



Readings for this week:

Monday	Reading 1 Pet 2 Pray for Fay Powell
Tuesday	Reading 1 Pet 3 Pray for Matthew, Charlotte and Joshua Purves
Wednesday	Reading 1 Pet 4-5 Pray for Adriana, Philip, David, Joseph, Pete & Rebecca Richmond
Thursday	Reading 1 Pet 3 Pray for Mark, Rebecca, Charlie & Laney Rotheram
Friday	Reading 2 Pet 2-3 Pray for Nick, Ada and Joshua Savu & family
Saturday	Reading: Catch up Pray for Dean, Simona & Mia Stanfield
Sunday 6 th December	Reading 1 John 1:1-2:14 Pray for Karl & Ingrid Stanfield & family

Prayer requests:

- We pray for *the season of Advent* that we have just entered, and pray that many will discover the Peace of Christ and his Kingdom
- *Wendy Bailey* has been in hospital following a minor stroke but is home again; this has affected her cognitively and we remember her in our prayers
- Our continued and faithful prayers for John B, Jon F, Bill & Sue E & Nat
- We pray for the *Herbert family* at Christine's funeral this Wednesday, 10am.
- We give thanks that *Debi M* is now home from hospital!
- Pray for *David Sykes*, now in Palliative care
- We pray for *all the children* taking part in our services over Christmas
- We give thanks and pray for all front-line NHS staff and other such workers

Welcome the **First Sunday of Advent**, 2020! This is the first of four Sundays Before Christmas Day. We hope and pray that this year many will be able to enjoy Christmas in as near-to- normal a way as possible. Our service this morning will include a kids-spot and of course the traditional lighting of the advent candle, including a prayer at the beginning of our service. There will be a kids-spot and advent candle every Sunday, concluding on Christmas morning. The latter will be a recorded service which you can watch from 10:00 am on Christmas morning for about 20 minutes. We have been working hard to get all these recordings and items prepared in advance; our thanks to all who have and are working on them. There will also be an all-age Nativity presentation. More details later.

We have been looking forward to **Katie** preaching this morning; if you remember Katie was with us a year ago on college placement. She is now in her final year at NTC. If any of you have the NTC devotional ***Advent to Epiphany: Reflections for the season written by people of Nazarene Theological College***, then you will know that it commences today with the opening reading on page 4. It concludes with Epiphany on 5th January 2021. We do hope you find theses readings and reflections helpful and a blessing over Christmas. There are many things to be grateful for. If you do not have a hard-copy we can email you a pdf version. Please contact Mark our church secretary for a pdf copy. This way, we can all be on the same page as a church.

We take this opportunity to wish **Bill Graham a very Happy 80th Birthday!** We thank you for all your labours of love over many years in our fellowship. In addition, a thank you to Huw for his warmth and positive attitude to everything in his placement, his preaching recently and involvement in all services. In spite of restrictions we have managed to do a number of *distanced door calls* with people at church and been able to discuss many aspects of pastoral work in depth. We were sorry to hear that **Wendy B** had a stroke a week ago. We want to wish her a speedy recovery and pray for her to that end.

This Sunday we all are about to engage with other people, in one way or another to tell the story of Advent – Jesus coming into our world. He is still in our world physically through our endeavours and acts of kindness. Let us be careful to bring Christ to the masses of people around us.

Blessings to all our readers... **Grace & Peace!**



Message: "Hopeful Imagination & Careful Watching"

Readings: Jeremiah 31:10-17 Mark 13:24-37

Today is the first Sunday in advent. If you love Christmas, the anticipation, the carols, the lights, the celebration, this might make you feel a bit giddy. I wonder if you've got advent calendars ready? Or advent candles? Or even the NTC devotional that you can purchase through the college. Scott and I decided to buy each other a advent calendar this year. There's so many to choose from. I don't know what kind I've got this year, but in 3 days we get to open the first door!

As a lover of all things Christmas, this could not have come soon enough. In a year of lockdowns, restrictions, separation, loneliness, maybe even grief and sorrow – the arrival of advent, to a lot of us, seems to bring a sense of hope. A tingling of anticipation. An ounce of excitement.

But we have to ask, what will the Christmas period look like this year? I think it goes without saying that it might not look like any other we've had. For me back in Lowestoft, we typically had modest Christmas's, spending the morning at church, coming home and having dinner with 20 other people, playing games, and of course, the mid-afternoon nap followed by the Doctor Who Christmas episode. Although this year, Scott will be working throughout the period as a carer, and we simply don't know what it will bring.

But I recognise that any excitement I feel is a privilege. And I had this in mind when choosing today's text. Jeremiah seems to resonate with the various places we might be in right now, at the first Sunday of advent.

The book of Jeremiah gives witness to the crumbling political, social, moral, and religious conditions of Judah. He witnessed the rise and fall of major empires. I think we can relate to that, right? The closing of schools through the year; periods of isolation; maybe disagreeing with parliamentary decisions, and even social breakdowns. The similarities are uncanny.

As we read vv. 7-8, I find myself excited for things to come. I can look from my place of privilege and say that *I can sing with gladness and raise shouts! I can speak to God and know that reconciliation will happen one day.* That those with disabilities, those with children or in labour will be reconciled to the community and to God. Those who are the least will become first. We will join together as one family. Maybe not at Christmas but at some point. God says that he will do this for people in exile, under attack from the Babylonians who are separating families. I don't

doubt he will do this again. I believe that at some point, the weight of this barrier and its impact will reduce.

But there's more to the Jeremiah text than simply aligning with the praise and hopefulness in the beginning.

Our Adoptive Father

Jeremiah doesn't ignore the difficulties, the emotional separation and mental distress this causes. In vv.9 we read "with weeping they shall come." You might feel in that place now.

Throughout this text exists the imagery of a parent and child. God calls himself a Father to Israel and Ephraim is his firstborn. Here exists the imagery of a father and son. God has adopted the people of Israel as his children but his children are still sad. They are weeping. They feel isolated and rejected. Not only is there the Father and son relationship, a mother and child relationship is brought in as well. Rachel, who we read about in Exodus, her weeping and lamenting is expressed here. She weeps for her children who are no more. She is hurt and refuses comfort.

As we begin advent, we are reminded of those who feel separated. There are people who are weeping because they are always separated from their family, through a variety of circumstances.

Waiting Children

Did you know that in the UK, fostering services need to recruit 8,100 new carers this year to meet the need and to account for the carers who will retire?

Did you know that almost 3000 children in the UK are waiting for adoption, 27% of whom have been waiting for more than 18 months - if you feel like this lockdown had been long, just imagine waiting for 18 months to be adopted?

For children and parents who are separated, advent and Christmas can be a traumatic time. Family situations can be fractured. Children might come from backgrounds of abuse or neglect and thinking about joining with their family at Christmas might be the worst thing imaginable. Even though God says things will be better, it doesn't seem to feel like it for the children of Israel, and it's likely it doesn't feel like it for children who are in the care system awaiting a foster placement or adoptive family.

And I think this text in Jeremiah is powerful! It's a powerful tool to help us look beyond our own excitement in advent and focus on those who are less privileged. Those who don't have a secure home. Those who haven't had a secure home in years.

I had a conversation with the regional director of Home For Good, a Christian charity who support people to adopt or foster children, and they equip churches to be a safe space for those who have experience of the care system. He pointed out to me that in



the Church of England alone, there are at least 14,000 church buildings in the UK. And overall, there are over 40,000 churches in the UK. That's more churches than there are pubs!

Imagining Homecoming

If one family from every church made themselves available to foster or adopt, and the whole church surrounded them with support and love... imagine the difference. We might even model the father figure, the reconciler, the comforter, that God is in Jeremiah. Just think for a minute. Imagine for a moment, the hope possible. The anticipation that can brew in a child. In a church. Close your eyes for a moment, and let your imagination run.

Keep your eyes closed.

Mark 13:24-25: "But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

You can open your eyes now. When I imagine the possibility of helping a child to have a home away from neglect and abuse, and that child is supported by the church, it feels a little bit like these words. Like we might be able to end that suffering, that what is coming will shake all of creation! In vv. 26, we see that something is something good. That Someone good is coming, and he is near. Vv. 29: So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.

Therefore, as we wait in eager expectation. As we ***keep alert***, why don't we move and shake creation just a little bit. As God moved to restore Israel, to comfort them and make them glad, he says this in Mark 13:7 - "There is a hope for your future, says the Lord, your children shall come back to their own country."

God is working to turn the kingdom on its head and put the least first. The disabled. The women with children, and the children themselves. Our God is a god of reconciliation. And as we wait in eager expectation for Christmas, when we retell the story of Jesus coming into this world as a baby, and as we wait for his glorious return, we must be ***watchful***. We must be ***careful***. We might even take direction from Jeremiah 31 and see to reconcile parents to children. (If you want to know more about this, there will be a link on the slide at the end of the service).

As we wait in patience, with hope, and carefully watching, imagine the possibilities and remember these two things:

- 1) There is a hope for your future, children shall come back (Jeremiah 31:17)
- 2) And what I say to you I say to all: keep awake (Mark 13:37)