**Salendine Nook Baptist Church – Church Together**

**Sunday 28th November 2021 – Journey To Bethlehem - Is There Hope?**

**Welcome**

Welcome to **Church Together.**

**No matter wherever you are, whatever you do, whoever you are, together we can grow as Church Together.**

Our flexible Sunday worship patterns blend together on - line services, home deliveries and E - mailed copies of Church Together.

Today’s service will be looking at: **Luke 1 v. 26 - 38**

The theme for today’s service is: **Journey To Bethlehem - Is There Hope?**

Today’s service that is set out in this edition of **Church Together i**s looking at **Journey To Bethlehem - Is There Hope?**

We hope that you will be able to engage with what has been produced for our **Sunday Service** and that you would indeed **Journey With Us Throughout This Advent Season**

**Call To Worship**

**Psalm 62 v. 5 - 8 NLT**

I wait quietly before God,

For my hope is in him.

He alone is my rock and my salvation,

My fortress where I will not be shaken.

My salvation and my honour come from God

Alone.

He is my refuge, a rock where no enemy

Can reach me.

O my people, trust in him at all times.

Pour out your heart to him,

For God is our refuge.

**Moment of Reflection**

For I know the plans I have for you declares the Lord. Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. **Jeremiah 29 v. 11 NIV**

**Opening Prayer**

Loving Lord Jesus, we come to worship you today on this first Sunday in Advent. Today we begin our preparations to celebrate your coming into our world. Be with us now we pray, and help us to know your nearness not only in the time spent here in church but at every time of our lives.

Over many long years your people prepared for your coming; they looked for a king and a conqueror and when you came as a baby they missed seeing you; when you came with the conquering power of love they rejected you.

Let us today heavenly Father, not miss your coming among us now. Be here in our worship and out in the world that we are part of.

We ask these things in Jesus’ name.

**Amen**

**Song Suggestion**

As The Deer Pants For The Water

**Moment of Reflection**

If you declare with your mouth, Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.

**A Prayer For The First Sunday In Advent**

God of light and life,

Give us hope as we wait

For your coming again.

When we are tempted

To be grateful to have found you

While others are lost,

Send us out into the darkness

In search of those

Who need you most.
**Amen**

**A History Of The Advent Wreath And Candles**

Advent is a seasonal tradition often celebrating and preparing for the arrival or coming of Jesus Christ. The advent wreath is used to symbolically commemorate newness, eternal life, and the death and resurrection of the promised Messiah. It is often coupled with the lighting of candles and prayers recited in the weeks leading up to Christmas.

**The History of Advent**

Advent traditions will vary by country, but the heart behind Advent is mostly the same across cultures and denominations. Derived from the Latin word **‘adventus’**, the word advent means **‘arrival’** or **‘coming’**. In this instance, it is used to indicate set time(s) during the month of December to commemorate the coming of the Messiah in Jesus Christ. Advent, like Christmas, is a season of expectation, celebration, and hope.

There are a few historical accounts that put the inception of Advent as a church tradition somewhere around the 4th or 5th century. Other traditions use Advent as a way to anticipate the second coming of Jesus Christ, which has yet to happen. However, most of what we know and practice today, can be traced back to the Middle Ages and later 19th century. In 1851, the first mention of an Advent calendar was seen in Elise Averdieck’s picture book, and in 1839, the advent wreath first appeared.

**The Advent Wreath**

As the story goes, in 1839, a Lutheran minister working at a children’s mission in Germany created a wreath out of the wheel of a cart. The minister placed 20 small red candles on the outer ring of the wheel and four larger white candles inside the ring, lighting the red candles on weekdays and the four white candles on Sundays as a way for the children to countdown the days until Christmas.

Advent wreaths were eventually fashioned out of evergreens, twisted together in a circle to symbolize continuous life across the seasons, from the death of winter to the new life of spring. Naturally, this earthly symbolism also points to the spiritual symbolism of newness and the promise of eternal life and salvation offered through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ (**John 3 v. 16**). The circular nature of the Advent wreath, similar to a wedding ring or band, is further meant to reflect the unending love of Jesus and eternal life offered through salvation.

Holly leaves, berries, and seeds are sometimes added to the Advent wreath as well. Holly leaves can be prickly and therefore used to represent the crown of thorns placed on Jesus’s head during his crucifixion. Berries, which are typically red, also point to Christ’s sacrifice and the blood shed for sins. Pinecones, seeds, and nuts are also placed within the wreath as a symbol and promise of new life. Together, the elements of the Advent wreath reflect the new life and eternal salvation offered through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who we now celebrate.

**The Advent Candles**

In almost all Advent traditions, the lighting of candles is also a prominent feature of each week’s commemorative celebration. Some candles are placed within or near the Advent wreath itself. Other times, they are lit separately on each Sunday beginning four weeks prior to Christmas. Candles and the light they produce are a reflection of the light that came into the world with the arrival of Jesus Christ.

Some traditions light a single candle on each of the 24 days leading up to Christmas. Other traditions place one large candle in the centre of the Advent wreath and light it every day of December until Christmas.

The most common tradition, however, typically uses four candles. Each advent candle is lit on one of the four Sundays leading up to Christmas. The colour of these candles can vary, but it is common that the first, second, and fourth candle is purple, while the third candle is rose - coloured, red, or a pinkish hue. In some cases, all the candles are red, blue, or white, and often, a fifth white candle is placed in the middle of the wreath and lit on Christmas Day itself.

In most traditions, the lighting of the four candles (*or multiple candles*) is meant to be done as a family and will often be used to reflect on the hope, love, joy, peace, light, and purity that came into the world with the gift of the Messiah. Families will typically light the candle together, often encouraging children to take part in the celebration. Many modern churches light an Advent candle during Sunday services to prepare for Christmas as a church family.

Regardless of specific Advent traditions and differences in how it is celebrated across cultures and countries, Advent is a time for all believers and families to commemorate the arrival of the Messiah, prepare for his second coming, and celebrate the joy of Christmas together.

**Advent Wreath Prayer Week 1 - Hope**

On this First Sunday in Advent, we come and pray:

Heavenly Father, Advent is a time for remembering and reflecting on the birth of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus.  Help us to turn our hearts toward you as Christmas approaches.  Let us not get caught up in the hustle and bustle of the season this year and miss the chance to celebrate the gifts of hope, love, joy, peace, that you sent to us on that first Christmas.

Father God, every word in scripture points to the gift of hope that we have because of Jesus.  The Christmas story wasn’t the beginning of that message of hope because the Old Testament is full of glimpses of your plan to redeem your people and restore them into a relationship with you.

You showed us a glimmer of that hope as you chose to send your son into this world through a simple, ordinary family. It can be seen when we recognize that you didn’t send your Son to be birthed in a fancy palace among the wealthy and the elite, but Jesus, who is, our King of Kings and Lord of Lords was born among the everyday ordinary things of life.

Help us to see that you are with us.  Nothing is too difficult, too messy, or too dirty for you.  Jesus came to give us the gift of Eternal Life through the salvation that only you, our Heavenly Father, can give when we believe on your Son, repent of our sins, and confess Jesus as our Lord and Saviour.

That first Christmas, you gave us the gift of hope wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger.  Thank you, Father, for your immeasurable gift. In Jesus’ precious name, we pray.

**Amen**

**Bible Reading**

**Luke 1 v. 26 – 38 NIV**

**The birth of Jesus foretold**

26In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, 27to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. 28The angel went to her and said, ‘Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.’

29Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. 30But the angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. 31You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. 32He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, 33and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants for ever; his kingdom will never end.’

34‘How will this be,’ Mary asked the angel, ‘since I am a virgin?’

35The angel answered, ‘The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. 36Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. 37For no word from God will ever fail.’

38‘I am the Lord’s servant,’ Mary answered. ‘May your word to me be fulfilled.’ Then the angel left her.

**Song Suggestion**

At The Name Of Jesus, Every Knee Shall Bow

**Offering**

No matter wherever you are, whatever you do, whoever you are, together we can grow as Church Together here at Salendine Nook.

Now that we find ourselves once again holding services in Church, we are able to give of our finances to the work of the Lord when we are in church.

If you feel that your are able to, then please keep on giving with a cheerful and grateful heart, praising God for all that he has given to you and share in the finances of the church.

**Moment of Reflection**

For nothing is impossible with God. **Luke 1 v. 37**

**Church Together Thought**

What do we do when we are bursting with happiness, when we hope for something wonderful to happen? News that is given to us that we least expect! At first, we might burst into tears, jump up and down or shout for joy, as what has happened begins to sink in. If it is very good news, many of us might feel like singing, or we might find ourselves expressing our joy with words that hardly seem our own.

The Jews were expected a Messiah, a man sent from God who would lead them back to a time of peace and prosperity. The prophets of the Old Testament had foretold of his coming, and many a Jewish woman may have longed to be the one who would give birth to the Messiah, the anointed one. Maybe, Mary was one of those Jewish women who longed for this to happen!

On this first Sunday in Advent, we begin a journey looking at a theme of Hope. We will be journeying to Bethlehem, over the course of Advent, with well – known characters such as Mary, The Shepherds, The Wise Men / Magi and of course ourselves. Along the way we will hold in the course of our thoughts the idea of Hope is Born. So, let us begin our Journey To Bethlehem!

How would you react if an angel dropped by for a visit? For the news that the angel Gabriel brings to Mary is mind – blowing. If something like the angel Gabriel’s visit to Mary happened to us, we might think we’d blundered into an episode of ‘The X-Files’.

Mary was a good girl who was minding her own business when her life – and the direction of the entire human race – was forever changed by the appearance of the angel Gabriel. Very often when angels appear in the Bible, the people who see them are terrified. Mary was no exception.

After the initial greeting, the angel Gabriel said to Mary, ***‘Don’t be frightened.’*** ***‘Do not be afraid’*** was a kind of catchphrase among angels in the Bible, a way of telling the person in front of them to calm down before they had a heart attack. We find an example of this earlier in this very chapter of Luke.

‘When Zechariah saw the angel, he was startled and overcome with fear. The angel said, ‘Don’t be afraid, Zechariah.’’ (**Luke 1 v. 12 - 13, NRSV**).

But it’s not just about their own appearance that angels say that. And in this passage where the Angel Gabriel appears to Mary, I don’t think that it was so much his appearance that was giving Mary reason to fear. I think he spoke the words, ***‘Do not be afraid’*** in order to pre-empt the message he was about to deliver. It was a message fraught with danger. It was the news that she was pregnant.

Now remember Mary is engaged (**which is legally binding**), but not yet married, and so she is still living at home with her parents, and the assumption is that she would still be a virgin until she and Joseph came together and formed their own household. But now there’s this angel in her room telling her that she is pregnant, and he tells her not to be afraid before he even gives her the news. He did this, I think because he probably knew the chain of fears that might run through her mind:

(**It's important to remember that Mary was only in her mid – teens, possibly no older than 15 years old**). That chain of fears could have gone something like this:

Joseph, knowing the child wasn’t his, would call off the marriage and leave her. For that reason, people would assume that her pregnancy was the result of sleeping around. Her parents would think the same thing and might disown her and throw her out. Friends would then forsake her. She would be shamed and either shunned or stoned (**remember that’s the penalty for adultery**). Even if she weren’t stoned, she would be all alone during the trials and sufferings of pregnancy. Even if she made it to the actual birth itself, she would be alone facing the daunting task of labour and the delivery which included the very real possibility of dying in childbirth.

**I wonder what your greatest fear is? What you are most afraid of? Whether you think to yourself; ‘Is there any hope for the future’?**

It would appear, that the more Mary heard, the more confusing the angel’s message became. God would visit her. She would become pregnant – even though she was a virgin. And this baby would somehow be the Son of God! Yet despite her fear and confusion, this young woman responded in a way that demonstrated her absolute faith in God: ***‘I am the Lord’s servant, and I am willing to accept whatever He wants.’*** (**Luke 1 v. 38**)

**Do you mean me?**

Mary is overwhelmed when the angel tells her that she, a lowly peasant girl, is to be the mother of the Messiah. **How would we react to this awesome, out-of-this-world being bringing us such stupendous, almost unbelievable news? Would we be cynical, doubtful, or just plain terrified?**

Mary doesn’t doubt for one moment what the angel says — though she does want to sort out the practicalities (**Luke 1 v. 34**)!

We too need to remember the angel’s words when we feel that there is no hope left: ***‘Do not be afraid’***. We need to know that those words still apply and that they apply to each one of us today. There will always be dangers and difficulties in and throughout our lives, there will always be something to fear, but we need not be afraid. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has brought an end to all our fears. God has and can overcome them. The game, the battle, is won.

All we have to do in courage is to put aside our fear for a moment and say yes to God. Mary ultimately was not afraid and said yes to God, or perhaps she said yes to God and then became unafraid. Maybe it was some combination of the two. Maybe it’s not possible to know which came first. Maybe it works that way for us. In saying yes, we become unafraid and in becoming unafraid we are ever more able to say yes.

To be clear: The Christian faith does not teach that our lives will not be perfect, not everything will go our way. After all, the child Mary bore, Jesus Christ the word made flesh, the most faithful human being who ever lived, suffered and died a horrible death.

There’s no promise that everything is going to go the way we want to. But that is not the end of the story. Christ suffered and died, but then he went through death and came out the other side more alive than ever. And so, his resurrection promises us that although we must face trials and difficulties in this life, in the end, in the life to come, all will be well. For in the life and the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the world has turned a corner. What the angel said to Mary, the risen Christ says to us: Do not be afraid, for in me there is hope!

**The journey to Bethlehem has just started . . .**

**Prayers of Intercession**

Father God, we pray for those who are unhappy during this time of Advent:

Those who have no presents to give or receive;

Those who are sad because someone they love is not with them;

Those who hate Christmas because of the stress it puts them under;

Those who are cold or sick or living on the streets;

And those who have never heard of you and don't know why we are celebrating.

Comfort them, we pray, and show us how to help them.

God of hope and love and joy and peace, come and walk with us.

Through our lives and our words spread your light in the world.

**Pause & Pray**

**Amen**

**Prayer for Advent**

Lord you wait for us to come and see you. You wait to shine light where there is darkness, to show love where there is hate, to share peace where there is conflict. Lord you wait for us to come and see you. You wait for us to remember what has been fulfilled, to prepare for what must still be done. You wait in hope and expectation, longing for us to shine your light, to show your love, to share your peace.

**Song Suggestion**

Blessed Assurance, Jesus Is Mine

**A Poem For Advent - Advent Credo**
It is not true that creation and the human family are doomed to destruction and loss -
**This is true:** For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life;

It is not true that we must accept inhumanity and discrimination, hunger and poverty, death and destruction -
**This is true:** I have come that they may have life, and that abundantly.

It is not true that violence and hatred should have the last word, and that war and destruction rule forever
**This is true:** Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, his name shall be called wonderful councillor, mighty God, the Everlasting, the Prince of Peace.

It is not true that we are simply victims of the powers of evil who seek to rule the world -
**This is true:** To me is given authority in heaven and on earth, and lo I am with you, even until the end of the world.

It is not true that we have to wait for those who are specially gifted, who are the prophets of the Church before we can be peacemakers -
**This is true:** I will pour out my spirit on all flesh and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions and your old men shall have dreams.

It is not true that our hopes for liberation of humankind, of justice, of human dignity of peace are not meant for this earth and for this history -
**This is true:** The hour comes, and it is now, that the true worshippers shall worship God in spirit and in truth.

So let us enter Advent in hope, even hope against hope. Let us see visions of love and peace and justice. Let us affirm with humility, with joy, with faith, with courage:

**Jesus Christ - the life of the world.**

**Moment of Reflection**

The hope of the world Christmas begins in God’s heart it’s complete when it reaches the heart of man with love and understanding.

**Song Suggestion**

I, The Lord Of Sea And Sky

**Blessing**

And now may the Love of God,

The Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit,

Remain with us all,

Now and forever more.

**Amen**