

ABBAY INTERNATIONAL BAPTIST CHURCH, READING
THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT WORSHIP SERVICE WITH COMMUNION
10.30 AM 15TH DECEMBER 2024

REV DR JIM BINNEY LEADING & REV DR JULIA BINNEY PREACHING

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THEME: Advent 3 – The God of Grace (Luke 1:26-38,46-48)

ADVENT 3:

With this third Advent candle we remember Mary, the mother of Jesus, a young woman, blessed by God.

As we light this candle we give thanks for Mary who responded to God in faith and trust, saying 'yes' to God's challenge, accepting the pain and joy of an unknown future.

PAUSE TO REFLECT

CALL TO WORSHIP: *From 1 Corinthians 1:27-30*

God chooses the foolish things of the world to shame the wise.

God chooses the weak things of the world to shame the strong.

God chooses the lowly things of the world and the despised things and the things that are counted as nothing at all to bring to nothing what the world considers important.

So that no-one has anything to boast of before Him.

It is because of Him that we are united with Christ Jesus who is for us our wisdom, our holiness. He made us right with God and freed us from sin.

We gather to worship the God of grace, who is Immanuel, God with us.

MP 1045:

From the squalor of a borrowed stable,
By the Spirit and a virgin's faith;
To the anguish and the shame of scandal
Came the Saviour of the human race!
But the skies were filled with the praise of heaven,
Shepherds listen as the angels tell
Of the Gift of God come down to man
At the dawning of Immanuel.

King of heaven now the Friend of sinners,
Humble servant in the Father's hands,

Filled with power and the Holy Spirit,
Filled with mercy for the broken man.
Yes, He walked my road and He felt my pain,
Joys and sorrows that I know so well;
Yet His righteous steps give me hope again –
I will follow my Immanuel!

Through the kisses of a friend's betrayal,
He was lifted on a cruel cross;
He was punished for a world's transgressions,
He was suffering to save the lost.
He fights for breath, He fights for me,
Loosing sinners from the claims of hell;
And with a shout our souls are free –
Death defeated by Immanuel!

Now He's standing in the place of honour,
Crowned with glory on the highest throne,
Interceding for His own beloved
Till His Father calls to bring them home!
Then the skies will part as the trumpet sounds
Hope of heaven or the fear of hell;
But the bride will run to her Lover's arms,
Giving glory to Immanuel!

STUART TOWNEND © 1999 THANKYOU MUSIC

ADVENT WORSHIP:

The Holy One is merciful and strong. **We glorify the Lord.**
The Holy One is unimpressed by power. **We glorify the Lord.**
The Holy One feeds the hungry. **We glorify the Lord.**
The Holy One keeps his ageless promises. **We glorify the Lord.**
The Holy One is full of grace and truth. **We glorify the Lord.**
We worship, honour and glorify the Lord, our God and Saviour. Amen.

A PRAYER OF CONFESSION:

Lord God, there are times in our lives when we fail to understand.

In reliving the past, we do not live in love.

In fearing the future, we do not offer hope.

In depending on ourselves, we do not trust.

We avoid the risks of discipleship and turn away from the challenges of transformation and change.

Forgive us. Plant the seed of hope and expectation in us, help us to live as your people and bring your kingdom to birth in and through us. For Jesus' sake. Amen

THE LORD'S PRAYER: *You are invited to pray in your own heart language*

**Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come,
your will be done on earth as in heaven.**

**Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours
now and for ever and ever. Amen.**

FAMILY TIME: Help, I need somebody!

(There will be an offering taken during the following song, and after the song the children will leave us for their own groups)

SONG:

Our God is so big,
So strong, and so mighty—
There's nothing our God cannot do.
That's right!

(repeat)

The mountains are His;
The valleys are His;
The stars are His handiwork, too.

Our God is so big,
So strong, and so mighty—
There's nothing our God cannot do.
That's right!

PRAYER OF DEDICATION

GOSPEL READING 1: Luke 1:26-38

GOSPEL READING 2: Luke 1:46-55

BP&W 177:

The angel Gabriel from heaven came,
His wings as drifted snow his eyes as flame
'From God, all hail' the angel said to Mary,
Most highly favoured lady!' *Gloria!*

'Fear not, for you shall bear a holy child,
By him shall we to God be reconciled;
His name shall be Emmanuel, the long-foretold:
Most highly favoured lady!' *Gloria!*

Then gentle Mary humbly bowed her head:
"To me be as it pleases God," she said,
"My soul shall praise and magnify his holy name."
Most highly favoured lady!' *Gloria!*

Of her, Immanuel, the Christ was born
In Bethlehem, all on a Christmas morn

And Christian folk throughout the world will ever say:

"Most highly favoured lady." Gloria!

SABINE BARING-GOULD (1834-1924)

SERMON: The God of Grace (Luke 1:26-38,46-48)

Today is the third Sunday of Advent. Advent is the period of the church year when we prepare for the wonder of Christmas that is of God coming among us, born a helpless baby in Bethlehem's manger, God in the flesh, Immanuel, God with us, the One come among us full of grace and truth (John 1:14). It is traditional on one of the Sundays of Advent to think about Mary, the mother of Jesus and the role she played. In and through her we see **The God of Grace** which is the theme this morning and we are looking at Luke 1:26-38, 46-48.

Controversy surrounds Mary. Either her role is vastly inflated even given an equal place to Jesus with prayers offered to her. She is described in some circles as Mother of God, sinless, another mediator between God and humanity and able to impart grace and forgiveness. Or her role is dismissed, ignored and her place in salvation history played down. The cult of Mary which is very strong in Roman Catholic and high Anglican churches, started in Ephesus, which was in Asia minor now modern day Turkey. There the worship of Artemis was strong. She was the Greek goddess of hunting, childbirth, virginity and the protector of young girls. We can see the links. When Jesus was dying on the cross he asked John to take care of his mother (John 19:26,27). John took Mary to Ephesus where he became the pastor of the church. You can visit her house there. But there is only one mediator between God and humanity that is God's son, Jesus Christ. There is no need for another. Jesus is our great high priest, not Mary. So then what is her place, her role, and what can we learn from her about **The God of Grace?**

1. **Mary is the model disciple.** This is her rightful place and role. She is the model of humble obedience and submission to God and his will for her life. She is an example for us to follow: 'I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said' (v.38). Mary said 'yes' to God. To inflate or exaggerate Mary's role is a distortion and her example to us is lost. Mary was a 1st century devout Jew from Nazareth engaged to a carpenter called Joseph. One day an angel came to her to announce to her that she would bear a son even though she was a young unmarried virgin and explained to her who the child was and how it would happen. This is known as The Annunciation and is a powerful image in western art. The passage in Luke is in the New Testament but it is full of Old Testament imagery. There is a formula to angelic meetings and Luke's purpose here is to mimic the Old Testament format and symbolism. He is deliberately emphasising the continued revelation of the Old Testament to the New Testament and the sense of continuity and coherence of God's plan for salvation through Jesus. He is also deliberately emphasising the cost of discipleship. For Mary, her obedience was costly. Being unmarried and pregnant in 1st century Palestine was a serious business. For Luke, becoming a follower of Jesus is about daring to be different, being faced daily with the call of God to follow Jesus in life transforming ways as the only way to the full, abundant and eternal life that Jesus offers. Any other attachment - such as family, people, economic and emotional ties, religious, cultural - that gets in the way of this or prevents it, for Luke, was substituting another god for Jesus. Through his gospel by the Holy Spirit, God's call comes to us. Do we dare to be different, be counter-cultural, to daily face the decision to follow Jesus and be like Mary and say 'yes' to God.



2. **Mary knew she was a nobody.** She was a lowly maiden of no earthly economic, social or political power or influence. Luke intentionally wrote about ordinary people because everyone matters and is valued from the lowest born to the highest but he has a special place or women, the poor and excluded. Mary would have seen herself as lowly, of the lowest rank, because of age, gender and family background. When the Angel appears before her and says, 'Greetings Mary. You who are highly favoured' (v.28), is not how she would have seen herself. No wonder she was greatly troubled at the angel's words (v.29). But she was called by God and chosen by him for a special purpose. This confirms that 'God chooses the foolish

things of the world to shame the wise. God chooses the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chooses the lowly things of the world and the despised things and the things that are counted as nothing at all to bring to nothing what the world considers important' (1 Corinthians 1:27-30). This is the upside down nature of the Kingdom of God so that no one has anything to boast in in and of themselves. When we feel weak and helpless and inadequate that is when God can use us. The Apostle Paul had a 'thorn in the flesh' (2 Corinthians 12:7), which may have been a person or an illness or a condition. He pleaded with God three times to take it away but God didn't. Paul had to live with it (v.8). God said to him, 'my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness' (v.9). In other words, 'my grace is enough; it's all you need. My strength comes into its own in your weakness.' Paul came to the conclusion, 'For when I'm weak, then I am strong' (v.10). When we acknowledge our own weakness and sense of adequacy, when we stop pretending that we are OK or it is all of us and our own strength, then we can be strong in God: 'I just let Christ take over! And so the weaker I get, the stronger I become' (v.10 the Message). The more we depend on God the stronger we are. We have to stop fighting, stop trying to do things on her own strength and be like Mary and give in and say to God, 'I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said' (Luke 1:38).

3. Mary reveals the reality of God's joy. She shows us how to live in God's joy. In Luke 1:46-55 we find Mary's

song, a beautiful poetic prophetic song of praise in response to Elizabeth's prophetic declaration about Mary's unborn child: 'my soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my saviour come before he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed' (vs.46-48). The word 'rejoices' here is the strongest word for joy in the Greek language (the language of the New Testament). It is a spontaneous, extravagant, and uncontainable joy. How can she rejoice like this given her circumstances? In 1st century Palestine to be pregnant and unmarried was a serious business. Despite how others might view and interpret her circumstances, she saw herself as blessed: 'I'm bursting with God-news; I'm dancing the song of my Saviour God. God took one good look at me and look what happened - I'm the most fortunate woman on earth!' (vs 46-48 The Message). Indeed she was/is! It wasn't her circumstances, it was her interpretation of those circumstances. How do you interpret your circumstances? Mary chose to interpret her circumstances as a blessing! Rick Warren defines Christian joy as 'a settled assurance that God is in control of all the details of my life, the quiet confidence that ultimately everything is going to be alright and the determined choice to praise God in every situation.' Mary invites us to see beyond our circumstances and to choose to look to God.

The focus of Mary's story, and her place and role, is on God, on his grace and undeserved favour that takes ordinary, lowly and insignificant things and people of this world to do extraordinary things in his Kingdom. We are not called to do what Mary was called to do but whatever God is requiring of us - to us it might feel as momentous and seemingly impossible - remember, v.37 'Nothing is impossible with God.'

Without God's grace Mary could not have done what she did. She didn't fulfil God's plans and purposes for her life because she was 'special' but because God's grace enabled her to be all that God required her to be - the model disciple, a wonderful, inspiring and powerful example of a true obedient, humble, submissive follower of Jesus. God's grace enabled her in her weakness to be strong, to rejoice in her circumstances because she knew that despite how things looked she was blessed by God and God would see her through!

'Grace' is one of the most wonderful words in the Christian faith. It means the unmerited favour of God freely given to weak, sinful people like us. We can't buy it, we can't earn it, it is the free gift of God. Grace is God reaching down in infinite love and care to people who are in rebellion against him. It is most clearly expressed in the promises of God in Scripture and embodied in Jesus Christ. It was God's grace, and his grace alone, which enabled Mary to go through all that she had to fulfil her calling to be the mother of God's Son. The good news is that this same grace is as available to us today, in and through Jesus, as it was to Mary. So whatever it is that God calls you to be or to do you can be sure of this that like Mary, like the Apostle Paul, you too will discover that God's grace is more than sufficient for your need (2 Corinthians 12:9).

MP 793:

You are my hiding place,
You always fill my heart with songs of deliverance,
Whenever I am afraid
I will trust in You.
I will trust in You;
Let the weak say 'I am strong
In the strength of my God.'

MICHAEL LEDNER © 1981 MARANATHA! MUSIC/ ADM. BY COPYCARE.

RECEPTION OF NEW MEMBERS

COMMUNION

WORDS OF INVITATION

Come to me, says Jesus, all who are tired of carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest.

Come to me, all who are anxious, fearful and doubting, and I will give you peace and assurance.

Come to me all who are weighed down by sin and guilt and I will give you forgiveness.
Come to me all who are burdened by past failures and I will give you a new beginning.
Come, says Jesus, eat, drink, taste and see that the Lord is good –
do this in remembrance of me.

A PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING

THE INSTITUTION:

'The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread
and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said,

"This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

In the same way after supper he took the cup saying,

"This cup is the new covenant in my blood.

Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

(1 Corinthians 11:23-26)

This is the body of Christ, broken for you.

(take a piece of bread and eat as it is served to you)

This is the blood of Christ, shed for you.

(we drink together once all have been served)

WORDS OF ACCLAMATION AND CELEBRATION:

**We are God's people, people of hope and expectation,
for the risen Christ is here, full of grace and truth,
speaking his word, giving his promise:
'Peace be with you... do not be afraid...
for I will be with you to the end of time.'**

PRAYERS FOR OTHERS: – Hassan Kabotragi and Parisa Hashemi

Heavenly Father,

As we approach the season of Christmas, we come before You with hearts full of gratitude for the gift of Your Son, Jesus Christ, the light of the world. We thank You for His humble arrival, His love, and the hope He brought to a weary and waiting world.

In this season of Advent, we remember the promise of His return. Help us to prepare our hearts as we await the day when Jesus will come again in glory, bringing peace and restoration to all creation.

Lord, let this season be a time of renewal in our faith. Teach us to reflect the love and joy of Christ in our lives, spreading kindness, hope, and compassion to all we meet. May Your Spirit guide us to walk in His light and to proclaim His truth.

We pray for those who feel lost, lonely, or broken during this time. May they feel the warmth of Your presence and the hope of Christ's coming. Help us to be Your hands and feet, sharing Your love with those in need.

As we celebrate the birth of our Savior, may our hearts overflow with praise, and may we never forget the reason for this season: the arrival of Emmanuel, God with us.

In Jesus' holy name we pray, Amen.

MP 1151:

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me;
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear,
The hour I first believed.

*My chains are gone, I've been set free,
My God, my Saviour has ransomed me.
And like a flood his mercy reigns,
Amazing love, amazing grace.*

The Lord has promised good to me,
His word my hope secures;
He will my shield and portion be
As long as life endures.
My chains are gone...

The earth shall soon dissolve like snow,
The sun forbear to shine.
But God who called me here below
Will be forever mine.

H. E. FOSDICK (1878-1969) ALTD. J. NEWTON (1725-1807) AND E O EXCELL (1851-1921): CHORUS BY C TOMLIN AND L GIGLIO © 2006
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ADVENT BLESSING:

May God inspire and strengthen you as you respond to his call to obedient discipleship.

May you receive the grace and care, love and humility, courage and joy to fulfil God's will and purpose for your life.

And may God bless you and release his love to you and through you, in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

THE GRACE:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore. Amen.

TODAY and dates for your diary:

The next Leadership Course Session 4 is POSTPONED until the new year. The revised dates are:

- Tuesday 7th January 2025 – 2.30 pm in person in the Brookside room.
- Friday 10th January 2025 – 7.30 pm on Zoom (ID: 828 1505 7805 Passcode: 461165).

Church Prayer Meeting:

- Friday 20th December - In person in the Upper Room Prayer Room at church 10.30 – 11.30 am.

Christmas Programme: details are on the publicity flyers. Please give others a copy of the flyer as an invitation to the Advent and Christmas services.

Baptismal Service: A baptismal service is being planned for 12th January and another one on February 9th. If you would like to be baptised and/or become a Church Member please speak to the Minister or one of the Deacons.

If you would like to contribute financially to Abbey International Baptist Church electronically, please use the card reader at the back of the church or scan the following QR code below to pay.

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