

worship notes

from the United Reformed Church



Sunday 20th December 2026
The Fourth Sunday of Advent
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Call to Worship

Welcome on this fourth Sunday of Advent.
The days are short and the nights are long, but God is coming to meet us.
God does not wait for us to make ourselves ready.
God comes to us as we are, and makes a home among us.
Let us worship the God who travels with us.

Prayer

God of the tent and the wilderness,
God of the cradle and the cross,
we thank you that you do not wait for palaces,
but come to us wherever we are.
You walked with your people through the desert.
You called a shepherd boy to be a king.
You sent an angel to a small town in Galilee.
We praise you for your faithfulness,
which has outlasted every empire and every disappointment.
Lord, we confess that we are always busy building.
We build our plans, our churches and our reputations,
and we leave little room for you to build in us.
We hold on to our buildings and our habits,
and forget that you are out ahead of us on the road.
When your promises seem slow, we lose heart.
Forgive us, and teach us to wait with open hands.
As we prepare to celebrate the birth of your Son,
make us ready to hear, to ask honest questions,
and, like Mary, to say yes.
Lord, in your mercy, hear us as we pray together: Our Father...

All Age Idea

Bring a box of building blocks and a blanket. Invite a few volunteers to build the biggest and best house for God they can in one minute. Then tell the story: David wanted to build God a palace of cedar, but God said, "I have always lived in a tent, travelling with my people. Instead, I will build a house for you." Drape the blanket over two chairs to make

a tent and invite some children to sit under it. A tent is not grand, but it is a place where people sit close together. Explain that God's presence was never dependent on a grand building: God had been travelling with the people all along. When the angel visits Mary, we see again that God chooses to come close and live among ordinary people. Give everyone a paper brick to write or draw their name on and add them to the outline of a house. Remind everyone that the Church is more than the building in which we worship; it is the people God gathers together.

or

Talk about the things people do to get ready for Christmas, such as the cleaning, the cooking, the cards and the decorations. Ask what the most important job might be. Then read about Mary, who had no time to prepare, and whose only job was to say, "Here I am." Ask the children what it might mean to make room for Jesus in our own busy week.

Readings

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16 | St Luke 1:26-38

Sermon Notes

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

David is settled and comfortable in his cedar palace and is troubled that the Ark of God still sits in a tent. His impulse seems to come from gratitude: David has received much and now wants to give something to God. Nathan approves the idea immediately, but that same night the word of the Lord comes to him with a different message. There is a useful point here about discernment. David's proposal is generous, and Nathan's response is understandable, but a good idea is not necessarily the same thing as God's call. Nathan also models the willingness to listen again and change direction when God speaks.

God reminds David that the divine presence has never depended upon a permanent building. From the Exodus onwards, God has been "moving about in a tent and a tabernacle", travelling with the people through wilderness and uncertainty. This gives us a picture of a God on the move, rather than a God contained within a particular building. This need not become an argument against church buildings. The Temple will eventually be built, and buildings can serve worship, mission and community. The passage does, however, allow churches to ask whether our buildings serve the mission of God or whether maintaining them can sometimes become the mission itself. The passage turns on the word "house". David offers to build God a house, meaning a temple. God promises to build David a house, meaning a household or dynasty. The giver becomes the receiver. Verses 8-9 underline this reversal. God reminds David of what God has already done: taking him from the pasture, being with him wherever he went and establishing him as king. Before David can speak about what he will do for God, he is reminded of what God

has already done for him. Grace comes first. That offers a useful Advent connection. Our worship, service and giving are responses to what God has already given. Verse 16 promises that David's house, kingdom and throne will be established "for ever". What follows in the biblical story makes that promise difficult. The kingdom divides. Jerusalem falls. The monarchy disappears. The people experience exile. From a human perspective, the promise appears to have failed. That raises an important Advent question: **What do we do when God's promise appears to be taking a very long time?** Luke's Gospel deliberately returns to this promise in the announcement of Jesus. Christians therefore read the promise to David as finding its fulfilment in Christ, although in a form David could not have anticipated. This may also be pastorally important. People in our congregations know what it means to wait, pray and wonder whether God has forgotten them. Care is needed not to suggest that every personal hope is a divine promise, or that every prayer will be answered exactly as we wish. The deeper biblical witness is that *God's faithfulness can outlast our ability to see what God is doing.*

Questions to ask:

- Where might we be building something for God that God has not actually asked us to build?
- How do we discern the difference between a good idea and God's call?
- Is our church building helping us in mission, or has maintaining it begun to replace mission?
- What changes when we remember that before we are givers, we are receivers of grace?
- What do we do when God seems to be taking a very long time?

St Luke 1:26-38

Luke places this announcement in deliberate contrast with Gabriel's earlier appearance to Zechariah. Zechariah is a priest, serving in the Temple in Jerusalem. Mary is a young woman in Nazareth. The movement from Jerusalem to Nazareth, from Temple to ordinary life, is significant. God's saving activity is not confined to the recognised centres of religious life or power. Gabriel greets Mary as "favoured one!". Mary has done nothing within the narrative to earn this description; God's grace and initiative come first. Again, **grace comes first**. Mary is perplexed by the greeting and later asks: "How can this be?" Her question is not condemned. Luke allows questioning, pondering and faith to belong together. This may be pastorally important where people assume that Christian faith requires certainty or leaves no room for difficult questions. Verses 32-33 provide the strongest connection with 2 Samuel 7. Gabriel says that Jesus will receive "the throne of his ancestor David", reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and that "of his kingdom there will be no end". The promise made to David has not been forgotten. Yet its fulfilment comes in an unexpected place and through an unexpected person. There is a movement here from David's palace and proposed Temple to an ordinary young woman in Nazareth. God's purposes are not limited by the places in which we expect God to work. Gabriel also says that the power of the Most High will "overshadow" Mary. This may recall the

language of God's glory overshadowing the tabernacle in Exodus 40:35. The connection is suggestive: the God whose presence travelled with the people in the wilderness now comes among humanity in Jesus Christ. Mary's response, "Let it be with me according to your word," is trust rather than passivity. She has listened and questioned; then she responds to God's call. There is an interesting contrast with David. David wants to **do something for God**. Mary allows God to **do something through her**. The contrast should not be pushed too far – David's desire also comes from devotion – but together the passages raise an important question about Christian discipleship. Faith is not only about what we achieve or build for God. It is also about making ourselves available to what God is doing. The final statement, "Nothing will be impossible with God," brings us back to where the initiative lies: before anyone can do anything for God, God has already acted in grace.

Questions to ask:

- Where do we expect to encounter God?
- What might Luke's movement from Jerusalem to Nazareth say to the Church about the places and people we overlook?
- What does Mary teach us about the place of questions within faith?
- What might "Let it be" mean for Christian discipleship?
- Are there times when we are so concerned with doing something for God that we fail to notice what God is already doing?

Intercessions

God of promise, who came among us in weakness and wonder,
we bring before you a world that longs for rest.
We pray for those who have no home:
refugees and the displaced, those in tents and shelters, those sleeping on our streets.
You who once lived in a tent, be near to them, and make us generous in our welcome.

We pray for those in authority,
that they may remember they are servants of your people.
Bring down the proud, lift up the lowly, and fill the hungry with good things.

We pray for your Church, anxious about buildings and numbers.
Make us a people who follow you into the wilderness,
ready to be surprised by where you are at work.

We pray for those for whom Christmas is hard:
the lonely, the bereaved, the sick and those who care for them,
and those still waiting for a promise to come true.

We commit to you those we love...

Silence

God of Mary and Elizabeth, of David and Nathan,
make us ready. Let your Word take flesh among us,
in our homes, our churches and our streets.
Through Christ, the child, the teacher and the Saviour we pray. Amen.

Benediction

Go into this week, and the days that lead to Christmas,
not to build a palace, but to make a space.
May the God of the tent and the wilderness travel with you,
may the Son, who came to dwell among us, make a home in you,
and may the Holy Spirit, who overshadowed Mary,
make you brave enough to say yes.
We go to love and serve the Lord. Amen.

Music

See the Advent hymn suggestions on the Worship Notes page