

GOSPEL WONDERS

A different way to look at the gospels

Advent/Christmas Order of Service

1. Call to worship
2. Hymn 186 – Tell out my Soul
3. Introductory prayer
4. Mary and the Angel
5. Hymn 187 – The Angel Gabriel
6. Ephraim's Story
7. Hymn 182 – On Jordan's bank
8. Reflection
9. Hymn 193 – Born in the night
10. Prayers of intercession
11. Hymn 216 – See him lying on a bed of straw
12. Offering and dedication
13. Hymn 212 – O Come all ye faithful (Omitting verse 6).
14. Blessing

(all hymns from Singing the Faith)

Introductory Prayer

Advent is a time of preparation.

Advent is the time that life is suspended, held in the icy grip of winter.

Advent is time when nature itself rests and prepares itself for the explosion that is spring.

Advent is for us a time when we pause in the hurly burly of life and prepare ourselves to celebrate the greatest event in human history.

Advent, the time when the Lord God reached down and touched the earth.

For a short while the glory that is heaven became one with His people.

In the quiet of the night he came; a gentle child for us.

How can we accept this?

We come today with our thanks for His gift.

With our praise for His glory.

With our worship for his love.

So, Lord we are here before you.

Our hearts are open;

Our ears alert for your word;

Our love laid out for you;

Your praise on our lips.

Come to us Lord Jesus.

Amen.

Mary and the Angel

Characters: Mary, The Angel.

Mary: At the time I lived with my parents, my mother teaching me how to become a good Jewish Housewife.

The day was just like any other until the door opened and there stood this man. He made me jump. He was so quiet that, I must admit, I was a bit scared. There was something a bit unusual about him. You couldn't put a finger on it, but a bit weird.

Anyway, being polite I said "Good morning what do you want?"

At first, he just looked at me then said.

Angel: "Mary! I have a message for you from the Lord God."

Mary: I thought oh dear, another cold caller I wonder what he is selling. I said "Ok! It's nice to meet you but I don't know what you are selling but whatever it is I definitely don't want it and now I am very busy so good bye and please close the door on your way out. Try next door".

But he didn't move. He just stood there and smiled. Now I was just starting to worry a bit with him standing there with that smile on his face I was getting more and more angry. So I said

"Would you please leave right now?"

Angel: "I can't. Not until I have given you my message from the Lord God"

Mary: Well! I thought let's hear the message then maybe he will leave me in peace. So I just stood there all quiet like and waited.

He cleared his throat and began and by the time he had finished I didn't know which end up I was.

He said

Angel: "Mary, You are very special to the Lord God. So special that He has selected you to do a job that has no equal in the whole of history. You have nothing to worry about. He wants you to have a baby: the most important baby ever to be born, His son."

Mary: Well! Ladies how would you respond to that one? 'What a wonderful privilege I can't wait', or would you feel like me? Suddenly frightened to death. Yet having delivered his bombshell he continued to stand there waiting for me

to respond in some way. Eventually all my jumbled-up thoughts came tumbling out. I can't have baby what would people think?, what would my parents think?, how would I look after it?, then the big one, what would Joseph my fiancée think because he would know it wasn't his? For that matter how could I have a baby? It was impossible. For that matter who are you trying to make me believe you have some special way into The Lord Gods' mind? He just stood there letting me rant on. Then when I ran out of breath and stopped, he said.

Angel: "For a start I am an angel, my name is Gabrielle. I am a messenger of God. Please believe me.

Second. Don't worry about how you can and will have a baby, The Lord God's Holy Spirit will take care of that.

As for your parents well, they will be alright and as for Joseph I'll have a word with him so that he understands. All you need to remember is that your baby is the most important baby ever to be born and when He grows up, he is going to change the world.

Mary: Then suddenly he was gone. Just vanished before my eyes. I suppose angels do that. But he left me in a complete whirl. I didn't get any more work done that day.

Ephraim's Story

Good day to you all. For what it's worth my name is Ephraim. I am a business man who in the nature of that business travels around this country quite a bit and have also met a lot of people who, over the years, I've got to know quite well. That is why the last time I was in this area I heard about young Mary and the predicament she has got into. I was sad to hear this because she was always a pleasant sort of person and she really seems in a bit of a mess. I was talking to her parents and they are very worried about her. Evidently, she is talking about the baby being the Lord God's child and refusing to say who the father is. Mind you they are speaking very well of Joseph, her fiancé. Seems that though he accepts that it is not his child he is standing by her and not just dropping her like a hot potato. Under the circumstances that would leave her in a difficult and possibly dangerous position for offending against the law. As a result, the two of them are having a bit of a hard time with the neighbours. From what I heard around the village a lot of the men think he is a fool and that she has tricked him in some way and the women aren't even talking to her, only talking behind her back.

I bumped into Joseph and said that I thought he was doing the right thing and I thought he was to be commended. But what, I asked had made him realise that this was the thing to do. He then started to go on about seeing an angel and received an instruction to support Mary because she needed someone she could trust and rely on.

I thought it all seemed a bit strange but tried to keep a straight face and shook his hand.

Anyway, as I was travelling home the next day, I was thinking about all this and thinking of another couple who had a, I suppose you might say, a spiritual experience. Zachariah and his wife Elizabeth.

Now they were on the elderly side. He was a priest of some sort and every so often went to Jerusalem to do duty in the Temple.

Now last time he was there I was also on business in the big city so had arranged to meet up with him when he had finished so that we could travel home together.

On the due date I had finished what I had to do so went to the Temple to meet up with him. I asked one of the priests where I could find my friend. He directed me with that sort of look which suggested "good luck with that one mate" When I finally found him Zechariah was pale and hollow eyed. He looked pale and shaken and kept opening his mouth but nothing came out. The priest who was looking after him said he had been appointed to go into the Holy of Holies and when he came out from behind the curtain, he was like this. He started to write and just printed 'take me home.' So, I loaded him onto a donkey and away we went.

When we got there, he went straight into the house to Elizabeth and wrote again 'The Lord God says that you are going to have a baby' She just looked at him then at the writing and burst out laughing. What at my age. How on earth is an old hen like me going to have a baby? Twenty or thirty years ago when I was a spring chicken yes but not now. Have you been sniffing those candles?

I left them to it. But the next time I visited sure enough she was going to have a baby. Nobody was more surprised than she was and when Zachariah kept writing down that it would be a boy and that he was to be called John well that caused there to be another serious family discussion. John, you see, wasn't even a family name. Again, I left them to it. A couple of months later I was there again and there in the crib was a bouncing baby boy named John and Oh boy did he have a fine pair of lungs.

Now then! Putting those two stories together I started thinking. There's Mary and Joseph in one village expecting a child and saying that Lord God was specifically involved in its birth. Then here we have Zechariah saying something very much the same. Do you know what I think? I think there is something happening here and these two boys are going to be important to each other somewhere down the road.

(Speak to the congregation) What do you think?

Reflection

So where does that leave us? Today we have seen the start of a story. Certainly, we hear of the prophets saying that a Messiah is coming and that one will come who will announce Him but now it begins.

When the Angel came to Mary and then spoke to Joseph. When Zachariah was given his message in the Holy of Holies. A story begins. These two babies were going to shake the earth with a message so glorious so important that the world would be changed, not just a physical and scientific expansion but a message which would challenge and change the hearts of those who heard it. The world would never be the same again.

Within fifty years, even though both men were no longer with us in a physical, form the message they gave had started to spread across the world. It crossed seas and oceans, the highest of mountain ranges and the hottest and driest of desert. It was proclaimed in mighty cities, in small towns and villages, it was debated by scholars and loved by the untutored. For the unloved it brought love, for the anxious it brought a sense of peace, for the lost a sense of purpose. It became all things to all people in their time and in their need.

All this came because of the courage of two women, one young and one old and the two men who supported them. Our story tells us how given a task that, because of its nature and timing went against all the standards of their time. When asked said Yes.

It must have been quite scary for both of them but they trusted.

But what is this message. It is one of hope. John spoke of forgiveness. Jesus spoke of Love your God and love those around you no matter how near or far away. In return you will know that you are loved by God and that his love is infinite. He will never leave you even in your worst moments, those times when you feel all others have left you and don't understand He is still there and will not leave you alone. This has always been the message and still comes to us today.

All because these two women said Yes. What a truly wonderful moment.

We are now part of a group of people in excess of two and a quarter billion (2,250,000,000)¹ Surely that is amazing. All because they said yes.

¹ Taken from the Lion Handbook of The World's Religions. Page 350.

Prayers of intercession based on Singing the Faith 182

On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry
Announces that the Lord is nigh;
Awake and hearken for He brings
Glad tidings from the King of Kings.

Heavenly father in the rush and activity, help us to remember that we are preparing for the coming of our Saviour.
Let us also remember that many have forgotten or have ever heart the message of the prophets.
Enable us to be today's prophets and to spread the good news of the Christ's coming.

The cleansed be every Christian breast,
And furnished for so great a guest!
Yes, let us each our heart prepare
For Christ to come and enter there.

Father we ask your forgiveness for things said or done that make us unfit to accept our Christ.
It is easy in the tiring rush to lose one's temper or neglect people.
Give us courage to say sorry and make amends.

For thou art our Saviour, Lord
Our refuge, and our great reward;
Without thy grace we waste away
Like flowers that wither and decay.

Father help us to make time to stop and look around to see your wonders and blessings.
To understand what the giving of your greatest gift to us means in our lives.
As we choose presents let us remember that the greatest gift we can give is the knowledge that Christ is come to be the Saviour of the world.

To heal the sick, stretch out Thy hand,
And bid the fallen sinner stand;
Shine forth, and let thy light restore,
Earth's own true loveliness once more.

Heavenly father as your son comes to stretch out His healing hands, we need to remember that the light of His love is reflected by us.
This Christmas help us to reach out to the poor, the lost, the sick, the lonely and all those who need our Lord's love and comfort.

AMEN

Blessing

Love came down at Christmas.

Love came down at Christmas,
Born inside a stall.
Laid within a manger.
Straw to keep it warm.

Love came down at Christmas,
HERE upon Our streets.
Lying in a doorway
Newsprint round its feet.

Love came down at Christmas,
In a new born babe it came.
Wise men and shepherds
Travelled far to learn its Name.

Love came down at Christmas,
Outcast, Sad, Forlorn.
In ignorance they passed it by.
On that joyous Christmas morn.

Love came down at Christmas,
A time to Celebrate.
A saviour sent from heaven
To Save the human race.

Love came down at Christmas,
FIND it in Your Street
In the Lost and in the Lonely
There our precious Lord YOU'LL Meet.

Bren Bissenden. 2007