

# Salford Methodist Circuit



## Advent 2 - Wilderness - 6th December 2020

Ruth Dawson

Hello and welcome to you all, if you are joining for the first time, if you are returning, if you have joined us each week, all are welcome.

### Call to Worship

God, you called and prepared your people through John,  
A strange man in a strange place  
May we, sometimes strange, sometimes not,  
All gather to worship you, O God,  
Who calls all kinds of people to gather together?  
Turning towards the eternal Word  
That does not fade, that welcomes all,  
Making strangers friends forever.  
Amen

In this second week of advent we light our second candle –

*Light a candle in a darkened place,  
In its flame see hope on every face,  
Christ our Saviour will be born,  
Heralding a brand new dawn, so let it burn.*

As we light this candle we remember the prophets, who risked their lives to spread a message of hope: the Saviour will come! This flame reminds us of the joy of his coming.

Advent God, we thank you for all who have risked everything to share the message of your coming in Jesus. Light of our world, shine upon us this day and every day. Amen.

*Stepping through each page of history,  
Prophets contemplate this mystery,  
Celebrate the coming King,  
Words of joy and hope they bring, so let it burn.*

### Hymn: Come, thou long-expected Jesus

*Come, thou long-expected Jesus,  
born to set thy people free,  
from our fears and sins release us,  
let us find our rest in thee.*

*Israel's strength and consolation,  
hope of all the earth thou art,  
dear desire of every nation,*

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*joy of every longing heart.*

*Born thy people to deliver,  
born a child and yet a king,  
born to reign in us for ever,  
now thy gracious kingdom bring.*

*By thine own eternal Spirit  
rule in all our hearts alone;  
by thine all-sufficient merit  
raise us to thy glorious throne*

For our prayers today we are going to hear first from Carolyn Lawrence, Vice President of Methodist conference with her prayer for advent, and then from Deacon Belinda Letby from Hinde St Methodist in the West London Mission Circuit

At this time of Advent, we bring to you our hopes and expectations  
as we reflect on the coming of our Lord Jesus.  
We expected splendour, but you came in poverty,  
now you expect us to generously serve the poor.  
We expected a palace, but you came in a stable,  
now you expect us to shelter those with no home.  
We expected a king, but you came as a baby,  
now you expect us to defend the weak and defenceless  
We expected beauty, but you came in squalor,  
now you expect us to enrich the world of those who find it a harsh place.  
With deep thanks and humble praise, we offer ourselves in your service  
this Advent,  
and for all of our lives. Amen

Loving God,  
in this time of uncertainty and strangeness  
help us to be guided by your wisdom  
and to know the familiarity of your presence with us.  
In our anxiety and fear,  
help us to hear your still, small voice of calm  
and find your peace in our lives.  
In our illness and grief,  
help us to feel your healing and comforting arms around us.  
In our loneliness and despair,  
help us to know your companionship and your hope on this difficult  
journey.  
In all we do and all we are,  
and in whatever we are experiencing right now,  
may we be strengthened and uplifted  
by the knowledge that you share our discomfort, pain and fear

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*and that your love for us is constant.  
Amen.*

## Lord's Prayer

*Our Father, who art in heaven  
Hallowed by thy name;  
Thy kingdom come;  
Thy will be done;  
In earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our trespasses,  
As we forgive those who trespass against us.  
And lead us not into temptation;  
But deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory,  
For ever and ever.  
Amen*

We are going to hear our scripture reading today from Rebecca. The reading is perhaps not one you would first imagine as a reading for Advent, the story of a baby being born, however in this reading Mark introduces us to the Good News of the greatest story ever told!

## **Bible Reading: Mark 1 : 1 - 8**

*The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God,  
as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:  
"I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way"—  
"a voice of one calling in the wilderness,  
'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"*

*And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism  
of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside  
and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins,  
they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. John wore clothing made  
of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts  
and wild honey. And this was his message: "After me comes the one more  
powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop  
down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the  
Holy Spirit."*

Our second hymn is from my box of favourites, and possibly the way in which I first heard the message of my own calling, but that's a story for another day. This hymn always makes me feel special, as if I am being spoken to, singled out so to speak in a crowded room.

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**Hymn: I, the Lord of sea and sky, I have heard my people cry**

*I, the Lord of sea and sky,  
I have heard my people cry.  
All who dwell in dark and sin  
my hand will save.  
I, who made the stars of night,  
I will make their darkness bright.  
Who will bear my light to them?  
Whom shall I send?*

*Here I am, Lord.  
Is it I, Lord?  
I have heard you calling in the night.  
I will go, Lord,  
if you lead me.  
I will hold your people in my heart.*

*I, the Lord of snow and rain,  
I have borne my people's pain;  
I have wept for love of them.  
They turn away.  
I will break their hearts of stone,  
give them hearts for love alone.  
I will speak my word to them.  
Whom shall I send?  
Here I am, Lord...*

*I, the Lord of wind and flame,  
I will tend the poor and lame.  
I will set a feast for them.  
My hand will save.  
Finest bread I will provide  
till their hearts are satisfied.  
I will give my life to them.  
Whom shall I send?  
Here I am, Lord...*

Life pretty much feels like a wilderness at the moment for many of us, it does for me in so many ways. The current pandemic putting restraints on who I can meet and where I can go and when; the isolation both in body and mind; the mixture of 'near normal' at work albeit with masks and distancing and the abnormal of social life. Entering Advent, a season of Hope as John discussed last week, almost seems surreal. I have been at several Zoom groups this past week talking about how we can witness during Advent, even in these times. We have talked of singing carols, where and how, and is it allowed, dressing the outside of church buildings, virtual services.



Our reading today from Mark's Gospel doesn't relate to the advent story at all, no babies being born, no angels, or shepherds, but there is a promise of Good News. Mark introduces his story of the life of Jesus as 'good news'. But before getting to the content of that good news is , he represents John, a messenger sent to prepare the way, who baptizes his people in the wilderness.

Now a key decision for any storyteller is what details to include and what to omit. This matters as much with the Gospels as with any novel. One of the extraordinary things about this week's reading from Mark's Gospel is its urgency. Mark says, 'The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.' And then, with no reference to Jesus' nativity, we're off! Without a hint of Jesus' birth or lineage, we are straight into an account of John the Baptist.

The appearance of the Son of God signals the ultimate end of exile for the people of God. John the Baptist represents the last in a long line of prophets pointing towards the expected Messiah. He urgently calls people to 'repent', to 'turn round' and to turn to God. Mark deploys words of Isaiah from the Old Testament and in doing so, he reiterates the sense of urgency. He wants to remind his readers that to point towards Jesus - to follow him - is an urgent matter. John prepares, as the Isaiah foretold, a 'highway' for the Lord - that is, a way that enables us to get where we need to be quickly.

Now the Romans built their roads straight, making conquering easier, and thus quicker to build their empire. But what of the highway for the Lord that John beseeches us to prepare for? How straight is that? How easy to follow?

Let's go back to that wilderness. What do you think about when you hear the word - wilderness? A bleak uninhabitable landscape? Dusty dirt track? Bare and barren? No end in sight...

What about a metaphorical wilderness? That feeling of being away from the centre of things, feeling of loss or isolation, off the beaten track. This pandemic has perhaps for many of us heighten that sense of wilderness. For some shielding or isolating has been a literal wilderness, for others the sense of social isolation, not just being able to nip out for coffee, or retail therapy has a sense of mindless wilderness.

What is your wilderness, is it a scary place or exciting, is there fore-brooding or anticipation, does it have a purpose or are you constantly pulled down?

My wilderness is mainly metaphorical, I am fortunate to be able to travel to work, to mix and converse with colleagues. I am able, and have access to virtual systems to enable me to communication and catch up with a whole range of people; personal, professional spiritually - though virtual systems are not always all they profess to be! However in the midst of my wilderness is not being able to see my children as I would want, not being able to hide in the back of a warm

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coffee shop with some light reading, or nip to the shops for a preamble. I have watched way too much tv, looking back on programmes as they used to be and often wondering what I actually found in them before. I have, though, interestingly, ignited some old hobbies - knitting, you may have heard, by angels, my hearts, my teddies.

We hear of John the Baptist as a stranger character, strangely dressed, miles from anywhere, rambling and proclaiming; emerging from the wilderness. John is the messenger sent to prepare the way, so we are ready for the Good News. Would we - I often think - have listened today to this strange man appearing from some distant bleak vista? Who do we listen to today? Do we ignore the people on the margins of our society, where John may have come from?

And yet John is the one who prepares the way to the coming of Jesus, just as Advent prepares us for Christmas as if it was the very first Christmas.

Now, I am not very good at preparing, and some of you will know this. I like to jump straight in, and the detail of getting done sort of bores me. Shopping lists... nah, just jump straight into the car and off we go, and you will see the obvious consequence of this recklessness, and yes time and time again there is stuff I forget. I often prepare in a different way, I like to talk (yes you may not have guessed this). I need to talk out my thoughts, working them out loud often helps me to make sense of the thoughts swimming through my head. Often, I do too much talking or thinking and not enough actual putting to paper, frustrating those I work with as they see this as last minute preparation.

Advent takes us through four weeks of preparing, with that expectant waiting, hopeful anticipation and a joyful preparation, all in readiness for that very special guest. This, for me, slows me down, gives me a sense of purpose and direction. It reminds me of the joy in waiting, for inviting God into all aspects of our hearts and lives, all moments, all places, all times.

The Wilderness can be a scary place, a place of flight, of struggle, of lostness – it can also be a place of new beginnings, of new adventures and of new birth. An in-between space.

In preparing I encourage you to reflect on the role of the wilderness in our own lives, especially in our current circumstances, the in between space, think of the past and the lessons we have learned, remembering the good things, as well as the not so good. Think of the present taking time to breathe, and just to be. To hear the whisperings of God. Then thinking of the future, our readiness for a new baby, an old but new story – the Good News! Be prepared, sit in readiness for the coming of a new Babe. Amen.

We are going to hear our second prayers now, from Rev'd Dr Raj Bharat Patta from the United Stockport Circuit. Let us pray



Wake us up to your presence in our lives, O God,  
to know that prayer is an action;  
and help us to rededicate ourselves to acts of love, peace, justice  
and grace for others.  
For in these acts you come alive to us.

Wake us up, O God, to recognise that in Jesus  
you are not a dictatorial God, trying to fix things from above,  
but a collaborating God, working with us  
to heal and transform our world today.

Wake us up, O God, to recognise that this pandemic is not a 'great  
equaliser',  
because people from Black, Asian Minority and Ethnic communities  
are two to three times more likely to die with Coronavirus  
than the general population of the UK.

Wake us up, O God, to understand that our action in prayer  
is to join with you to advocate for  
adequate housing, employment and healthcare for our communities,  
who are living in insecure or overcrowded housing, working on low  
incomes  
or in essential but precarious work.

In the name of Jesus, our neighbour, we pray.  
Amen.

Before we sing our final hymn, I'd like to direct you to some fabulous resources,  
suitable for children and adults, should you be looking for something to tie in  
this Advent to the year 2020 and all that it has been.

The resource entitled 'Then - and Now' has been written by Emily Hoe-Crook,  
student Deacon at the Queen's Foundation in Birmingham. There are five  
different scenes relating the current pandemic to the Christmas Story, for  
example Scene 2 is entitled the contribution of Key workers and the Shepherds  
key role in telling the good news, or Scene 4 Family life in lockdown and Holy  
family isolation at the time of their son's birth.

<https://www.rootsontheweb.com/media/21981/roots-now-and-then.pdf>

Our final hymn is a rousing tune, not found in our current hymn books, which  
reminds us of the powerful message that all over the world there's a mighty  
revelation of the Glory of the Lord:

**Hymn: All Over The World**

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*All over the world the Spirit is moving,  
All over the world, as the prophet said it would be,  
All over the world, there's a mighty revelation  
Of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.*

*All over the church the Spirit is moving,  
All over the church, as the prophet said it would be,  
All over the church, there's a mighty revelation  
Of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.*

*Right here in this place the Spirit is moving,  
Right here in this place, as the prophet said it would be,  
Right here in this place, there's a mighty revelation  
Of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.*

I love that tune, and I am so hoping that those who are able were up and swaying to the rousing tune, indeed a timely reminder that it is right here, in this place, the spirit is moving

And to our final prayer:

God of timelessness. You speak of eternity and the things that do not fade. In all the business of our week, the importance of small things, may we find the time for the things that will last forever, especially loving-kindness. Call us deeper into smaller moments where we can find the light of love in unexpected places. Because You are always to be found in unexpected places.

Amen.

Come Thou Long-expected Jesus - Charles Wesley

I The Lord of Sea and Sky - Daniel L. Schutte

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All Over The World - Roy Turner

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