

# twelvebaskets



## ADVENT 4A

A complete Sunday service ready to use  
for worship and inspire ideas in your church

Produced by **twelvebaskets**. Subscription available from **theworshipcloud.com**

**Advent 4 - Year A**  
18th December 2022



## **Order of Service**

Call to worship

**Hymn:**

**165 STF – Advent candles tell their story OR**

**706 STF – Longing for light, we wait in darkness**

Opening Prayers

The Lord's Prayer

All Age Talk

**Hymn:**

**198 STF – Emmanuel, Emmanuel OR**

**178 STF – Long ago, prophets knew Christ would come**

Readings: Isaiah 7:10-16; Matthew 1:18-25

**Hymn:**

**175 STF – Light of the world, you stepped down in darkness OR**

**208 STF – Let earth and heaven combine**

Reflections on the readings

**Hymn:**

**628 STF – Faithful One, so unchanging OR**

**173 STF – Into the darkness of the world**

Intercessions

Offering / collection

Blessing the offering

**Hymn:**

**188 STF – There's a light upon the mountains OR**

**503 STF – Love divine, all loves excelling**

Blessing

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The Vine Services are compiled and produced by twelvebaskets.

Many more resources and inspiration for this week's lectionary, leading worship and other church use are available on [www.theworshipcloud.com](http://www.theworshipcloud.com).

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## **Call to worship**

Amongst the mid-winter,  
Jesus is here.

Amongst the cold and the uncertainty and the cost-of-living crisis,  
Jesus is here.

Amongst the family gatherings and the carols and the scent of possibility,  
Jesus is here.

We have come to worship you, Lord Jesus,

Amen.<sup>1</sup>

## **Hymn:**

165 STF – Advent candles tell their story OR

706 STF – Longing for light, we wait in darkness

## **Opening Prayers**

Dear Lord,

As we edge closer to Christmas, we give thanks and praise you for the capacity you have given us for joy, laughter, and fellowship. May this be a time where we can grow in love for each other and for you through time shared together.

While we thank you for the material joys we experience at this time of year, we thank you even more for your relentless pursuit of us, a pursuit so great that you humbled yourself to come amongst us. May our excitement for the season be matched by our excitement at your arrival on Earth two thousand years ago, and your continual arrival in our hearts.

Lord, we also bring to you our sadness. For the people we wish we could spend this time with but cannot, for the things that make Christmas difficult, for the times where the hope of the Christmas story struggles to break through.

We also bring to you our disappointment in ourselves, for when we have not acted as you would have us do. Not in shame and self-hatred, but in humble acknowledgement that we have sinned and will sin again, and that through your grace we have both the assurance of forgiveness and the guidance of the Holy Spirit in better aligning with your will.

Amen.<sup>2</sup>

## **We say together the Lord's Prayer**

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<sup>1</sup> Call to Worship written by Tim Baker

<sup>2</sup> Opening prayers written by All We Can

## All Age Talk

*A possible activity to try out if you can access the ingredients. If you can't make this work, then ask people to use their imaginations as part of the next section.*

*Carry out a blind taste test, using blindfolds to cover people's eyes and a bowl (or several bowls) of sour yoghurt and another bowl (or several bowls) of honey, with teaspoons for people to use.*

*Invite people (especially any children or young people) to come up and be blindfolded and to taste each. Look at and get their reactions.*

Read from Isaiah: 'Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son . And will call him Immanuel. He will be eating curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right.'

You've been eating curds and honey, like Jesus. It's now a breakfast food – yoghurt and honey. But then it was given to babies. Basically moving on from baby food is a sign of growing up – so is rejecting wrong and doing right.

We often say knowing the difference between right and wrong is a sign you are growing up – but that's wrong.

We all know the difference between right and wrong.

Anyone been dared or double dared? No one ever dared you to clean your room or do the washing up. It's always wrong.

Whenever we have to justify to ourselves what we are doing, we know it's wrong. An extra piece of cake will be okay. If I take this from work no one will be harmed. If I join in being cruel to someone I won't get hurt. Faking my tax returns doesn't really hurt anyone.

So knowing the difference isn't a sign of Christian maturity – like Jesus – its doing what is right.

Micah 6:8 This is what God requires of you. Act justly. Love mercy and walk humbly before your God.

When we learn to live our lives with the truth of Immanuel, God with us, we can come to see the world as God sees it, to live as God wishes us too.

Let us be an Immanuel-people this Christmas time.<sup>3</sup>

### Hymn:

198 STF – Emmanuel, Emmanuel OR

178 STF – Long ago, prophets knew Christ would come

**Readings:** Isaiah 7:10-16; Matthew 1:18-25

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<sup>3</sup> All Age Talk written by Christopher Hulme

## Hymn:

175 STF – Light of the world, you stepped down in darkness OR

208 STF – Let earth and heaven combine

## Reflections on the readings

Today is the day we celebrate Immanuel – God with us.

So here is a question for us to consider: How is Jesus being 'God with us' of any relevance in our crisis hit communities?

In Isaiah 7:14, we read: the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and we will call him Immanuel.

There is power in a name. Here we have a Messianic prophecy, a foretelling of the birth of Jesus, being given the name Immanuel, 'God with us.' It's quite a cosy familiar name, one we sing with great gusto. It's a safe name. It is comfortable. It fits nicely with Advent – waiting for his birth.

But perhaps at the same time this focus seems a little jarring, it doesn't seem to fit the times we are living in. That's because the verse was written in a context and that context and the reactions of the people at the time resonates with the issues facing us today.

A little context. The Assyrians were the main nation in the area. They had iron weapons when others used bronze. Their chariots were the unstoppable tanks of the day. They had a large army and focussed on expansion. Historians have compared them to German armies during WW2, or perhaps to the large armies of Putin's Russia. Like Russia has done they would move populations from conquered territories and replace them with Assyrians.

The three kingdoms, Aram [Syria] Israel and Judah paid tribute to Assyria, but Aram and Israel rebelled and tried to get Judah to join them but King Ahaz declined. So they unsuccessfully tried to take Jerusalem. Ahaz was scared – 'so the hearts of Ahaz and the his people were shaken, as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind'.

This context seems to mirror much of what is happening in society today, particularly if you are a Christian living in the Ukraine. We are seeing uncertainty, a surge in the cost of living, rising prices, rising mortgages. Our communities are struggling.

How do we respond as Christians? How do we respond as churches?

Like Ahaz, our response is often to be paralysed by fear. We don't know what to do so we do nothing. Like Ahaz we just worry and do nothing. We dig in, we shut down.

Into this situation steps Isaiah with a message from God. 'say to him "be careful, keep calm and don't be afraid." and again "Ask the Lord your God for a sign".

Ahaz's fear led to him failing to respond when God said ask me for a sign. Because of his failure to respond Isaiah prophesied conquest and suffering. The Assyrians coming like a flood, water up to the neck. He got it wrong. He remained a captive to his fears.

I feel a lot of sympathy for Ahaz. His response was very human. So how then can we avoid the same mistake.

God's very personal message to Ahaz was just as relevant to us today. God says be careful – don't do anything silly, don't do anything rash that you might regret. Then he says keep calm – always useful advice. Then don't be afraid. You could call these common knowledge – but Isaiah shows that sometimes that can be from God.

God keeps repeating 'don't be afraid'. Generally, when God repeats things it's for a reason.

How do we respond when all around are caught up in a cycle of fear, like now?

In chapter 8, verse 11, we read: "this is what the Lord says to me with his strong hand upon me, warning me not to follow the people".

Let's have God's strong hand upon us. Let's not follow everyone else.

"Do not fear what they fear. The Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as Holy. He is the one you are to fear."

This doesn't mean be afraid of God, it means get your focus right, get your priorities straight. Put following his will at the heart of what you do. The things you fear may not disappear but your life will not be robbed of meaning by fear. The situation remains the same, but our response changes.

Unfortunately for Ahaz his fear robbed him of God's blessing, the sign.

We also have that sign. "The Lord himself will give you a sign. The virgin will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel." and "he will be eating curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right."

If knowing the difference between right and wrong is not a sign of maturity, then doing the right things is. So again, this is how we respond to our world in crisis. Open our homes, fill the food banks, give generously, talk to our neighbours, smile. This is how we can be God with Us.

It's time to move into a space of reflection and conversation.

*If you have the facilities and/or technology to show a short video clip, or project some images from the news, you might like to play something that helps people recognise some of the challenges our world is facing right now – something from the war in Ukraine, or the cost of living crisis in our own country, or similar.*

For this next part of our service, we are going to break into groups of 4 or 5 people, just where you are sitting. It will be helpful if you have at least one Bible per group *[Make use of pew Bibles or ask people to find it on their phones]*.

Firstly, read Isaiah 7:1-4 and 10-17

Remember what we learned earlier – about the Assyrians, and how they could be compared to an aggressive world superpower today, like Putin's armies?

Question for discussion in groups (2-3 minutes)

Does anything you heard about Assyria and the context for the Isaiah reading seem to mirror much of what is happening in society today, particularly if you are a Christian living in the Ukraine?

If so, how?

Read Isaiah 7:2: 'so the hearts of Ahaz and the his people were shaken, as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind.'

Question for discussion in groups (5-6 minutes)

We are currently living with: the cost of living crisis, prices, political turmoil, energy prices and power cuts, refugees in many parts of the world and our own country, war. Like Ahaz. Do people feel powerless and full of fear about the future? How do we respond to crises?

Read Isaiah 8:6-11

Question for discussion in groups:

What were the consequences of fear for Ahaz and Judah?

Which verse speaks vividly to you? Can you see any parallels here?

Into this situation steps Isaiah with a message from God: say to him "be careful, keep calm and don't be afraid." and again "ask the Lord your God for a sign."

Read Isaiah 7:4, 8:12-17

Question for discussion in groups:

Perhaps you feel a lot of sympathy for Ahaz. His response was very human. So how then can we avoid making the same mistake? What verses resonate with you?.

*[When the conversation has drawn to a close, thank people for their contributions and lead into the next hymn as a way of bringing all the conversation together in worship].<sup>4</sup>*

### **Hymn:**

628 STF – Faithful One, so unchanging OR

173 STF – Into the darkness of the world

### **Prayers of intercession**

Father God,

Thank you that the way you choose to work is unusual and unpredictable, that you would use means as strange as a virgin birth to kickstart the reconciliation of all things. Help us to be open to the strange and unusual, to recognise your creativity and imagination in the times where sticking to tried and tested methods is far too easy.

Thank you for the gentle obedience of Joseph, who had the humility to not obstruct what God was doing. We pray that we may also learn to recognise when the best thing we can do is get out of the way to allow the Spirit to move.

We pray for All We Can as they seek to not get in the way of people fulfilling their potential – as they resist the urge to impose solutions on local communities, and instead like Joseph, take the back seat to allow others to take centre stage.

Most of all we thank you that you are Emmanuel – God with us. When we seek to serve others may we be similarly incarnational – not dictating from afar, but getting in amongst it, coming alongside people, and getting our hands dirty.

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<sup>4</sup> Reflection written by Christopher Hulme

We take a moment to bring our own prayers to God for our world, our community, and ourselves.

All this we pray in your name,

Amen.<sup>5</sup>

**We will now take up the offering.**

God of all grace,

We are grateful for what we have received.

As we head into this Christmas season, may we be people of gift-giving,

People who use what we have to make the world a better, safer, more sacred space.

In Jesus' name,

Amen.

**Hymn:**

188 STF – There's a light upon the mountains OR

503 STF – Love divine, all loves excelling

**Blessing**

Go out and be people who bring the Kingdom of God closer,

Let us practice the peace, the love, the grace, the love and the hope we encounter in the Christ.

Let us be people of the Spirit,

A Christmas people,

Amen.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Prayers of intercession written by All We Can

<sup>6</sup> Additional prayers by Tim Baker