

Creationist 2.0

Be Prepared

11 December 2022

Call to Worship – Luke 1

“My soul magnifies the Lord,

and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,

for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who fear him

from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;

he has filled the hungry with good things,

and sent the rich away empty.

Born in the night, Mary's Child

Geoffrey Ainger

Born in the night, Mary's child,

A long way from your home:

Coming in need, Mary's child,

Born in a borrowed room.

Clear shining light, Mary's child,

Your face lights up our way:

Light of the world, Mary's child,

Dawn on our darkened day.

Truth of our life, Mary's child,

You tell us god is good:

Prove it is true, Mary's child.

Go to your cross of wood.

Hope of the world, Mary's child,

You're coming soon to reign:

King of the earth, Mary's child,

Walk in our streets again.

Prayer of Adoration and Confession

The tree, a tree, any tree

God, you speak to us through the natural beauty of our world

A tree in full splendour, stretching toward the sky

Pressing down into the earth

Reaching out into the world

You teach us, God, how we might live

Stretching out toward you

Pressing into our family of faith

Reaching out into the world

Small trees, large trees, bushy trees, sparse trees

Each one has their place, a role to play in the theatre of life

Just as we have our place in your love and mercy

Teach us to seek out those things you have prepared for us

Forgive us for the times we withdraw into ourselves

Hiding from your call

Failing to serve as you have made us

We bring our private confessions before you now.

God pardons those who humbly repent and truly believe the gospel.

Since Jesus died for us, we have peace with God,

to whom be praise and honour for ever. Amen.

Dance – Team from House of Breakthrough

Notices

The Peace

Reading

James 5:7-10

⁷ Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. ⁸ You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. ⁹ Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! ¹⁰ As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

Reflection

Being prepared can mean different things to different people. Being prepared for summer might mean getting the garden ready and all the plants planted so they are ready to fruit at the right time. Or it might mean getting into the gym and making yourself beach ready. Or it might mean getting out the BBQ, cleaning it up and making sure it's ready to go for those long balmy evenings. Here is a short video clip about different approaches to being prepared.

Let's say you are heading off to the airport to catch a flight. Are you the person who is ready to go 5 hours before the flight? Or are you the one who turns up just in time wearing different socks and having your name called on the intercom? I'm quite sure the two protagonists both felt they were prepared for their flight in their own way. I'm also quite sure there would have been a little tension if the two were planning to travel together. My point here is that what is being prepared for you may look different to how being prepared is for the person sitting next to you.

Those differences count in our faith journey too. Think about it this way. I'm sure you know people who just love singing in church, reading their Bibles, praying out loud. And we all know people who are not fans of singing. They only read their Bibles occasionally, and don't you dare ask them to pray out loud. On the other hand, you will find those same people cheerfully helping in the kitchen, mowing the lawns – at church and for the elderly, sitting with shut-ins. Are they any less prepared for Christ's return than the singing, praying, Bible readers? I suspect they are just as ready for Jesus as anyone. Let's turn to our reading and see what it can tell us about being prepared. Did you notice how it talks about the farmer waiting for the precious crop from the earth but says nothing about all the preparation that goes on beforehand. Where is the tilling of the soil and the planting of the seeds and the weeding? There's none of that boring getting prepared stuff in there. I suspect that is because everyone reading that text would realise that there won't be a crop without the preparation. Being prepared is the prerequisite to harvesting a crop. If I go out to harvest some Christmas potatoes this year and discover there are none to be found it will be because I didn't plant any to begin with. I mean, that's kind of obvious isn't it? No amount of spring and summer rain is going to make potatoes grow if they weren't planted first. So we assume that the farmer has done all the work to ensure that the rain will find something to nurture.

Does that mean James is not telling us anything about preparation. Well, no. I think there are some important aspects of preparation in what he is telling us. The first thing we realise is that preparation involves patience. Occasionally people will tell you they do their best work under pressure. I used to say that all the time. As I have got older I have realised that is simply a lie I told myself, and often others, to justify my procrastination and laziness. If we do our best work under pressure, then why do elite athletes and musicians practice for thousands of hours? It is because they know that their best work is the result of hard work. Someone might argue that you can't train for the unexpected. The purpose of training is in the first instance to reduce the unexpected and then to give you tools to deal with anything that remains. So, we train, we practice, we prepare – and it all takes patience. It's much more fun to be out playing the game or the concert. But the game is less good if I constantly fumble the ball from lack of practice. The concert is less good if I miss all the high notes from lack of practice.

So James tells us to be patient – it is an essential part of preparation. And then another – strengthen your hearts. I have lost count of the times that people have told me they are old, they are weak, they are tired, they can't this, they can't that. Sometimes it comes out quietly by holding back and hoping someone else will pick up the job that needs doing. Sometimes it is louder and more obvious. And I get it. People get old. They find things that were once effortless and straight-forward have become difficult and sometimes impossible. When it is hard work simply getting to church anything else is a battle for someone else to fight. James isn't telling us to join the gym and get our hearts working. He is telling us to have courage. Here is something I think we can forget too easily. You may remember I talked a couple of weeks back about how opposing evil is a team sport. A lot of being Christian is a team sport. The best way to strengthen our hearts, to take courage, is to work together. It is so much easier to be strong together. Imagine how it would be if the All Blacks turned up and fielded a single player. Yet that can be how we play our faith at times – on our own against the world. We need each other for support and encouragement. To strengthen our hearts. When we learn to do that consistently – through patient practice - we will find that we are preparing ourselves as God intended. We will get to the grumbling another time – it's important enough to get its own message. For now we are going to team up to sing.

When the music fades

Matt Redman

When the music fades, all is stripped away,
And I simply come
Longing just to bring, something that's of worth
That will bless Your heart

I'll bring You more than a song
For a song in itself is not what You have required
You search much deeper within, through the way things appear
You're looking into my heart

I'm coming back to the heart of worship,
And it's all about You, all about You Jesus
I'm sorry Lord for the thing I've made it
When it's all about You, all about You Jesus

King of endless worth
No one could express how much You deserve
Though I'm weak and poor
All I have is Yours, every single breath

Reading Matthew 11:2-11

² When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples ³ and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" ⁴ Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. ⁶ And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

⁷ As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸ What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. ⁹ What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is the one about whom it is written,

'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.'

¹¹ Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Reflection

John's whole purpose in life was to prepare the way for Jesus. Everything he did and said was to point the way to the coming of the Messiah. When the poor and the lame came to him, he baptised them and told them to look out for the Messiah. When the soldiers and tax collectors came to him, he baptised them and told them to look out for the Messiah. When the Pharisees and Sadducees came to him, he called them a brood of vipers, maybe baptised them, and told them to look out for the Messiah. He had one tune, and he sang for all he was worth.

To be honest I find people who are completely single-minded a bit tiresome. I want to tell them to sing a new song occasionally. To tilt their heads to the side and take a different view of the world. I suspect sometimes people think that about me. And here's the thing. We need people like that, people who continually press us to look beyond ourselves and see what's out there. People who tell us to look out for the Messiah. Without them our lives would be dull (yes, I know some people like dull), uneventful (yes, I know some people find uneventful refreshing), and worst of all, without Jesus. Without Jesus because unless some single-minded person had pointed us toward Jesus where would we be? Remember Andrew inviting Nathaniel to come and meet Jesus? Remember Peter and John introducing the lame man to Jesus? Remember Paul inviting King Agrippa to trust in Jesus? These all showed a single-mindedness in calling people to meet Jesus. Were they always successful? No, they weren't. Did it stop them from trying? No, it didn't.

Now, before you say, 'But I'm not like that. I'm no Paul or Peter or Andrew.' I know. A world full of Pauls would be uncomfortable at best and downright awful at worst. This is where we use an extreme to make a point. I am not suggesting that we all become as single-minded as Paul, or John the Baptist. I am suggesting that we learn from them. That we learn that aspect of being prepared they had tuned down to a fine art.

You may have already picked up on what it is I am referring to. The writer to the Hebrews puts it like this:

“We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we're in.” Hebrews 12:2

There *is* a single-mindedness to this. Only it isn't a single-mindedness that becomes bloody-minded. It is like a farmer turning the soil for planting. If he only looks at the wheels of the tractor those furrows are likely to wander all over the place. But if he fixes his eyes on the point where he wants to end up

the furrow will be good and straight. Or it is like a tramper walking through unmarked bush. If she only watches the ground in front of her she will likely walk in circles. But if she takes a bearing on a landmark well ahead of her and keeps her eyes on that landmark she will probably make good progress toward her destination. In both examples the farmer and the tramper need to be watching more than just their endpoint. They need to be aware of what their equipment is doing, ready to make adjustments where necessary. But always at least some part of their attention is on where they are heading.

As Christians we have a bearing, a point where we want to end up. It is Jesus. We need to be aware of what we are doing, of how we navigate the world around us as we head toward Jesus. We need to be ready to adjust our approach, speeding up or slowing down as is appropriate, making turns when the particular road we are on comes to an end, but always heading toward Jesus. It is likely that when we look back on where we have been there will be all sorts of twists and turns in our paths. Places where we had to double back, routes that took way longer than the most direct track, points where we set camp and just stayed a while. For the most part those aren't mistakes. They are signs of us being the living, creative human beings we are made to be.

As long as we keep our eyes on Jesus we are being prepared. We might long to be more prepared. We might spend time working at being more prepared. We might march with single-minded purpose toward our goal. Or we might live well, always with Jesus in view, always making forward progress on average, even when it is two steps forward and one back. Either approach is OK. With patience and courageous hearts we will finish the race to the glory of God.

We Pray

Loving God, we often feel so very unprepared for all the curveballs life seems to throw at us. Life, death, and everything in between constantly catch us by surprise. We think we have things sorted out and suddenly something changes, sweeping us off our feet, as we wonder how we will survive the approaching calamity. Help us to keep our eyes on Jesus as our bearing and goal so that no matter how often life tumbles us, we come out heading in the right direction. Teach us to be prepared, to be patient, to have strong hearts that when it is our time to point to Jesus we are ready and able. Through Christ who is our compass in life we pray. Amen.

Only You

Andy Park

No one but You Lord
Can satisfy this longing in my heart
Nothing I do Lord
Can take the place of drawing near to You

Only You can fill my deepest longing
Only You can breathe in me new life
Only You can fill my heart with laughter
Only You can answer my heart's cry

Father I love You
Come satisfy the longing in my heart
Fill me overwhelm me
Until I know Your love deep in my heart

Offering

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/>

Generous God, as we bring our gifts to you this day, we acknowledge that we have been given so much by your goodness, but we have been tight-fisted and slow in giving to help others. In this Advent season of preparation, we ask you to help us live in a new way, to walk a new highway, to set ourselves on the path that leads to a closer walk with Jesus, our example and redeemer. May this be the season when he finds the highways to our hearts prepared for his coming. In the name that is above all others. Amen.

Prayer for Others and Ourselves

As Christians around the world lean into the Season of Waiting we prepare ourselves to see things we have chosen to ignore, to listen for the sounds of holiness all around us and to open ourselves to the mysteries of Advent. Waiting involves courage, patience, and perseverance. We pray for an abundance of these qualities for those who are waiting for answers that may be difficult to hear:

For the people on the island of Ischia, near Naples, Italy, where several people are feared to have died after a mudslide was triggered by heavy rains. The missing people are believed to be trapped under the mud.

For those mourning the violent death of Cassius Turvey, a teen-aged Aboriginal youth, beaten to death in his beloved country of Australia. The crime has been determined to be racially motivated.

The waiting is hard, Most Holy One, and there are times when we want to give up. Grant us strength, all of us, as we wait for answers unknown, for answers that will change our lives, for answers that will bring us closer to you.

For the families of those lost unexpectedly in this past year. Through illness, through accident, through violence. As they grieve in this expectant time leading into Christmas, we pause with them.

We grieve for the injustice that seems to permeate the air. We ask that you, Lover of all, help us to recognize the myriad steps that are taken in the name of freedom, of peace, of love.

For our friends and families, those we love, those we struggle with. For ourselves as we love and struggle within ourselves. For those who are travelling, who are ill, who are in distress, who are lonely.

Creator, Saviour, Spirit, we wait to catch a glimpse of your light. We wait to hear the news we are anxious to receive. We wait expectantly, as Mary did, and so many women after her. We wait....as you continue to change our lives. May we feel your presence as you wait with us. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father in Heaven holy be your name.

Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen

Not on a snowy night (Te Harinui)

David Lyle Morris

Not on a snowy night
By star or candlelight
Nor by an angel band
There came to our dear land

Te Harinui
Te Harinui
Te Harinui
Glad tidings of great joy

But on a summer day
Within a quiet bay
The Maori people heard
The great and glorious word

The people gathered round
Upon the grassy ground
And heard the preacher say
I bring to you this day

Now in this blessed land
United heart and hand
We praise the glorious birth
And sing to all the earth

Benediction and Grace

As we go on from here may we find the patience and courage and single-mindedness to keep Jesus always in our sight...

May the Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
the Love of God,
and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with us all, now and forevermore. Amen.

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