s version, Jesus takes the place of honour, which is smack dab in the middle! According to Paul’s prayer, it is the very love of Christ that fuels us, that makes us *capable* of transformation (vs9), of growing in knowledge and organizing our lives in the way of righteousness and purity (vs 9–11), so that we can participate in the production of a “harvest of righteousness” through Jesus, for the glory of God (vs 11).

If we use Phil 1:3–11 as our template for righteous living, we’ll have a secret map, a fail-safe spiritual code that will faithfully help us to discern *what really matters in our daily lives, and what doesn’t matter at all* (like stuff and status!) Also, if we organize our daily habits and decisions in the light of the gospel, then we’ll be living with the kind of kingdom priorities in mind that will make a practical difference in our communities now, and will also prepare our hearts and souls for the future.

So then, how are we going to live? What will captivate our hearts and minds? What challenging word (or comforting word) from Paul’s letter might your community of faith need to hear during this Advent season of reflection and preparation?

## Sermon Topic 4

### Making Straight the Crooked? Preparing the Way of the Lord

Luke 3:1–6

John the Baptist interrupts our festive preparations every Advent season with the determination of a party crasher—in the midst of all our seasonal baubles and baking, cards and carols, decorations and demands, John’s prophetic voice insists, in his typically abrupt, direct manner, that we *must* make space for Jesus!

The opening verse of this pericope gives us seven different historical figures (all political), and this has the effect of grounding the good news of the gospel in a tangible, historical place and time. There is an interesting interplay between the historical realities and the Divine, suprahistorical, salvific work that God is announcing to (and through) John, the Baptizer.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Luke 3:2*b* tells us that “the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.” The wilderness can be a place of breathtaking beauty. It can be a harsh and unforgiving landscape. The wilderness can sometimes be a lonely place, too. The text doesn’t explain why John was in the wilderness, or why God chose to share the miraculous news about the advent of the Word to this single, solitary man in that particular location. What the text does reveal, however, is that John responds to this Divine message. Verse 3 says that “He (John) went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins …”

We don’t like to talk about our need for repentance very much, in the United Church of Canada. It makes many of us uncomfortable to even consider referring to ourselves or our congregants as “sinners.” And yet, this is John’s abrasive, irritating word, a word of our need to repent (to be transformed, to change direction, to turn away from ourselves and turn back to God) that is linked to our forgiveness *by* God, through the grace and peace of Jesus. As we will discover in Advent 4, when Mary sings her glorious Magnificat, we must humble ourselves (empty ourselves before God) before God can fill us up with God’s own gracious, redemptive presence. If we are completely full of ourselves, God will send us away, empty-handed (see Luke 1:51–53).

The Greek word we translate as “forgiveness” carries more than the sense of a simple pardon or of excusing poor behaviour; it means “to let go.” God lets go of our sins, offering us marvelous grace and mercy instead, and what else can we do, but respond to God’s gracious invitation and loving action with repentant, obedient hearts.

Contemporary musical illustration: “[Prepare the Way](https://www.reverbnation.com/lisawaites/song/4919384-prepare-the-way)” by Lisa Waites could be used to aurally set a “wilderness” scene in the minds of your congregants; permission is hereby granted by the composer to use this track for non-commercial worship purposes during Advent 2024 (live and online streaming/worship recordings). It could be played directly after the gospel passage is read, before the preacher begins the sermon time, or you might consider printing/projecting the chorus lyrics, and having the congregation join in singing as a musical response to the sermon time, boldly declaring as a community of faith that we will “prepare the way of the Lord” together.

What does it mean to “make straight” the crooked places? A plain sense reading of verses 4–5 could seem quite homophobic and ableist to those of us who do not find “straightness” desirable or attainable. Without a supernatural, miraculous intervention from God, my spine is going to continue to crumble. I have Ankylosing Spondylitis, an inflammatory form of arthritis that is eroding the facet joints and discs in my lumbar spine, causing agonizing, unrelenting, bone-on-bone mechanical, neuropathic, and now chronic inflammatory pain. My feisty grandmother (who had severe scoliosis of her spine) used to tell me (a slouching teenager), “Lisa! Stand up straight, for heaven’s sake!” Straightness goes far beyond having good posture, in this biblical text!

In John’s apocalyptic imagination, the good news of God’s salvific work of forgiveness, in and through Jesus, is the great leveler for everyone, in all times and places, of all abilities and orientations, for “all flesh,” whether gay or straight, well or ill, disabled or able-bodied, female or male, elder or youth … the Messiah will tear down all physical, social, spiritual, and financial barriers, reorienting the entire created order to the kingdom of God, the Divine purposes of peace (*shalom*, wholeness) that God intends for all peoples. This good news is so momentous, that in John’s eschatology, even the landscape is transformed! The mountains will be torn down to fill in the deep valleys, and pleasant paths will be made possible, so that everyone can be included; people who use mobility aids will be able to join the great and glorious throng of people journeying along the way of Jesus, because the “valleys shall be filled, the mountains and hills shall be made low, the crooked made straight, and the rough ways made smooth” (vs 5).

Why does John seem to rhetorically imagine the landscape as one gigantic, level, parking lot, you may ask? That question is answered in vs 6, that “all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” *All* flesh. That means everyone. John’s proclamation about the grace and peace of God, sent to humanity in the person and work of Jesus, is all about tearing down the barriers and boundaries that prevent marginalized peoples from flourishing. John the Baptist is declaring that to “prepare the way of the Lord” is to identify and to tear down the ableist policies and procedures that have kept disabled people from full access and robust participation in our communities, and also in our churches. This prophet isn’t only declaring that we need to adopt a more “daring justice” around ableism, either! In the kingdom of God, there is no place for any of the “isms” (i.e., racism, sexism, ageism, classism) and homophobia—any and all of the artificial human categories that we have used to judge and then elevate or denigrate one another, affording more power and privilege to some people, based on their bank accounts, level of education, skin colour, gender, age, or health, and less to others, based on those same qualifiers. John comes stomping onto our human scene, yelling that all of these categories are ridiculous, wrong, and sinful, and he isn’t shy about telling us that we need to bulldoze them, tearing down those artificial barriers and heavy burdens with repentant hearts that are ablaze with God’s love, all in the service of the gospel, a gospel of grace and profound peace (wholeness, shalom) in Christ.

Core concept: In Christ’s kingdom, everyone belongs, including people living with disabilities.

Contemporary illustration: “Roadbuilding” is a liturgical poem based on Luke 3:1–6 by Heather Pencavel.[[23]](#footnote-23)

In this Advent season of preparation, consider asking what needs to be bulldozed in your own life or in the lives of your congregants. How about the collective life of the church? What needs to be strengthened and improved? Why?

What connections might you draw from John’s passage to the United Church’s commitment to becoming an anti-ableist denomination? What spiritual and practical ideas can you commit to implementing *now* that would “make space for grace” and offer a wider welcome for the people in your community who are living with hidden or visible disabilities?

Is anything (or anyone) preventing you from extending that hospitality in practical ways? Who, what, how, and why is that obstacle still happening? What can you do to dismantle/remove these barriers to accessible worship? Have you considered municipal social wellbeing and development programs, or provincial and federal accessibility funding?

1. Robbert E. Webber, Ancient-Future Worship: Proclaiming and Enacting God’s Narrative (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Fleming Rutledge, *Advent: the Once & Future Coming of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid, 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Inspirational porn, according to disability rights activist Stella Young (who coined the term in 2012), is “the portrayal of people with disabilities as being inspirational to non-disabled people on the basis of life circumstances.” ([www.tulsakids.com](http://www.tulsakids.com)) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), 497. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Abraham Malherbe, *Letters to the Thessalonians,* Anchor Bible Commentary (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. James H Evans, Jr., in David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 1* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. [A list of easy-to-share facts](https://easterseals.ca/en/disability-in-canada-facts-figures/) about the difficulties and barriers that Canadians living with disabilities face. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For some interesting global statistics on disability and poverty, check out the [2023 report](https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/disability-and-health) by the World Health Organization. For Canadian statistics, read the 2023 “[Report Card on Disability Poverty](https://www.disabilitywithoutpoverty.ca/2023-disability-poverty-report-card/)” or look at the employment and income data from the latest (2022) [Stats Can Disability Survey](https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/89-654-x/89-654-x2024001-eng). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. [Information and resources](https://united-church.ca/community-and-faith/being-community/disability-accessibility-and-inclusion) about disability, accessibility and inclusion efforts within The United Church of Canada. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Jennifer Ryan Ayres, in David L. Bartlett and Barbara Taylor Brown, eds., *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 1* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. [This illustration](http://www.ministry127.com) has been adapted by Lisa Waites from Michael Hodgin, *1002 Humourous Illustrations for Public Speaking,* accessed on September 9, 2024 in the article “Soap and the Gospel”. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See Razali Salleh Mohd, *Life Event, Stress and Illness,* as [shared by the National Institutes of Health](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov.com) (originally published in October, 2008) and accessed on September 9, 2024. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See Stephanie Watson’s article [*Causes of Stress*](https://www.webmd.com/balance/causes-of-stress)in the “Health and Balance” section of WebMD, accessed on September 9, 2024. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Rosetta E. Ross in David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 1* (Louisville, KY: Westminister John Knox Press, 2009), 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. “God, We Pray for Peace” words and music © Lisa Waites, 2024. All rights reserved. Permission is hereby granted for non-commercial worship use/streaming in United Church of Canada communities of faith during Advent Unwrapped 2024; please record every use of Lisa’s material to OneLicense. After December 2024, you’ll need to contact the composer directly at lisa.waites1@gmail.com for ongoing copywrite permissions. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. As reported by John Paul Tasker, “[Speaker Kicks Poilievre out of the Commons](https://www.cbc.ca/amp/1.7189600)” for CBC News, April 30, 2024. Accessed on September 9, 2024. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See Randle R. Mixon in David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol.1* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. James H. Evans Jr., in David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol.1* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *Ibid*., 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, in David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol.1* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Geoffrey Duncan, *Shine On, Star of Bethlehem: A Worship Resource for Advent, Christmas and Epiphany*, 3rd ed (Norwich, UK: Canterbury Press, 2004), 10–11. Permission has been kindly granted by Canterbury Press for you to read and reprint this poem for non-commercial worship purposes during Advent 2024 (with attribution), as long as you do not use more than five selections from the book throughout the Advent 2024 season. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)