

Advent Church Cracked Open: Engaging the Journey

As we move into that time when we are tempted to post reminders that ‘Jesus is the reason for the season’, Social and Ecological Justice Huron is offering this Advent study which draws from the discussion of the “Way of Love: seven practices for Jesus-centered life” as this is described in Stephanie Spellers’ “The Church Cracked Open: Disruption, Decline, and new Hope for Beloved Community”. These include:

1. Turn again and again to God.
2. Learn Jesus’s ways through scripture and holy reading.
3. Pray and dwell intentionally with God every day.
4. Worship God weekly through community praise, thanksgiving, and petition.
5. Bless one another by giving our lives away in love.
6. Go across borders to join in solidarity and heal brokenness.
7. Rest in God’s grace, because the revolution is not ultimately up to us.

Each week, this resource will invite participants to reflect on some of the practices for Jesus-centered life through the lens of the different Advent Gospel stories and videos exploring ministry around the Diocese of Huron.

This program is designed with flexibility in mind allowing it to be used independently, and as an online and/or in person program within congregations, deaneries, or other groups. We hope that all who engage find this journey meaningful.

If you have any questions or comments as you engage in this journey feel free to contact us at: sejh@diohuron.org

Reflection For Advent 1

Video: Spencer Creek <https://youtu.be/raabt3gxlcA>

Luke 21:25-36 New Revised Standard Version

The Coming of the Son of Man

²⁵ “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. ²⁶ People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷ Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. ²⁸ Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

The Lesson of the Fig Tree

²⁹ Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; ³⁰ as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. ³¹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³² Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. ³³ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

Exhortation to Watch

³⁴ “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, ³⁵ like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶ Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

Reflection:

Among the traditions associated with Advent is the use of an Advent wreath. Often these wreaths are made with branches and/or greens from creation and contain candles that are lit each week in succession as a reminder that God, in Jesus brings light to the world. There are also celebrations of the hanging of the greens, the common of Christmas trees, and the longest night worship that also serve to connect this season to Creation.

“The Way of Love: seven practices for Jesus-centered life” as highlighted in Stephanie Spellers’: “The Church Cracked Open: Disruptions, Decline, and New Hope for Beloved Community”, includes the invitation to worship God weekly through community praise, thanksgiving, and petition. To what extent can the use of materials and moments from

Creation in our worship connect us to the call to safeguard the integrity of God's Creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth?

There is much we may be carrying into this Advent season. Reflecting on the Gospel text consider:

What weights, cravings and pressures prevent us from living more simply in Jesus' way?

What are the demands of living? What are our inner desires and outer temptations that prevent us from being more loving and inclusive?

What significance does this apocalyptic vision as we start advent do to help us prepare for Christ's coming, not just at Christmas time.

What is preventing us from being more loving?

Does this passage bring up different kinds of emotions and doubts than we would expect as we enter the new Christian year?

Are we inspired to do something about our brokenness, and cross borders we would not otherwise expect from ourselves?

Another of the practices for Jesus-centered life is to pray and dwell intentionally with God every day. How might these concerns be transformed into prayers and conversations with God throughout the Advent season?

End with the doxology:

Glory to God whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory to God from generation to generation, in the Church and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. Amen.

Engaging the Journey – Advent 2

The “Ways of Love”¹ this week:

- BLESS one another by giving our lives away in love.
- GO across borders to join in solidarity and heal brokenness.

Video: Missional Ministry Group, Stratford, ON: <https://youtu.be/E2uaBuUKT2s>

Scripture: Luke 3: 1-6

3:1 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene,

3:2 during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

3:3 He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,

3:4 as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

3:5 Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth;

3:6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

Questions for reflection and discussion:

Verses 1 and 2 describe the domination structures of empire and religion under which John the Baptist and Jesus ministered.

- How is our context as disciples of Jesus similar (or different?).

Verses 3-6 speak to knocking down barriers, opening pathways and “crossing borders to join in solidarity and heal brokenness”.

- What barriers and borders are there between our church and our neighbourhood/community?
- What are some practical, achievable ways that we can better get to know our neighbours beyond our church - their names, needs, hopes, gifts – and “join in solidarity” with them?
- What gifts and resources do we have to share God’s healing love to people - beyond our walls and our membership - where they are, as they are?
- What might they have to teach us about “the salvation of God?”
- Do we have the humility and faith to let ourselves be “cracked open”, to give our lives and our old ways of church away to love?

End with the doxology:

Glory to God whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory to God from generation to generation, in the Church and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. Amen.

¹ From the “The Way of Love”, Episcopal Church of the USA, quoted in The Church Cracked Open, chapter 7, by Stephanie Spellers.

Advent 3

Scripture: Luke 3:7-18

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.'

And the crowds asked him, 'What then should we do?' In reply he said to them, 'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.' Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, 'Teacher, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.' Soldiers also asked him, 'And we, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.'

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church.

Reflections:

(Learn Jesus's ways through scripture and holy reading)

In this text, John is not impressed with the crowds and their coming to him for baptism. His anger seems to stem from a lack of authenticity. He accepts that these folks know something of scripture, and challenges them to live it more fully.

We know scripture. We know the one who is more powerful than John who came to teach us how to love God and love our neighbour. To the extent that we have sought to live what we know from Jesus: what do we know about our neighbours?

What was a homeless person's upbringing?

Why are people homeless?

What are the homeless allowed to have?

Where should the homeless go?

Why do they not just get a job?

Video: The Tent People <https://youtu.be/nhmjIAWd4uU>

Having seen stories from homeless people, how would you answer these questions now?

What was a homeless person's upbringing?

Why are people homeless?

What are the homeless allowed to have?

Where should the homeless go?

Why do they not just get a job?

The Way of Love: seven practices for Jesus-centered life also calls us to bless one another by giving our lives away in love. As you reflect on what you have heard in the video consider:

What angered you?

What surprised you?

What needs to be done?

What if this was your child?

What is God inviting you to do differently now as John once directed the crowds?

End with the doxology:

Glory to God whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory to God from generation to generation, in the Church and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. Amen.

Dec. 19 - Advent 4 Luke 1:39-55

A reading from the Gospel of Luke (1:39-45)

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

Video: A journey to find acceptance of a call, character, and charism.

<https://youtu.be/XBau5lxIEJw>

Reflection:

In "Church Cracked Open", Stephanie Spellers refers to the Way of Love: seven practices for Jesus-centered life. Among these is the invitation to turn again and again to God. Mark 1:15 says: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news". The key word is repent or *metanoia* in Greek, which means turning the heart or mind away from one path and towards another.

In the story from the video we hear how one person's journey to the priesthood was invalidated by a church community. We are asked to consider who else might not be fully embraced for who they are in our church communities. To what extent can we acknowledge that our churches may not be as welcoming as we like to think? How can we be better aware of the ways in which some may feel excluded or invalidate by our expectations, and actions? What are we doing to offer these truths to God as we repent and believe the good news not only for ourselves but for all of God's beloved children no matter who they are and how they understand themselves in the arc of God's Creation?

Another practice is to go across borders to join in solidarity and heal brokenness. How do the questions raised in the video invite us to engage differently with those beyond our sanctuaries?

Recall: Who can and should we welcome as Elizabeth welcomed Mary? Who can we affirm as (the narrator) was affirmed at ACPO? Who can we bless as we accept that they are a blessing to us?

According to Spellers: "Followers of Jesus don't stand still, and we don't stay at the center waiting for centripetal force to draw all the people and resources inside to us. We go out beyond comfort, knowing, and certainty. We go when and where the Holy Spirit sends us." (p. 130).

To whom are we being sent? What does this look like? To what extent are we relying on our prayer which gives 'Glory to God, whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine'?

To the extent that we are going across borders to join in solidarity and heal brokenness, how are we able to proclaim with Mary (Luke 1:46-55):

And Mary said,
'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.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

End with the doxology:

Glory to God whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory to God from generation to generation, in the Church and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever. Amen.
