



Advent 2017

These advent reflections have been prepared to introduce the theme and vision for the North Western Baptist Association in 2018. But they are offered beyond that community to any who might find them of value.

It is easy to reduce our life as local churches to “*keeping things going*” in the way that they have traditionally been done. This is not always wrong, but if we are doing things for which we no longer have the capabilities or resources, or working from a sense of inherited duty rather than recognising a purpose in the here and now, then perhaps it is time to think differently. What gifts and abilities remain un-tapped because rather than building our vision and activity around them, we remain locked into ways of doing things for which people have no real enthusiasm or aptitude? To what degree is it easier to feel challenged by the things that we can’t do, rather than inspired by the things that we can? “Unlocking the Potential” is an invitation to look at the resources that God has placed in our hands, to let these define our vision and priorities, and to release the potential of what we have.

This may all feel a long way from the message of Advent, but “potential” is an Advent word. It speaks of there being more to any given situation than what immediately meets the eye. It suggests that there are possibilities and opportunities that need to be harnessed and released, even if at first sight such things seem to be lacking. It is a season that reminds us that what some might call a crisis, in reality, can be signs of God at work.

Advent is the season when Christians look at their world in terms of the bigger picture. Yes, there are realities in the here and now that disturb and concern us, but we encounter them with a confidence that God is the beginning and end of our human story; that God’s purposes can prevail and be at work in circumstances and in ways that we would struggle to comprehend.

Discovering our own potential begins by recognising and believing not only that God desires for this world to be different, but that he is at work within it. Even when that world feels alien and hostile, Advent invites us to faithfully engage, believing that we can be part of God’s work and purpose within it. It invites us to participate not because we can immediately see every benefit and outcome of our endeavours, but because we believe and have faith in the promises and purposes of God, whether or not their consequence is obvious.

The four Sundays of Advent provide the opportunity to explore this reality in fuller detail, and these readings and reflections are offered as a way of doing that. They are primarily designed to be read around the lighting of a candle in an advent wreath, but could be used in other contexts. There is some variety of practice within our various Christian traditions in relation to what each advent candle is perceived to represent. There is obvious scope for flexibility, but the basic structure used for these readings is as follows:

Week 1: Looking back - The candle of hope. We are encouraged to reflect on how God has been at work throughout history and by recognising the roots of our faith, to believe that God has a purpose in the present.

Week 2: Hearing the prophets – the candle of peace. The message of the prophets remind us that God has something to say to our world; we are encouraged to listen for God’s message and to share God’s truth.

Week 3: signs in the wilderness – the candle of love. Different traditions make their focus either Mary or John the Baptist, so the readings for weeks 3&4 might be interchanged. This reading focusses particularly on Mary and her response of willingness to be used for God’s purposes.

Week 4: The certainty of God’s promise – the candle of joy. The song of Mary and the words of Elizabeth declare God’s Salvation as secure, even before their offspring are born. As a man, John calls people to prepare a way for one he is certain will follow. God’s promise fulfilled in Jesus, gives us confidence to trust that one day he will come again and his reign and rule will be established for all eternity.

These core themes have then been re-cast to reflect the overall vision of unlocking our potential.

Week 1 – Unlocking the potential of our history

Week 2 – Unlocking the potential of our message

Week 3 – Unlocking the potential of obedient response

Week 4 – Unlocking the potential of our confidence in God



Week 1 – Unlocking the potential of our history

Looking back can often be portrayed as a negative thing, and will be if all it does is locks us into tradition or causes us to hanker after times now past. But as we look back to the early stories of God's people, we are reminded that this world is no mere accident and that God is not indifferent to its plight.

If we are to realise our potential for God, it begins by believing that God has a purpose for us, and the world he has made. We are not simply called to stand by, nor are we limited by what can be achieved in our strength alone.

Our world has the potential to be different, and the narratives on which our faith is founded remind us of this again and again. Advent reminds us that while God's Kingdom has yet to fully come, there is much that can be done in the here and now.

We look to a present that is beset by struggle, but we still believe. We believe because the God who had led and sustained his people continues to be present in their midst. In the stories from our past, there are many moments when things did not make sense, when the road that was hard and painful to tread, was the one that led to the place of redemption and hope. We choose to believe, not because we can make sense of our present circumstances or even see a clear way ahead, but because we stand as part of a bigger story – we inherit the hope and the testimony of those who have walked this way before.

**This flame of hope is ignited
To cast its light on the road we have travelled
For the very light that we have kindled
Exists only because our God once declared that it should be.**

**And though we struggle to make sense of the world that surrounds us
And pathways ahead are shrouded in uncertainty and foreboding
We will not surrender to despair or indifference
For God's purpose prevails, even when obscured by our expectations.**

**Its light draws our eyes away from the darkness;
The confusion and struggles of this earthly journey
Not to escape or ignore their reality
But to remember that in every circumstance God is present**

**And spurred by the stories of God's hand in our history
Inspired by the example of those who have been caught up in his purpose
We open ourselves to be servants of the most high
To embrace the present assured of God's faithfulness**





Week 2 – Unlocking the potential of our message

Words can be powerful things. Much of our perception of reality is not so much shaped by actual events and circumstances, but the things that we are told about them. “It doesn’t have to be this way” sheds a very different light on things to “It’s just how it is”.

Prophets were agitators who were not prepared to simply accept the status quo. When people were in despair, they spoke words of hope; when the nation was complacent and unjust, they spoke in condemnation; when falsehood and lies prevailed, they refused to stay silent. But their words were not simply a response to circumstances; they spoke as the mouthpiece of God, defining reality in the light of God’s word.

God has spoken a message of hope. God’s word has been made flesh in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. When we truly speak God’s message, we are not simply offering an opinion or communicating some vague optimism, we are echoing truths and realities that prevail beyond any immediate circumstance. God’s word has power beyond measure – it is within our grasp to declare it and unleash its potential.

**We light this flame as those to whom God has spoken
With lives touched by Word made Flesh in Jesus
Believing that God’s word still sheds its light
On the chaos and concerns of human circumstances**

**Its light is kindled in our world where many voices
Each clamour to be heard above the noise of worldly aspiration
Seeking to silence any who might dare to contradict
Their narratives of division, falsehood and misrepresentation**

**We hear the voices of the prophets
Echo their message of truth in every generation
Declaring God’s comfort to those who despair
And challenge to those who believe this world to be their own**

**We who believe God's word still speaks
Light this flame to declare our readiness to listen
Seeking peace through knowing that in the deepest despair
Echoes of grace and hope can be at their most profound.**





Week 3 - Unlocking the potential of our response

The Advent narratives are filled with stories of ordinary people. Yet through their lives and actions, God's extraordinary purposes were fulfilled. For many who were part of that story, their response required at best that they simply accepted the circumstances around them, and more often that they faced greater adversity in the here and now.

But they responded in faith, and because of their obedient willingness, God's salvation was accomplished. God will seldom call us to acts that would be seen as great in the eyes of this world; he will never require of us more than we can offer, though our commitment to his higher purposes may require acts of selfless sacrifice.

We are not called to achieve success as measured by the standards of the world in which we live; we do not even need to be able to explain or understand the circumstances in which we are immersed. But the lives that we celebrate bear profound testimony of the immeasurable potential of simple and humble obedience. What opportunities could be ours by simply responding to God's call, whatever that might be?

**We light this candle and remember
How once in the midst of the ordinary,
A messenger of light
Declared that God's salvation was dawning**

**Still stunned by the faithful example
Of one young woman's "let it be to me"
We offer ourselves in awestruck anticipation
Of what our living sacrifice might yet become.**

**Let this simple flame be our reminder
Of the profound potential of ordinary lives
Offered in service to the Most High;
God's purpose accomplished in the midst of human frailty**

**Not because we suppose that this world's salvation
Can be wrought through our endeavour alone
But as those who have seen God's miracle of grace
And believe that in these broken vessels, God's rich treasure can reside**





Week 4 - Unlocking the Potential of our confidence in God

Many of the Psalms and songs of Advent speak of God's salvation being accomplished. In reality what was being witnessed were simply the first signs of this reality and it would yet be some years before the work of the cross was complete. But these early signs were enough for those who saw them to know and declare that God, in his absolute faithfulness, would bring things to completion.

We can now look back on those events that comprise the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus as a part of our realised history. Yet we live in a world where God's Kingdom has not yet fully come, and are faced with realities that though temporary, remain at odds with the values of that Kingdom.

But Christ's first coming, in fulfilment of the promises and prophecies from centuries before, give us the confidence to believe that the promise of his coming again will one day be realised. We can speak of God's Kingdom and walk in the ways of God's Kingdom in the here and now, and though we may be at odds with the world that surrounds, we are confident of the day when that Kingdom will fully come. This is a promise that no-one can take from us, and we do not need to seek success or status as the world defines it, we can simply walk in God's ways with a confidence that defies any present circumstance.

**We light this candle as one of celebration
Not because every evil has been conquered or every trial overcome
But because the mark of God's coming
Is indelibly stamped in the history and destiny of this world**

**There is a Kingdom that will prevail
Long after this world's struggles have subsided
A Kingdom whose doorway has been flung open
And the light of Christ points us to its threshold**

**We kindle a flame to show our desire,
That this Kingdom's dawn should be made known
To draw the eyes of those who long for a better world
To the place where every such hope can be fulfilled**

**We join with those who declare the certainty of God's promise
Revealed in new-born child and Servant King
And so we seek to pursue the ways of this Kingdom
Confident that its sovereign will one day come again.**

