

Mears Ashby and Hardwick and Sywell with Overstone



WOMEN OF THE NATIVITY

Daily Prayer *for Advent*

Monday 2 December 2024 to Tuesday 24 December 2024

And Mary said:
'My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.'

Luke 1:46-48

Welcome to this special edition of prayers and reflections for daily use during Advent. As we prepare for Christ's coming at Christmas and look forward to his future rule on Earth, it is so good to be able to pause for a few minutes each day to contemplate the journey that we are on. And, to remember who we are travelling with as Christmas comes close. Each week, we will be focusing on the theme of our Advent candle: the Patriarchs, the Prophets, John the Baptist and Mary, but with a twist. We will be looking at these stepping stones to Christmas through the eyes of the women. These reflections are inspired by a book by Paula Gooder called 'Women of the Nativity'.

Enjoy journeying daily with God as you prepare your heart and home to celebrate the light and love, the joy and peace of Christmas.

God bless,

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The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come;
thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power and the glory,
for ever and ever. **Amen.**

WEEK ONE

The Patriarchs - Sarah's Story

Preparation

As you prepare to meet with God, pause to reflect on all that has happened so far today and what lies ahead of you. Offer them to God in silence.

I put my trust in your steadfast love;
my heart will rejoice in your salvation. *Psalm 13:5*

Opening Prayer

O God, you search me and you know me.
All my thoughts lie open to your gaze.
You know the journeys that I take
and the places where I rest.
You know all that is on my heart,
and the "to do" lists and worries
that are cluttering my life.
Help me to let go of them,
for a while, as I spend time in your presence.

Amen.

Reading and Reflection

Read today's passage and pause to contemplate its message.

Our Prayer for this Week

If you wish, light a candle to represent Abraham and Sarah.

Heavenly Father,
God of Abraham and Sarah,
you called the patriarchs to live by the light of faith.
May your light shine in my heart,
so that I may be ready to meet Christ our King
when he comes again.

Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father...

Conclusion

May the Lord make us ready for his coming in glory. **Amen.**

Monday - Introducing Sarah

December 2nd

My name is Sarah. Or at least it is now. A few months back Abram burst into the tent, his eyes shining like they always did when he met God. 'The Lord spoke to me,' he said. I sighed wearily, 'Again?' In my experience 'the Lord' appearing to Abram meant nothing but disruption and dashed hopes. 'What was it this time?' 'We have new names!' Abram declared. 'Mine is Abraham. And yours is Sarah.' 'What was wrong with our old names?' I'd got used to Sarai after nearly 89 years of using it, and, in any case, 'I'd always like it when Abram called me 'Sarai - my princess.' You might be wondering at my lack of enthusiasm. As I think of my story, even I wince at my grumpiness. But this God keeps messing with my life.

by Paula Gooder

Names become part of who we are. Our identity. Think about your own name, why it was chosen at your birth. What special names have you been called during your life? Give thanks for the love sewn into these names. Think about God choosing special names for the elderly Abram and Sarai; it is a sign of how he's going to mess with their lives (in a good way!). *As you set out into Advent, place your life into God's hands. Trust in his guiding love as you journey towards Christmas.*

Tuesday - God appears

December 3rd

The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground.

Genesis 18:1-2

'The LORD appeared to Abraham' speaks of one of Sarah's grumbles. God keeps on appearing to Abraham, and Sarah is feeling left out. She is jealous of the attention which Abraham is receiving. But, she will be a part of God's story. Without Sarah, there would be no Christmas. She doesn't know this... yet! *Think about how you are part of God's story and how you have helped to share the good news of Christmas. Without you, there would be less signs of God's kingdom.*

Wednesday - Abraham welcomes

December 4th

Abraham said, 'If I have found favour in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way - now that you have come to your servant.' 'Very well,' they answered, 'do as you say.'

Genesis 18:3-5

Abraham offers hospitality to the three visitors. But, it will be Sarah and her helpers who will bring the water and prepare the bread for these guests. Where do you see yourself in this division of roles? Notice how you feel about this. Who is God calling you to be this Advent? One who offers? One who obeys? *Think about who God is calling you to be in your daily life. How are you offering signs of his love and welcome, of his care and compassion? Listen to his still small voice.*

Thursday - A meal is prepared...

December 5th

So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. 'Quick,' he said, 'get three measures of the finest flour and knead it and bake some bread.' Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree. *Genesis 18:6-8*

And so, the meal is prepared under Abraham's directions. He chose the finest fare to offer to the three guests. *Think about your own generosity this Christmas. How will this be a sign of your love for family and friends, God and strangers?*

Friday - Sarah listens and laughs

December 6th

'Where is your wife Sarah?' they asked him. 'There, in the tent,' he said. Then one of them said, 'I will surely return to you this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.' Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. Abraham and Sarah were already very old, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, 'After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?' *Genesis 18:9-12*

Sarah laughs! Laughs at the idea that she will become a mum in her old age. It is impossible, but not for God! *Laughter comes in many forms. What has God done that has made you laugh?*

Saturday - God delivers on his promise

December 7th

Now the LORD was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah what he had promised. Abraham gave the name Isaac (*he laughs*) to the son Sarah bore him. Sarah said, 'God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.' *Genesis 21:1, 3a, 6*

Sarah laughs! Laughs with joy at the gift of a son. Her story points to the disruption and the joy that God will bring into Mary's life. *Ponder this.*

WEEK TWO

The Prophets - Huldah's Story

Preparation

As you prepare to meet with God, pause to reflect on all that has happened so far today and what lies ahead of you. Offer them to God in silence.

An offering of a free heart will I give to you
and praise your name, O Lord, for it is gracious. *Psalm 54:6*

Opening Prayer

O God, you search me and you know me.
All my thoughts lie open to your gaze.
You know the journeys that I take
and the places where I rest.
You know all that is on my heart,
and the “to do” lists and worries
that are cluttering my life.
Help me to let go of them,
for a while, as I spend time in your presence.

Amen.

Reading and Reflection

Read today's passage and pause to contemplate its message.

Our Prayer for this Week

If you wish, light a candle to represent Jeremiah and Huldah.

Heavenly Father,
God of Jeremiah and Huldah, and all the prophets,
who brought your word of peace and justice.
May I walk in the light of faith,
and come at last to the city
where you are the light.

Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father...

Conclusion

May the Lord make us ready for his coming in glory. **Amen.**

Monday - Introducing Huldah

December 9th

My name is Huldah. I am a prophet. People usually look surprised when they hear this. 'You don't look like a prophet,' they say. I used to ask them what a prophet looks like, bristling slightly in response. But now my nephew Jeremiah has grown up, I know what they mean. Jeremiah looks like a prophet. His hair is wild, his beard ragged but nevertheless impressive, his gaze as fierce as his spirit. He looks like a prophet. 'You should be pleased,' my husband Shallum would say to me. 'I don't think you really want to look like a prophet. Do you?' I would shrug and say nothing. It felt too complicated to explain. It's hard to get people to listen to you when you're telling them something they don't want to hear, but even harder when you don't look like they think you should.'

by Paula Gooder

Who God chooses to speak his words of wisdom, justice, mercy and forgiveness is, at times, very surprising. A rough and ready fisherman like Simon, a young girl on the brink of womanhood like Mary, a wife called Huldah rather than her husband. When God speaks people should listen. *Think about the prophetic voices who should be heard today. Pray for them.*

Tuesday - The King restores the temple

December 10th

Josiah was eight years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem for thirty-one years. He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD. In the eighteenth year of his reign, King Josiah sent the secretary, Shaphan to the temple of the Lord. He said: 'Go up to Hilkiah the high priest and make him get ready the money that has been brought into the temple of the LORD, which the doorkeepers have collected from the people. Make them entrust it to the men appointed to supervise the work on the temple. And make these men pay the workers who repair the temple of the LORD - the carpenters, the builders and the mason.'

2 Kings 22:1a, 2-6a

Josiah is one of the few good kings in the long-list of kings between David and the exile in Babylon. Like Abraham, he is a righteous man, and is keen to restore the glory of God's temple. As we prepare to celebrate the coming of Jesus, our perfect King, I'm delighted to see that carpenters have an important role in the restoration. *Ponder the links between Josiah's and Jesus' stories.*

Wednesday - The King is given a book

December 11th

Hilkiah the high priest said to Shaphan the secretary, 'I have found the Book of the Law in the temple of the LORD.' He gave it to Shaphan, who read it. Then Shaphan the secretary went to the king and reported to him: 'Your officials have paid out

the money that was in the temple of the LORD and have entrusted it to the workers and supervisors at the temple.’ Then Shaphan the secretary informed the king, ‘Hilkiah the priest has given me a book.’ And Shaphan read it in the presence of the king. When the king heard the words of the Book of the Law, he tore his robes.

2 Kings 22:8-11

Can you imagine a vicar without a well-thumbed copy of the bible? Or, a church without any bible readings in its Sunday services? I can't. Yet - the worship in the temple has fallen into such a poor state of repair that they don't use God's Book. How can you obey God's rules if you have lost them? *Think about your own pattern of reading the bible.*

Thursday - The King asks what God will do

December 12th

The king gave orders, ‘Go and enquire of the LORD for me and for the people and for all Judah about what is written in this book that has been found. Great is the LORD's anger that burns against us because those who have gone before us have not obeyed the words of this book.’ The king's officials went to speak to the prophet Huldah, who was the wife of Shallum son of Tikvah, the son of Harhas, keeper of the wardrobe. She lived in Jerusalem.

2 Kings 22:12-14 alt.

King Josiah recognises the depth of his and the people's shame. They have failed to keep the Law's key commandment. ‘Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments I am giving you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children.’ *Ponder this command in prayerful stillness and silence.*

Friday - Huldah speaks God's words

December 13th

Huldah said to them, ‘This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: tell the man who sent you to me, ‘This is what the Lord says: I am going to bring disaster on this place and its people, according to everything written in the book the king of Judah has read. Because they have forsaken me...’

2 Kings 22:15-17a

Huldah speaks with God-given authority. Tough words to a king and his people, repent and return to the LORD your God. *Ponder her courage and your own.*

Saturday - The King listens

December 14th

Then the king called together all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem. He stood by the pillar of the temple and renewed the covenant in the presence of the Lord - to follow the Lord and keep his commands, statutes and decrees.

2 Kings 23:1, 3a

Huldah may not look like a prophet, but a king obeyed her God-breathed words. *Could you be as obedient as Josiah?*

WEEK THREE

John the Baptist - Abigail's Story

Preparation

As you prepare to meet with God, pause to reflect on all that has happened so far today and what lies ahead of you. Offer them to God in silence.

You are my help and my deliverer;
O Lord, do not delay. *Psalm 70:6*

Opening Prayer

O God, you search me and you know me.
All my thoughts lie open to your gaze.
You know the journeys that I take
and the places where I rest.
You know all that is on my heart,
and the "to do" lists and worries
that are cluttering my life.
Help me to let go of them,
for a while, as I spend time in your presence.

Amen.

Reading and Reflection

Read today's passage and pause to contemplate its message.

Our Prayer for this Week

If you wish, light a candle to represent John the Baptist (and Abigail too).

Heavenly Father,
whose prophet John the Baptist
gave witness to the light that came into the world.
May I share with joy the good news
of the light of your Son,
our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father...

Conclusion

May the Lord, when he comes, find us watching and waiting. **Amen.**

Monday - Introducing Abigail

December 16th

My name is Abigail. My husband, Eleazar is a priest. As I tell you this, I feel myself standing taller, full of pride. We've been married for five years now, but last month Eleazar turned twenty, so at least he can serve as a priest in the Temple. He's been there since he was a young boy, watching what was going on, learning what to do, studying the Torah and gaining all the knowledge he needed to be a priest. But he couldn't actually be a priest because he was too young. This year, for the first time, he isn't too young. Now his time has come. He is in the division of Abijah and this week is their week of service in the Temple. Eleazar was happy and so am I. I was so excited that I came with him from the hill country.

by Paula Gooder

Abigail shows so much joy in her faith, and pride in her husband Eleazar's priestly service. You can feel her excitement at the thought of going to the Temple, the Gateway of Heaven. It was a place where you were more likely to experience God's presence than anywhere else. *Ponder where you are more likely to encounter God's presence or hear his still small voice.*

Tuesday - Zechariah goes to the temple

December 17th

In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all of the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

Luke 1:5-7

Zechariah and Elizabeth's story so clearly links with Abraham and Sarah's and Josiah and Huldah's. All are righteous people, who are keen to live by God's laws. All are recognised by God for their faithfulness, and he calls them for special roles. *Where do you see yourself in their stories? What role has God designed for you?*

Wednesday - Chosen for a special role

December 18th

Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as a priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside.

Luke 1:8-9

It was not to be. Abigail's husband Eleazar was not chosen for this special role, entering the Holy Place in front of the Holy of Holies, on this occasion. I suspect it would have been a huge disappointment. But, maybe, next time - God willing? Zechariah had been waiting thirty years for this. And, finally, he was chosen. *Waiting on God takes a lot of patient faith. Do you have what it takes?*

Thursday - God's special message

December 19th

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous - to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.' Zechariah asked the angel, 'How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well on in years.'

Luke 1:11-18 alt.

Zechariah was chosen by lot for a special reason: to receive God's promise of a son, a special son with a special mission. We can see hints of Josiah's calling. John, Zechariah's son, will return God's people to the Lord's ways. Yet, Zechariah wants proof that this will happen. *Think about a time when you have doubted God's ability to answer your impossible prayers. What happened?*

Friday - Struck dumb!

December 20th

The angel said to him, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.' Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he had stayed so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realised he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

Luke 1:19-22

I wonder how Abigail and Eleazar felt when Zechariah came out of the Holy Place, and signed that something very special had just taken place. Did their own sadness turn to joy for this elderly, faithful man? *Ponder how God turns your sadness to joy.*

Saturday - A child is born...

December 21st

When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy, and they shared her joy. Zechariah wrote, 'His name is John.'

Luke 1:57, 60b

God kept his impossible promise, just as he did to Abraham and Sarah. This birth points to an even more special birth. *Ponder your readiness for this.*

WEEK FOUR

Mary's Story

Preparation

As you prepare to meet with God, pause to reflect on all that has happened so far today and what lies ahead of you. Offer them to God in silence.

We give you thanks, O God, we give you thanks,
for your name is near, as your wonderful deeds declare. *Psalm 75:1*

Opening Prayer

O God, you search me and you know me.
All my thoughts lie open to your gaze.
You know the journeys that I take
and the places where I rest.
You know all that is on my heart,
and the "to do" lists and worries
that are cluttering my life.
Help me to let go of them,
for a while, as I spend time in your presence.

Amen.

Reading and Reflection

Read today's passage and pause to contemplate its message.

Our Prayer for this Week

If you wish, light a candle to represent Mary.

Heavenly Father,
whose servant Mary
obeyed your call to be the mother of our Lord.
May I heed your call to live humbly and faithfully
the whole of my life.

Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father...

Conclusion

May God, who has called us out of darkness into his marvellous light,
bless us and fill us with peace. **Amen.**

Monday - Introducing Mary

December 23rd

My name is Miriam. You probably know me by another name - Mary. I think most people do these days. I heard that name for the first time when I was a child. We lived in Sepphoris back then. It was a big bustling town, not like Nazareth where we live now. Nazareth is sleepy and out of the way. In Nazareth everyone knows everyone else... and everyone's business, too. Sepphoris was different: large and wealthy and full of people from all over the world. When I was very little, I didn't know that. All the people I knew were Jewish like us. They all spoke Aramaic like we did. The people I knew, knew me, and called me by my name. Miriam.

by Paula Gooder

In Nazareth everyone knows everyone else... and everyone's business, too. We see how dramatically God will disrupt young Mary's life. A girl waiting to be a wife, who will become a mother-to-be before saying her wedding vows. You can sense her shame and fall from grace... in the eyes of her neighbours, but not God's eyes. Or, Joseph's (thanks again to an angel's intervention). *Think about all that Mary was willing to take on as the mother of Jesus. Give thanks for this.*

Tuesday - Pondering her calling

December 24th

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

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus. He 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, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants for ever; his kingdom will never end.'

'How will this be,' Mary asked the angel, 'since I am a virgin?'

The 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. Even 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. For no word from God will ever fail.'

'I am the Lord's servant,' Mary answered. 'May your word be fulfilled.' The angel left her.

Luke 1:26-38

And so, we come full circle. To a woman who is surprised by God's message. Probably, she didn't laugh as the angel Gabriel spoke God's words or, after he left, as she pondered his message. But, joy will bubble up in her as God keeps his promise and provides two helpmates - Elizabeth, her cousin and Joseph, her fiancé. *As you wait for Christmas to dawn, ponder your wonder at God's Son being born to a bride-to-be called Mary and your joy at her brave 'Yes!' May God fill you with the courage to face the future that he has in store for you.*

May you have a happy and blessed Christmas.

Revd Katrina

*Continue your Christmas journey with
'Follow the Star - Calm and Bright'
Meditations for the Twelve Days of Christmas
Enjoy!*