

WATCHING AND WAITING

2020 Advent Course



Woven
God's Story. Your Story. Every Story.

Four-week course for small groups or personal Bible studies

AN INTRODUCTION FROM THE DISTRICT CHAIRS

We are delighted to commend to you this year's Advent Course *Watching and Waiting* as part of Woven, the London District theme for 2019 – 2021. Woven centres on the power of storytelling to transform and renew us in our lifelong discipleship as followers of Christ.

The season of Advent is a period of watching and waiting in anticipation of the arrival of Christ. During Advent, we look back and celebrate the incarnation of the Son of God in the world; we also look forward in anticipation of His return at the end of time. The front cover painting by Revd David Hollingsworth is based on the mystery of John 5:4. It reminds us that as the people waited for an angel of the Lord to come and disturb the waters so they could experience healing, we too are watching and waiting for the One who sends the angel.

The course encourages us to walk through the season of Advent to enable us to engage in mission and discipleship as a way of life. The course is specifically designed to be used in small groups and by individuals.

We hope and pray that as you use this material, whether alone or in a group, your story and other people's stories become woven into God's story of Advent.

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#WovenIntoGod

#WovenWithOthers

Scripture quotations and readings taken from the Holy Bible, The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) except where indicated otherwise

To download an electronic copy of this course



Week 1

THE WATCHTOWER: STAY AWAKE

By Gideon Gasinu

READINGS

First Reading: Isaiah 64:1 - 9

Psalm: Psalm 80:1 - 7, 17 - 19

Gospel Reading: Mark 13:24 - 37

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:3 - 9



Prayer

You are God and there is none like you, you dwell in the light and know what is in the darkness, all things were made by you, for you and through you all things consist.

In the beginning you were, today you are and tomorrow you will be.

You are not just Alpha you are also Omega, not just the beginning, also the **end**.

Your existence is courseless, you sit in eternity and you watch time from a distance. You see our beginning from the **end** and are privy to all that is in between.

You instruct us to **watch** and stay **awake** so that we may see through your eyes and behold the **end** in sight beforehand. Like on a **watchtower**, we would see the enemy of our souls at a distance and be prepared for victory.

In this period, we pray for an awakening, for in sleep we pay attention to nothing and are cast into obliviousness; a place where darkness prevails, where the lack of light makes us see things that be not, as though they are.

Like on a **watchtower**, we pray thee to call us up as sentinels to the mountain of your glory, as you did Moses, Peter, James and John, and shine your light before us in this dark world that we may not just **watch** but be able to see as we **watch**.

And after we have done all to stand firm, we would extend a hand to others, that we all will stand in worthiness of your final words:

“Well done, good and faithful servant! Come and share your master’s happiness!”.

Amen!



Worship Hymn

Father, I place into your hands (StF 519)



Psalm

Psalm 80: 1 - 7, 17 - 19



Bible Passage

Mark 13:24 - 37 (English Standard Version)



Reflection on Mark 13:24 - 37

According to the Gospel of Mark, we recall the beginning of Jesus' ministry with His baptism by John the Baptist, then forty days temptation in the wilderness and the call of the first disciples. Following these events were miracles, signs, wonders, wise sayings and prophecies about future events, which is what this chapter (Mark 13) is about.

The eschatological writings in this chapter were given following questions from four of Jesus' disciples; Peter, James, John and Andrew, who asked Jesus privately, *"Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished?"* Jesus did not give them a direct answer but rather, important clues (Mark 12:24 - 37). What if Jesus had given them the date and time of the eschaton? How would that have impacted human behaviour (evolution of morality) and our world today?

There are four fundamental questions in life;

1. The question of origin – where are we from?
2. The question of destination – where are we going?
3. The question of transition – how do we get to where we are going?
4. The question of purpose – why are we here?

Religion has, in many ways, tried and failed to answer these questions until the advent of Jesus Christ, who brings us back into relationship with God. It is only in relationship with God that these questions are answered. We understand according to the accounts of Genesis 1 - 3, that in the beginning we had a relationship with God and that was lost and till today we are seeking ways to restore the broken relationship. The moment this relationship is restored through salvation and conscious repentance, we behold the sight of our destination (with Christ Jesus) and with this prize in view, the question of origin, transition and purpose becomes clear.

The ultimate event that brings the final destination into focus is what Jesus foretells the disciples, cautioning them on what is to come and how they should prepare. It is important to note that Jesus did not only address the disciples on this matter but directly addressed everyone:

"And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake."

Mark 13:37 (English Standard Version)

We have all been admonished to stay awake for we know not when the eleventh hour comes. The end comes in two forms; our end or the end, it is either we go to meet our maker, or he comes to meet us. We do not know when any of these ends will be but what we can do is to stay awake, in other words be ready and prepared.

To stay awake means not to be asleep spiritually; metaphorically, this is to say we pay attention to nothing when we are asleep. If we are in a sound sleep, our minds are "dead to the world." We are not aware of anything that is going on, even of the passage of time. We become insensitive to our spiritual relationship and relationship with Jesus Christ. We owe this largely to frequent stressful hardships we face in the world, making us apathetic. In other words, a person reaches a point where they just finally roll over, play dead and say, "who cares".

Jesus calls us to keep our eyes on the prize, to carry this cross and follow him up the mountain; and when we are tired, we should not give up but pray as he did *"My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."* (Matthew 26:39 New International Version). Because the journey to the cross was tough, Jesus wanted by his will to take the easy route, but he stayed on course and rather prayed for the will of God to be fulfilled.



In this life we all carry our crosses and the church carries its cross also. We are all being encouraged in the face of hardships and pressure from the world to press on and to keep watch as we do.

Let us therefore keep watch, and with God's help do all we can to stand in worthiness of his final words:

“... Well done, good and faithful servant! ... Come and share your master's happiness!”

Matthew 25:23 (New International Version)

Prophecies are given to aid preparation, if God has the power to create this world, then he has the power to foretell its future events. To give us hope that these prophecies are not fiction or fantasies, the Holy Writ is scattered with fulfilled prophecies backed by archaeological and historical evidence outside the Bible. For example, Isaiah 45 gives a prophecy about Cyrus, who God named to release the people of Israel out of Babylonian exile (this was over 100 years before time). It was also revealed to Daniel in a dream (Daniel 8) before the happening, that a ram with two horns (Media and Persia) would conquer Babylon. History records Cyrus the Great overtook Babylon in 539 BCE and freed the people of Israel. This occurred many years after the Book of Isaiah had been written (between 740 - 686BC).

Many more fulfilled prophecies are scattered throughout the Old Testament and the New Testament to let us know that we can have confidence in that which has been prophesied. Jesus said,

“Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away”

Matthew 24:35 (English Standard Version)



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Questions for reflection

As you reflect on this passage, here are some discussion questions to guide you:

1. What does this mean to you “stay awake”?
2. From your answer can you say you are awake?
3. If you answered yes, what have you been doing to stay awake. Discuss this with someone near you.
4. If you answered no to question 2, think of three things you could actively engage in to stay awake, write these down.
5. Look at the resource material below, what do you see and how can you relate this to staying awake?
6. Take some time to reflect on what is happening in our world right now. On the scale below, how close are we to the end time?

ON A SCALE OF 1 TO 10

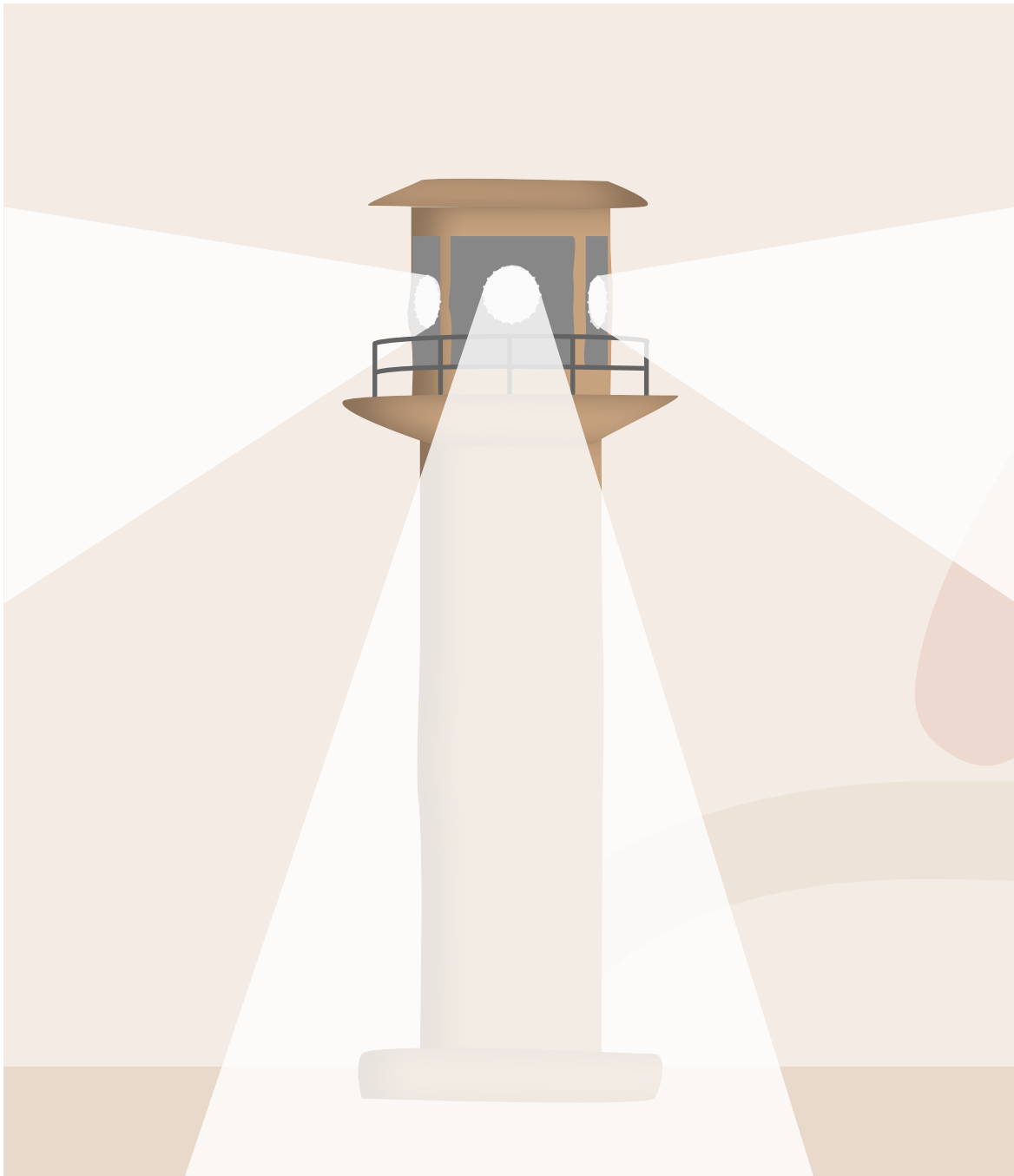
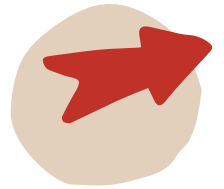
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

No matter where you think we are, remember what Jesus said: “But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come.

#watch&pray

Additional Resources for Reflection

Watch & Pray





Closing Prayer

Our Father who art in heaven

There is none holier than thou and there is no rock like you.

There is none worthier than thou, for none but you was found worthy to open the scroll and to read the content thereof.

By your blood the wrath of divinity is pacified and by divine design we are invited to dine with you. It is by your grace that we will make it to the table to feast with you, so; Strengthen us where we are weak, awaken us where we are sleeping and lead us in the path of righteousness and we would be with you in glory.

Amen



Personal Reflections





Week 2

LISTENING TO THE VOICE OF GOD

By Revd Dr Paul Hill

READINGS

First Reading: Isaiah 40:1 - 11

Psalm: Psalm 85:1 - 2, 8 - 13

Gospel Reading: Mark 1:1 - 8

Second Reading: 2 Peter 3:8 - 15a



Bible verse

“Then Jesus said, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.”

Mark 4:9 (New International Version)



Worship Hymn

You can sing any of these songs:

Light of the world, you stepped down into darkness (Stf 175)

Praise to the God who clears the way preparing room and space (StF 183)

Listen on YouTube: Prepare the Way by Dave Bilbrough



Pause for Thought

Some years ago, I knew a wonderful Christian man called Frank and, despite the challenge of profound hearing loss, he never missed worship or Bible study. If asked whether he was doing okay, Frank would invariably say: “God gave us two sets of ears, the ones attached to our heads and the spiritual ones to hear the Lord’s voice. I’m doing my best to listen with both sets!”

The Bible is full of examples of people who actually hear the voice of God speaking directly to them, including the boy Samuel (1 Samuel 3), Moses (Exodus 3) and Saul, soon to become Paul (Acts 9).

But what about us? We might wonder why would God would want to talk to us, and what would he wish to say to us? Perhaps the only place to start is to be prepared to be open to God and to listen out for his voice as we heed the advice of Jesus: “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.”



Prayer

God of every time and place, throughout history, you have woven your story with the lives of all those who have heard your voice and responded to your call to follow you.

God of our time and place, be present with us, and weave your story with our lives today.

May we hear your voice speaking to us through Scripture, prayer and worship, through the people we meet, and the experiences of everyday life.

Open our ears to all you would say to us and open our hearts to receive your love, that we might follow wherever you lead and live your life of love, justice and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.



Bible Passages

Isaiah 40:1 - 11 and Mark 1:1 - 8



Reflection on Isaiah 40:1 - 11 and Mark 1:1 - 8

I remember when my Dad pushed my Uncle Gordon off the shed roof.

It happened during the Summer when children were on their school holidays. It was a beautiful day, but why my Dad and Uncle Gordon were on the shed roof, I do not know. What I do know was that my Dad and Uncle Gordon were arguing about who was the better footballer. Dad was losing the argument, as Uncle Gordon had scored more goals in the earlier football match on the local recreational ground. Well, the dispute led to my Dad ending the discussion in a dramatic way. I seemingly remember when my Dad pushed my Uncle Gordon off the shed roof, but I know that I could not have been there because it happened when my Dad and Uncle Gordon were teenagers. And yet, this family story has been told so often, so many times, that in my mind's eye I can see it happening in vivid detail. I can imagine the voices raised in argument and the cry of my Uncle Gordon as he falls off the shed so clearly that I am almost convinced that I was present.

Stories have the power to transport us through time and space, enabling us to inhabit the lives and experiences of others, whether the life of a relative or a total stranger (or strangers) living hundreds of years ago.

As we consider Isaiah 40:1 - 11 and St Mark 1:1 - 8, we encounter voices that transport us through space and time to the lives and experiences of people in exile and the wilderness ministry of John the Baptist.

Tone of voice

The previous thirty-nine chapters of Isaiah presents us with a holy God with a voice of stern condemnation demanding a change of heart from God's people. Isaiah chapter 40 marks the start of something very different and new. As chapter 40 begins, we may wonder who is supposed to be speaking on behalf of God – is it the voice of the prophet? But the words must have been very welcome to God's people who are no longer in Jerusalem, but in exile in Babylon:

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem...

(Isaiah 40:1 - 2a)

However, as the passage continues, the intimacy of speaking tenderly gives way to a very different tone of voice when, in verse 3, a voice cries out to prepare the way of the Lord. By the end of the passage, the voice crying out gives way to what appears to be a shout of triumph in order to proclaim the good news:

...lift up your voices with strength...do not fear...
"Here is your God".

(Isaiah 40: 9)

This is good news and the poetic beauty of the passage with all its differing vocal tones of expectation declare hope for people in need.

Hundreds of years later, St Mark the gospel writer puts a particular name to the crying voice of Isaiah 40: John the Baptist. St Mark's graphic description of John, unparalleled in the other gospels, presents us with a word picture of this strange figure – dressed in camel's hair and leather belt and eating locusts and wild honey. However, the prophetic cry of John the Baptist does not speak tenderly. Though offering hope to people, his tone of voice in addressing the huge crowd is immediate, urgent and harsh.

In both passages the tone of voice and what is said are conflicting, but the message of each passage remains one of hope and expectation.

These passages are closely related, of course, as St Mark uses John the Baptist to reference the passage from Isaiah when speaking about Jesus. He firmly roots Jesus in God's story. But while St Mark roots Jesus in history, he uses the voice of John the Baptist to present a radical new future.

The voices spoke to the specific needs of the people

Both of our readings are wilderness experiences. In Isaiah, God's people are portrayed in the wilderness of a strange and foreign land. Their plight is wonderfully expressed in the question posed elsewhere in the Bible, in Psalm 137:4: 'How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?'. The people have been exiled as captive slaves for decades, but now a comforting voice tells the people that God is coming to them directly and cannot be stopped. We are told that valleys are to be lifted up and mountains made low, uneven ground level and rough places made a plain – a highway through the desert for God to come to the people offering life, liberation and restoration. Similarly, the people's hearts can be cleared of the past sins that brought them into exile, because their punishment is not forever. Again, the imagery is intense; though human life is fleeting – like grass and flowers that flourish for a time, but then withers – the people can rely on God's forgiveness and mercy. God is described as a shepherd who gathers lambs in his arms.

In St Mark's gospel, the place of encounter is the actual wilderness. God is coming to the people as the ultimate fulfilment of the words of Isaiah 40 because the voice of John the Baptist announces the arrival of the promised Messiah. There is also the call for people to make straight their lives, though the pastoral imagery of the Shepherd embracing lambs of Isaiah 40 is replaced by John's insistence upon repentance and baptism in the Jordan river. In other words, the outward washing by baptism would be accompanied by the inward washing by God through forgiveness. Confessing sins, forgiveness and baptism would herald a new beginning for people and a new way of coming home to God – like exiled people returning home. Certainly, people were looking for something in their lives and many were drawn to John. But this is just the start, says John, as he baptised people with water. Someone much more powerful is about to arrive who will baptise people with the Holy Spirit.

Are we listening to God's voice today?

The two Bible passages we have considered have once again reminded us of how God's story has always been woven into the stories of God's people. Though in very different contexts and times to our own, we have seen how the power of God renews and transform lives. So, what about us? Have we been listening to God's voice speaking to us through these stories? If God weaves his story with my story, your story, every story, how can we use what we have learned to inform our lifelong discipleship and so renew and transform our lives? The following discussion questions have been prepared to help you reflect and share your story with others.

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Questions for Reflection



Ice breaker for small groups: 'I remember when...' Share a family story with members of the group.

1. Do you have any experience of hearing God's voice, either directly or indirectly? If so, please share your story with a group member.
2. Speaking tenderly or speaking harshly. How is tone of voice important when people speak with us? How is our tone of voice important when we share our stories of faith with others?
3. But what if the voice of God is silent? If there have been times when you have not been able to hear God's voice, how did this make you feel? How can we help people who feel they cannot hear God's voice?
4. John the Baptist challenged the people to make a new start by confessing their sins and being baptised. Why do you think it is sometimes important for us to say sorry to other people or to God?
5. St Mark begins his gospel with the words: 'The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.' What does the good news of Jesus mean to you?
6. In our readings the prophetic voices spoke to the specific needs of the people bringing hope to many lives. What important issues in our lives and our world should our voices be speaking about today?

Prayer

Lord God, we have heard the good news of Jesus.

And yet, we confess, that often the hustle and bustle of our noisy world means that we can find it hard to hear your voice in our daily lives. Forgive us.

Lord God, we have received the good news of Jesus.

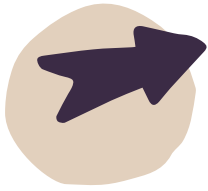
Enable us by your Spirit, we pray, to listen more intently for your powerful whisper urging us on to be your disciples.

Lord God, may we be part of the good news of Jesus.

May the story of God's love in Jesus be woven into our stories. May we share the good news with others that they too hear your voice and know you for themselves; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen

Let us end our study by saying together, The Grace...





Additional Resources for Reflection

1. It is difficult for me, and perhaps for you, not to read Isaiah 40 without hearing *Comfort ye my people* from Handel's *Messiah*. Various recordings are available on YouTube for you to enjoy.
2. You may find the following image helpful as you reflect upon Isaiah 40.



3. There are numerous images of John the Baptist available on the internet. Alternatively, St John's Church, Hoxton has a superb stained-glass window depicting John the Baptist and Jesus. The church is in Pitfield Street (Post code: N1 6NP) and is well worth a visit if you have an opportunity.
4. If you want to think about John the Baptist from a different perspective, there is an excellent series of 10 videos on the National Gallery website exploring this pivotal figure through masterpieces in the National Gallery and elsewhere.
5. If you want to dig deeper regarding hope, do read (at least) the opening chapter of Jurgen Moltmann's, *Theology of Hope* entitled: 'Introduction; Meditation on Hope'.
6. Similarly if you want to dig deeper regarding the experience of when God seems silent, then C. S. Lewis, in his book *In A Grief Observed*, recounts his experience of God's silence following the death of his wife, Joy. It is well worth a read.





Week 3

JOHN THE BAPTIST

By The Revd Canon Dr Jennifer Smith

READINGS

First Reading: Isaiah 61: 1 - 4, 8 - 11

Psalm: Psalm 126

Gospel Reading: 1 Thessalonians 5: 16 - 24

Second Reading: John 1: 6 - 8, 19 - 28



Bible verse

There appeared a man named John. He was sent from God, and came as a witness to testify to the light, that all might believe through him

John 1:6 - 7



Music for Reflection

Philip Newell, *'Chant: Hidden Things'* on album *'Sounds of the Eternal,'* (widely available on free digital music platforms, or CD) play up to 3:00 then pause the music, fading gently.



Prayer

Holy God, you speak in prophets of all generations. Thank you for John the Baptist and for his witness to your coming into the world in Christ Jesus. As he leapt in his mother's womb when Mary came near, let our hearts leap within us to feel your presence. Bless the stories we carry, told and untold. We pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.

J Philip Newell, *'Chant: Hidden Things'* on album *'Sounds of the Eternal'* fade up gently and play from 3:00 to the end.

The Lord's Prayer



Psalm

Psalm 126



Bible Reading

Isaiah 61:1 - 4, 8 - 11 and John 1:6 - 8, 19 - 28

Reflection on Isaiah 61:1 - 4, 8 - 11 and John 1:6 - 8, 19 - 28



In John 1:19, the narrator (the Evangelist) tells the reader exactly what kind of writing is to follow: 'This is the testimony given by John...' Testimony, or witness is an interesting kind of literature. It carries both a religious purpose, and also connotations of something like legal evidence. The crucial question is about identity: is John the Messiah, the promised deliverer of Israel? And if not, who is he? Identity is very important in the Gospel according to John. John the Baptist's identity has to be established before the Evangelist can begin to reveal who Jesus is, building a picture gradually from the first verse.

John's testimony, his answer to the questions 'who are you' and 'what do you say about yourself' are not given in the abstract, but in answer to direct questioning by those who considered themselves judges of his authority. John himself was of the Levites, and his father Zechariah had been among the chief priests of the Temple. In the Gospel according to Luke, we hear about Zechariah's disbelief when an angel told him, he and his wife Elizabeth, both elderly, would have a child. Zechariah was unable to speak during Elizabeth's whole pregnancy with John, his tongue released only to affirm his wife's insistence that the new baby be named as she recommended, not in the traditional way. John the Baptist was one of their own, in other words, and might have been expected to follow his father in priestly ministry. And yet, John was not in the Temple following his father's path, but out in the wilderness baptising people who were willing to join him in repentance, proclaiming the coming Kingdom of God.

The political, economic, and social context in which he lived were the womb that gave birth to John's testimony, as they are for all of us. Our context draws gifts out of us and builds us into the people we become in response to need. Martin Luther King, Jr. was just a young pastor in his late 20s in Montgomery, Alabama, in the USA, when Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a bus to a white man, in December 1955. As for John the Baptist, so for Revd King, the context called out his 'testimony,' the witness of who he became. It was in the 12-month boycott of buses in Montgomery that followed, and the mass prayer rallies each evening, that the young pastor found that his answers to the questions 'who are you,' and 'what do you say about yourself' drew people to him as a leader and pastor.

'The Jews', as spoken of by the Evangelist John, are not the same as Jewish people of today: often, as we read scriptures critical of Jesus' opponents, including those who crucify him, we do best to identify these opponents with ourselves or with the church establishment today. It is worth noting that historically, when the Gospel according to John talks of 'the Jews', it can mean different groups of people. For example, it might refer to either the Levites and priests, the religious establishment based in the Temple in Jerusalem, or the Pharisees, a sect of hyper observant followers. The Temple was destroyed in 70 CE, so by the time of the writing of this Gospel, the narrator/Evangelist and readers would have known of its destruction as an historical fact.

At this time, there had been much speculation about a predicted 'Messiah' (or anointed one), who would unite the people and oppose the Roman empire under which they lived. In this passage, John is crystal clear: he is not the Messiah, but he associates himself with the prophet foretold in Isaiah 40. 'I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord.' Thus, he identifies himself as the forerunner of the Messiah, calling out the oppressive practices of his day. And it would be he that would come to baptise Jesus, the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Ultimately, it would be John's refusal to accept the marriage of the vassal King Herod to his murdered brother's widow, Herodias, that caused the queen and her daughter Salome to plot for his arrest and assassination.





Activities for Reflection

If you are completing week 3 alone, take time to remember and reflect on times when people have given you positive feedback, or when people thanked you for something. You can also complete the exercises below alone as far as possible.

In your group, first spend some time in quiet: look at the following list of words, and circle at least six that describe you. Add words if you need to, that are not there.

	Able	Accepting	Adaptable
Ambitious	Analytical	Bold	Brave
Calm	Capable	Caring	Careful
Certain	Cheerful	Clever	Complex
Confident	Courageous	Dependable	Determined
Dignified	Disciplined	Dreamy	Durable
Efficient	Energetic	Enthusiastic	Emotional
Extroverted	Fair	Free	Friendly
Generous	Genial	Gentle	Giving
Happy	Helpful	Honourable	Imaginative
Independent	Ingenious	Innovative	Intelligent
Intellectual	Introverted	Intuitive	Jovial
Kind	Knowledgeable	Learned	Liberal
Lively	Loving	Maternal	Mature
Merry	Modest	Naïve	Normal
Objective	Observant	Organised	Original
Passive	Paternal	Patient	Perceptive
Persuasive	Playful	Pleasant	Pragmatic
Prayerful	Precise	Principled	Progressive
Protective	Proud	Questioning	Quiet
Radical	Rational	Realistic	Reasonable
Reassuring	Reflective	Relaxed	Reliable
Religious	Reserved	Resolute	Respectful
Responsible	Responsive	Satisfied	Scientific
Searching	Self-aware	Sensible	Sensitive
Shy	Simple	Skilful	Sociable
Spontaneous	Stable	Strong	Supportive
Sympathetic	Tactful	Tenacious	Tender
Thoughtful	Tough	Trusting	Trustworthy
Unassuming	Understanding	Useful	Vulnerable
Warm	Willing	Wise	Witty
Youthful	Zany	Zestful	

In groups of three, if you are able, share the words you have circled. Be brave! (10 minutes). Let each person speak without interrupting them or filling in silences if they are thinking. No one needs to speak.

Now consider how you would answer the questions John was asked in the passage. Note down key words or images that are important.

- Who are you?
- What do you say about yourself?

In your group of three, share your answers (15 minutes). Again, as each person speaks, let them speak and simply listen: try not to interrupt or fill the silence if they are thinking, but simply listen.

Back in the full group, share how it has felt to do these two exercises so far: the words 'that I am' and the 'John the Baptist' testimony questions. (5 minutes)

Now in the full group, consider:

- What contexts have drawn different gifts or qualities out of you?
- If you work, how has your work shaped who you are?
- How has your family or friendships shaped how you develop?
- What national or international events or situations have shaped who you are?

If there is time, consider what situations right now might change how we identify ourselves, who we say we are, or what we say about ourselves?

Prayer

Holy God, you speak in prophets of all generations. Thank you for John the Baptist and for his witness to your coming into the world in Christ Jesus. As he leapt in his mother's womb when Mary came near, let our hearts leap within us to feel your presence. Bless the stories we carry, told and untold. We pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.

Additional Resources for Reflection on Identity:

1. Marianne Williamson, from *A Return to Love* (1992):
'Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and fabulous?

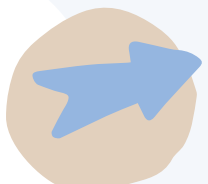
Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God.

Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people will not feel insecure around you.

We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It is not just in some of us; it is in everyone and as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give others permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.'

2. ***White Fragility: why it's so hard for white people to talk about Racism*, by Robin DiAngelo**

Or watch this short YouTube video:





Personal Reflections

A series of 20 horizontal dotted lines for writing reflections.



Week 4

DEVELOPING A LISTENING HEART

By Revd Elaine Joseph

READINGS

First Reading: 2 Samuel 7:1 - 11, 16

Psalm: Psalm 89:1 - 4, 19 - 26

Gospel Reading: Luke 1:26 - 38

Second Reading: Romans 16:25 - 27



Worship

Light of the world, you stepped down into darkness (Stf 175)



Psalm

Psalm 89:1 - 4, 19 - 26



Bible Passages

2 Samuel 7:1 - 11 and Luke 1:26 - 38



Reflection on 2 Samuel 7:1 - 11 and Luke 1:26 - 38

The two passages that we read invite us into an uncomfortably deep place, where we have to listen with our hearts, not just our ears. Reading, hearing and understanding are not enough. We have to be willing to surrender our heart's desires to God. Listen to what Solomon prayed, when he was made king while still a child in 1 Kings.

“Here’s what I want: Give me a God-listening heart so I can lead your people well, discerning the difference between good and evil. For who on their own is capable of leading your glorious people?”

1 Kings 3:9 (The Message Bible)

2 Samuel 7:1 - 11

At this point in the book, it appears that King David had been meditating on his achievements and decided to put building a house (bayit) i.e. a temple for God, on his to-do list. Of course, God cannot be contained in any temple, shrine or structure. The Ark of the Covenant was a physical reminder for the people of Israel and their enemies, of the holy presence of God that was abiding with them.

It seems that the Temple in Shiloh (1 Samuel 1 - 3) was overlooked by both King David and God in this conversation. When God relayed his message to David, via the prophet Nathan, it was to inform him that building a temple for God was not his calling (verses 5 - 7).

In the Ancient Near East, kings were often referred to as shepherds. David was reminded that God took him from shepherding actual sheep to become King Designate i.e. prince, over Israel. God was still King of Israel: present with them in all their journeys. He had not only defended the nation, but also saved them from all of their enemies. David had been divinely appointed by God and physically anointed as earthly ruler by the prophet, Samuel. And although the world saw King David as the highest authority in the land, God was still King of Israel. And God viewed David as a servant.

Nathan told David that the plan to build a temple for God was not divinely approved. But Nathan was able to soften the blow to David's ego, by revealing that God's plan was way better than David's.

God planned to do two things. Firstly, God would *'appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly'* (verse 10). Israel would have a place of their own and they would live in peace.

Secondly, God planned to make David's name great – putting him in the premier league of the *'great ones of the earth'* (verse 9). And if that was not enough, Nathan announced that instead of David building God a house (bayit), he declared that God would build David's dynasty (verse 11).

Luke 1:26 - 38

Six months after John the Baptist was conceived, God sent the angel Gabriel to a town in southern Galilee called Nazareth to speak to a young woman, called Mary. She was engaged to be married.

Gabriel's opening words, *"Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you"* were doubtless meant to make Mary aware of her standing with God and of God's active presence in her life. But instead of putting her at ease, the message threw her mind into confusion. While Mary was wondering what on earth Gabriel was on about, the angel tried to replace her obvious fear at his presence, with a word of encouragement, *"Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God."* Before Mary could ponder what the angel was on about, Gabriel delivered the punch line, *"And no, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."* (verses 31 – 33). Her son's name, the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua, means 'God has saved'

At this point, Mary reportedly found words which gave voice to her bewilderment and confusion. Even in her youth Mary knew that it was physically impossible for a virgin to get pregnant. And the answer came back, explaining that the birth of her son would have nothing to do with human will or desire. Her son would be conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, and will be called Son of God. I am not sure if God's pronouncement made Mary's future any easier, but the angel Gabriel continued to show Mary that impossible is not in God's vocabulary.

I know that we are not privy to the timescale of this conversation, but what is most astounding to me, is that after all that was said, Mary accepted God's plan for her life. Mary's response appears to be directed to God: *"Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."*

Questions for Reflection

2 Samuel 7:1 - 11

1. What reminds you that God's holy presence is living with/in you?
2. How would you like to be the one to relay God's message to a leader?
3. People who are appointed to high office today are sometimes perceived as 'the highest authority' in their nation. How can we remind ourselves, and the leaders, that they are appointed to serve or as servants?
4. Have you ever had to tell someone in leadership that God has shown you that their plan was not of God? How did you feel about being the messenger? And how did the leader respond to the message?

5. Think about what life is like for people who long for a place of their own, want to live free of those who hate them and yearn for a time when they can live in peace, where God has planted them. Then, as the Holy Spirit leads, bring their desires to God in prayer.
6. Have you ever behaved as if you were helping God, rather than God helping you?
7. King David had Nathan as a kind of spiritual director to help him hear God's direction. Who has God placed in your life to help you hear God's voice?

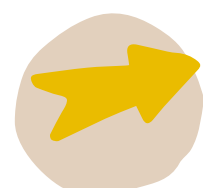
Luke 1:26 - 38

1. Have you ever wondered why God sent the angel Gabriel to deliver the news to Mary, when the prophet Nathan was sent to give the message to King David?
2. If a divine messenger appeared to you today, how do you think you might react?
3. What do you think enabled Mary to speak when most of us would have been dumbfounded?
4. Can you see any connection between verses 31-33 with the 2 Samuel 7 passage?
5. When divine messengers declare God's plans for our lives, how do we react to what sounds physically impossible?
6. The angel Gabriel left after Mary accepted her calling. Reflecting on your Christian discipleship, have you had an encounter with God which challenged you to ditch your chosen lifestyle for a more challenging and rewarding calling in God's service?
7. In the Christian calendar there are specific seasons, (e.g. Lent or Advent) when we are invited to do a spiritual check-up. Ask God to show you when you should take time to consciously develop a listening heart.



Worship Hymn

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord! (StF 186)



Additional Resources for Reflection



My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. - JOHN 10:27 NIV

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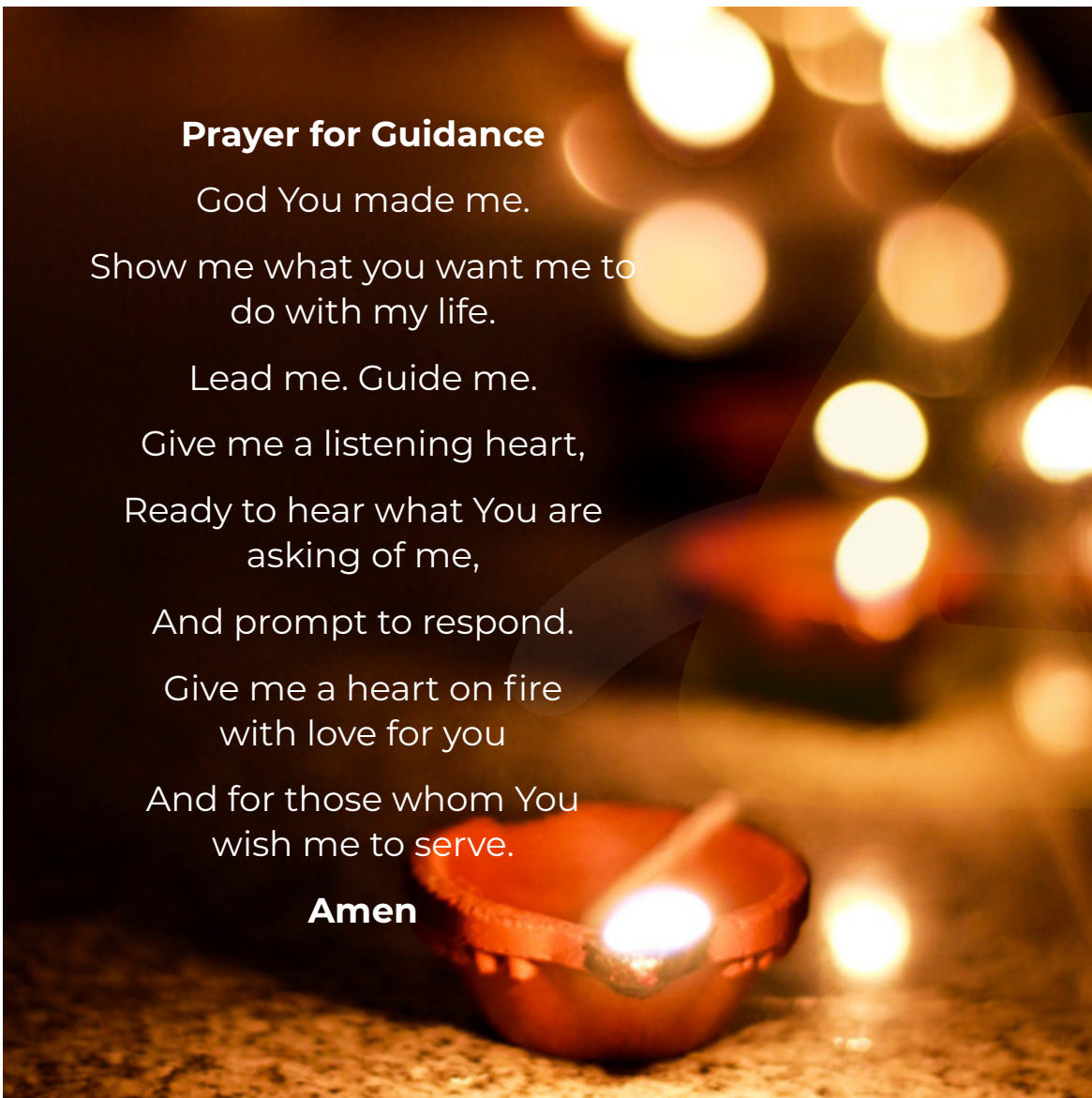
God wants to speak to you
but you have to listen not with
your ears but with your heart



Prayer for Guidance

God You made me.
Show me what you want me to
do with my life.
Lead me. Guide me.
Give me a listening heart,
Ready to hear what You are
asking of me,
And prompt to respond.
Give me a heart on fire
with love for you
And for those whom You
wish me to serve.

Amen





Personal Reflections

A series of 20 horizontal dotted lines for writing.

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Painting on front cover by Revd David Hollingsworth based on the mystery of John 5:4