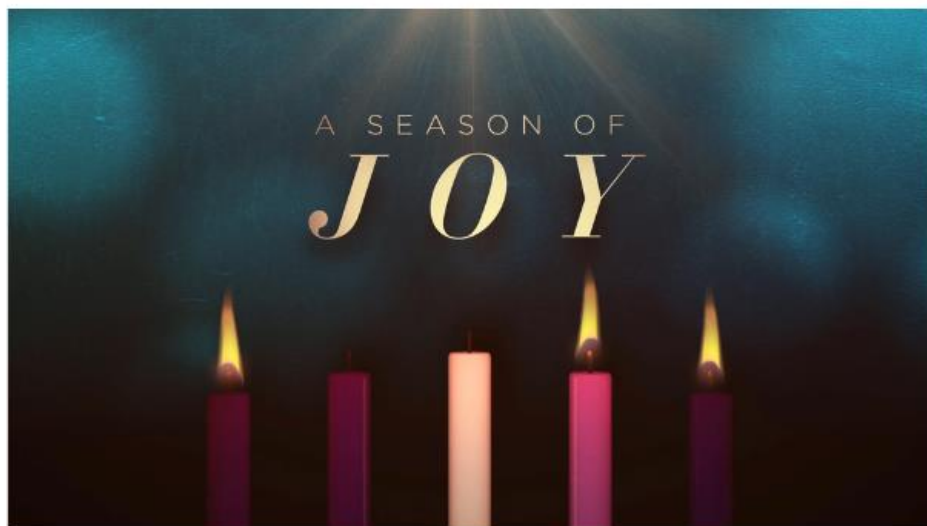




# Advent Course



**LUKE FOR EVERYONE  
BY TOM WRIGHT**

## **Week 1 Advent Course – Keeping Watch**

### **Watching for the Son of Man: Luke 21.25–36**

‘There will be signs in the sun, the moon and the stars. On earth the nations will be in distress and confusion because of the roaring and swelling of the sea and its waves. 26 People will faint from fear, and from imagining all that’s going to happen to the world. The powers of the heavens will be shaken. 27

Then they will see “the son of man coming on a cloud” with power and great majesty. 28 When all these things start to happen, stand up and lift up your heads, because the time has come for you to be redeemed.’

He told them this parable. ‘Look at the fig tree and all the trees. 30 When they are well into leaf, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is upon you. 31 In the same way, when you see all these things happening, you will know that God’s kingdom is upon you. 32 I’m telling you the truth; this generation won’t be gone before all of this happens. 33 Heaven and earth may disappear, but these words of mine won’t disappear.’

34 ‘So watch out for yourselves,’ said Jesus, ‘that your hearts may not grow heavy with dissipation and drunkenness and the cares of this life, so that that day comes upon you suddenly, like a trap. 35 It will come, you see, on everyone who lives on the face of the earth. 36 Keep awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that will happen, and to stand before the son of man.’

## Commentary

Travel with me, back in time, to Jerusalem. The year is ad 58, nearly 30 years after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. Many people in the holy city came to believe in Jesus in the heady days nearly a generation ago, and many of them are still here, older and more puzzled perhaps, but still waiting and hoping and praying.

Things have been difficult, on and off. Once Pontius Pilate stopped being governor people hoped life might improve, but there was then a huge crisis over the emperor's plan to place a vast statue of himself in the Temple. The threat, fortunately, was seen off; Gaius, the emperor in question, had died soon after; and when one of Herod's grandsons, Agrippa, was made king of the Jews in ad 41, everyone in Jerusalem stood up and cheered. To be ruled by one of your own might be better than having govern-ors from far away who didn't understand local customs. That didn't last, though. He too had died, struck down (said some) by God for blasphemously claiming the sort of divine honours that his pagan masters had given them- selves. Now there had been a string of new Roman governors, each one (it seemed) worse than the last. But in 54, when Nero became emperor, many people hoped again that peace and justice would triumph.

All along, though, people in Jerusalem were aware of the political tensions building up. Revolutionary movements arose, had their moment of glory, and were brutally crushed. Some said the priests were secretly involved. Some said it was all the wicked brigands, refusing to let ordinary people go about their business in peace. Some wanted an easy-going

peace with Rome, others were all for driving hard bargains, others again wished the Messiah would come. Daily life went on: buying and selling, growing crops, tending herds, woodwork, leatherwork, money-changing, pottery, with the daily round of Temple sacrifices, music, celebrations and the seasonal feasts as the constant backdrop. The Temple itself was almost complete: the programme of rebuilding begun by Herod the Great 70 years earlier was finally drawing to a close.

And in the middle of all this, those who named the name of Jesus, who still met to break bread and worship in his name, and to teach one another the stories of what he'd done and said, were pulled and pushed this way and that. Some of them were friends of the ex-Pharisee Saul of Tarsus, now known as Paul. He had been here not long ago, and had caused a riot (his friends said his opponents had caused it, but the word on the street was that riots tended to happen wherever Paul went). Now he'd gone, sent to Rome for trial, and he wouldn't be back. Peter, too, had gone on his travels and hadn't been seen for years. Others were sceptical of Paul; he had compromised God's law, they said, allowing Gentiles to worship God through Jesus without demanding circumcision. The leader of the Jerusalem Christians, the wise and devout James, the brother of Jesus himself, was getting older, and his prayers for the redemption of his people didn't seem to be answered.

How easy it was for Jerusalem Christians to become weary! If the gospel was producing exciting results, it was doing so across the sea, and they only heard about it every once in a while, and didn't always like what they heard (Gentiles

claiming to worship Jesus but not keeping the law of Moses – that sort of thing). Their lives dragged on day by day. Friends asked them, sometimes unkindly, when this Messiah of theirs was going to reappear, and could he please hurry up because much more of these Romans banging around would bring on a world war, and anyway look what’s happened to the price of bread, and if Jesus had really been the Messiah, why has nothing much happened since? Not much use to say that when you met for worship the sense of Jesus’ presence and love was so real you could almost reach out and touch him. Not much of an answer to say that you had been told to be patient. Thirty years is a long time. All you could do would be to retell the stories, including the sayings of Jesus such as you find in this passage. Hang on. Be alert. Prop your eyes open – physically, perhaps, spiritually for sure. Pray for strength to meet whatever comes. The son of man will be vindicated, and when he is you want to be on your feet.

Now travel with me to San Francisco, or Sydney, or Bujumbura, or San Salvador, in the twenty-first century. You emerge from the church on Sunday morning – the Pentecostal celebration, the Anglican Matins, the Spanish Mass – and there is the world going about its business, or as it may be its pleasure. Your friends think you’re odd still going to church. Everybody knows Christianity is outdated, disproved, boring and irrelevant. What you need is more sex; more parties; more money-making; more revolution. Anyway, hasn’t the church done some pretty bad things in its time? What about the Inquisition? (They always say that.) What about the Crusades? Who needs Christianity now that

we have computers and space travel? (They said it before about electricity and modern medicine.)

And anyway, they say, if your Jesus is so special, why is the world still in such a mess? They don't want to know about the freeing of the slaves, the rise of education and the building of hospitals; they certainly don't want to know about the lives that are changed every day by the gospel. They want to load you with the cares of this life; and, as Jesus warned, with dissipation and drunkenness, literal and metaphorical. They want to wear you down, to make you think you're odd and stupid. Why study an old book, they say, that's never done anyone any good?

The answer is the same for us as it was for the Jerusalem Christians nearly a generation after Jesus. Keep alert. This is what you were told to expect. Patience is the key. Pray for strength to keep on your feet. There are times when your eyes will be shutting with tiredness, spiritual, mental, emotional and physical, and when you will have to prop them open. This is what it's about: not an exciting battle, with adrenalin flowing and banners flying, but the steady tread, of prayer and hope and scripture and sacrament and witness, day by day and week by week. This is what counts; this is why patience is a fruit of the spirit. Read the story again. Remind one another of what Jesus said. Encourage one another. And keep awake.



## **For Reflection or Discussion**

Do you ever find yourself growing weary in your journey of faith?

What encourages you to keep going?

What other things might help to refresh or renew your faith, particularly during this season of Advent?

## **Week 2 Advent Course – A Voice in the Wilderness**

### **The Preaching of John the Baptist: Luke 3.1–6**

It was the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar. Pontius Pilate was governor of Judaea; Herod was Tetrarch of Galilee; his brother Philip was tetrarch of Ituraea and Trachonitis; Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene. 2Annas and Caiaphas were the high priests.

At that time, the word of God came to John, the son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. 3He went through all the region of the Jordan, announcing a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 4This is what is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:

A voice shouting in the wilderness:

Get ready a path for the Lord, Make the roads straight for him!

Every valley shall be filled in,

And every mountain and hill shall be flattened, The twisted paths will be straightened out, And the rough roads smoothed off,

And all that lives shall see God's rescue.

### **Commentary**

Imagine massive floods sweeping through the country- side. Ancient cities suddenly find themselves under several feet of



water. People aren't expecting it, and now can't quite believe it's happening.

If the authorities have enough warning, they do their best to get people out of their houses to stop them being trapped. They drive round parts of the city announcing that trouble is approaching and that people should leave at once. They make announcements on the local radio and television. Imminent danger needs urgent action.

That's the kind of work John the Baptist was doing. We don't usually think of preachers going around making that kind of announcement. Even politicians don't usually tell us things are getting very urgent – or, if they do, we usually take no notice. But people believed John, and came to him for a different sort of flooding: baptism, being plunged into the river Jordan.

What was the emergency, and how would being plunged in the Jordan help people to avoid danger?

Luke's introduction to the story of John the Baptist is designed to give us a fairly precise date when it all happened, but actually it gives us a lot more besides. Behind the list of names and places is a story of oppression and misery that was building up to explosion point.

Rome had ruled the area for about a hundred years, but only since ad 6 had there been a Roman governor resident in the area, living in Caesarea (on the Mediterranean coast) but also keeping a base in Jerusalem. Augustus Caesar, the first emperor, had died in ad 14, and his place had been taken by the ruthless Tiberius, who was already being worshipped as a

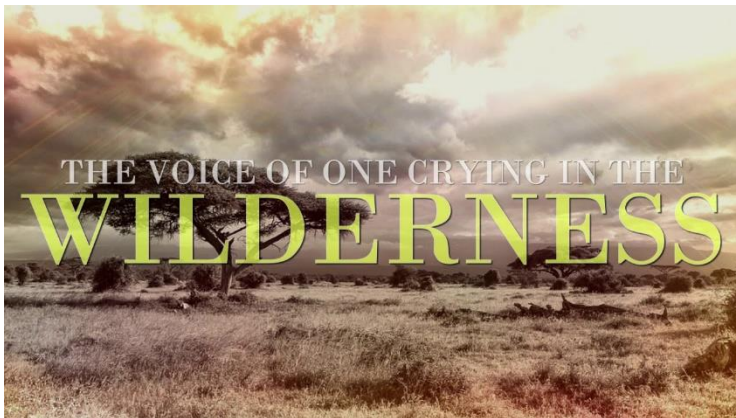
god in the eastern parts of the empire. Two of Herod the Great's sons, Herod Antipas and Philip, were ruling somewhat shakily, under Roman permission, in the north of the country, but Rome had taken direct control of the south, including Jerusalem itself. Most Jews didn't regard Herod's sons as real rulers; they were a self-made royal house, ruling, like Rome, by fear and oppression. The high priests weren't much better. Popular movements of resistance had come and gone, in some cases being brutally put down. Everybody knew they couldn't go on as they were. Something had to happen. But what?

Devout Jews had longed for a new word from God. Some believed that prophecy had died out but might one day be revived. Many expected that a movement would begin through which their God would renew the age-old covenant, bringing Israel out of slavery into a new freedom. The old prophets had spoken of a time of renewal, through which God himself would come back to them. They had only a sketchy idea of what this would all look like, but when a fiery young prophet appeared in the Judaeen wilderness, going round the towns and villages telling people that the time had come, they were ready to listen.

Baptism, plunging into the river Jordan, was a powerful sign of this renewal. When the children of Israel had come out of Egypt – a story they all knew well because of their regular Passovers and other festivals – they were brought through the Red Sea, through the Sinai wilderness, then through the Jordan into the promised land. Now they were in slavery again – in their own land! – and wanted a new exodus to bring them to freedom. Since the old prophets had declared

that this slavery was the result of Israel's sin, worshipping idols rather than their one true God, the new exodus, when it happened, would have to deal with this. The way to escape slavery, the prophets had said, was to 'return' to God with heart and soul; that is, to 'repent'. 'Return to me, and I will return to you,' one of the last prophets had said (Malachi 3.7).

Hence John's agenda: 'a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins'. John was doing what the prophet Isaiah had said: preparing a pathway for the Lord himself to return to his people. This was the time. Rescue was at hand.



## **For Reflection or Discussion**

- Can you think of anything you need to repent of and change in your life of Christian discipleship?
- What might help you to make that change and make it stick?
- What are the things that you find most challenging to change and why do you think that is?

## **Week 3 Advent Course – Seeking Justice**

### **John the Baptist Confronts the Crowds: Luke 3.7–18**

‘You brood of vipers,’ John used to say to the crowds who came out to be baptized by him. ‘Who told you to escape from the coming anger? 8You’d better prove your repentance by bearing the proper fruit! Don’t start saying to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our father”; let me tell you, God can raise up children for Abraham from these stones! 9The axe is already standing by the roots of the tree – so every tree that doesn’t produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.’

What shall we do?’ asked the crowds

‘Anyone who has two cloaks,’ replied John, ‘should give one to someone who hasn’t got one. The same applies to anyone who has plenty of food.’

Some toll-collectors came to be baptized. ‘Teacher,’ they said, ‘what should we do?’

Don’t collect more than what is laid down,’ he replied

Some soldiers, too, asked John, ‘What about us? What should we do?’

‘No extortion,’ replied John, ‘and no blackmail. Be content with your wages.’

The people were very excited, and everyone was questioning in their hearts whether John might not be the Messiah. 16To all of them, John responded: ‘I am baptizing you with water.

But someone is coming who is stronger than I am. I don't deserve to untie his sandal-strap. He will baptize you with the holy spirit and with fire. 17He will have his winnowing-fork to hand, ready to sort out the mess on his threshing floor and gather the corn into his barn. Any rubbish he will burn with a fire that will never go out.'

John urged his news on the people with many other words.

### **Commentary**

A cartoon shows a sceptic shouting up to the heavens, 'God! If you're up there, tell us what we should do!'

Back comes a voice: 'Feed the hungry, house the home- less, establish justice.'

The sceptic looks alarmed. 'Just testing,' he says.

'Me too,' replies the voice.

John the Baptist doesn't seem to have wasted time and breath going into the details of ethical debate. Not for him the learned discussions of particular cases, the small details of law that take time and energy away from actually doing anything about the way the world is – and the way one's own life is. Of course, one might grumble that John hadn't said anything to the people who didn't have two cloaks or too much food, but that wasn't the point. If people were coming for baptism, they were committing themselves to be God's Israel, the light of the world, the people in whom God's justice would be seen by all. There was no time, and no need, for lengthy discussions such as we find in the writings of the rabbis. What they needed were rules of thumb. 'Two cloaks?

Give one away. Too much food? Same applies.’ Nobody could miss the point. Like the great Old Testament prophets, John could see the rich getting richer and the poor poorer. A start had to be made to get things back on track.

The special cases are doubly interesting. Nobody likes paying taxes at the best of times, and some of the tolls were levied simply at the whim of local rulers, shamelessly lining their pockets and giving the collectors tacit licence to do the same. John doesn’t say they should stop working for the hated rulers; he’s not going to recommend unemployment. But they must earn their living and no more. No getting rich at the expense of their own people.

The soldiers are probably from Herod’s own troops; they are unlikely to be Roman soldiers, coming to a Jewish prophet for a ritual that only made sense within Israel’s national story. Like the toll-collectors, they aren’t told to abandon their careers, but they must avoid abusing their position, as was evidently commonplace. No thuggery, using their brute force to rob people with impunity. ‘Be content with your wages’ isn’t a way of telling them not to campaign for higher wages from their employers; the steady creeping inflation that modern Western economies experience was virtually unknown in the first-century Roman world, and annual pay rises would not have been an issue. Rather, the soldiers are not to use a complaint about low pay as an excuse to rob and pillage (‘Herod doesn’t pay us enough, so we have no choice’).

Simple, clear commands; but if they were obeyed they would demonstrate that people meant business. None of these

things happens by chance; they only occur when people have genuinely repented of the small-scale injustices which turn a society sour. But there is more. John is not just a moral reformer; he is the herald of the Messiah.

Jesus himself would give more detailed teaching than John. But he never retreated from the things John was saying here. He too was just as committed as John to God's justice working its way out into the world in the behaviour of his followers. For him, God's justice would be displayed not through riches and royalty of worldly style, but through the love and justice that would finally be combined on the cross.





## **For Reflection or Discussion**

Can you think of examples of injustices – whether large- scale or small-scale – that have been reported in the news recently?

What do you imagine John the Baptist would say about them were he alive today?

How do you think, as a Christian, you can address injustice that you see around you?

## Week 4 Advent Course – Finding Joy

### Mary's Song of Praise: Luke 1.39–55

Mary got up then and there, and went in excitement to the hill country of Judaea. 40She went into Zechariah's house, and greeted Elisabeth. 41When Elisabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby gave a leap in her womb. Elisabeth was filled with the holy spirit, 42and shouted at the top of her voice: 'Of all women, you're the blessed one! And the fruit of your womb – he's blessed, too! 43Why should this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44Look – when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the child in my womb gave a great leap for joy! 45A blessing on you, for believing that what the Lord said to you would come true!'

46 Mary said, 'My soul declares that the Lord is great, 47 my spirit exults in my saviour, my God. 48 He saw his servant-girl in her humility; from now, I'll be blessed by all peoples to come. 49 The Powerful One, whose name is Holy, has done great things for me, for me. 50 His mercy extends from father to son, from mother to daughter for those who fear him. 51 Powerful things he has done with his arm: he routed the arrogant through their own cunning. 52 Down from their thrones he hurled the rulers, up from the earth he raised the humble. 53 The hungry he filled with the fat of the land, but the rich he sent off with nothing to eat. He has rescued his servant, Israel his child, because he remembered his mercy of old, 55 just as he said to our long-ago ancestors – Abraham and his descendants for ever.'

## Commentary

And if you lived in any kind of culture where rhythm and beat mattered, it would be the sort of song you could clap your hands to, or stamp on the ground.

What would make you celebrate wildly, without inhibition?

Now read Mary's song like that. (It's often called the Magnificat, because that is its first word in Latin.) It's one of the most famous songs in Christianity. It's been whispered in monasteries, chanted in cathedrals, recited in small remote churches by evening candlelight, and set to music with trumpets and kettledrums by Johann Sebastian Bach.

Perhaps it would be the news that someone close to you who'd been very sick was getting better and would soon be home.

Perhaps it would be the news that your country had escaped from tyranny and oppression, and could look forward to a new time of freedom and prosperity.

Perhaps it would be the message that all your money worries, or business worries, had been sorted out and you could relax.

Whatever it might be, you'd do things you normally wouldn't.

You might telephone everybody you could think of and invite them to a party.

You might sing a song. You might even make one up as you went along – probably out of snatches of poems and songs

you already knew, or perhaps by adding your own new words to a great old hymn.

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It's the gospel before the gospel, a fierce bright shout of triumph 30 weeks before Bethlehem, 30 years before Calvary and Easter. It goes with a swing and a clap and a stamp. It's all about God, and it's all about revolution. And it's all because of Jesus – Jesus who's only just been conceived, not yet born, but who has made Elisabeth's baby leap for joy in her womb and has made Mary giddy with excitement and hope and triumph. In many cultures today, it's the women who really know how to celebrate, to sing and dance, with their bodies and voices saying things far deeper than words. That's how Mary's song comes across here.

Yes, Mary will have to learn many other things as well. A sword will pierce her soul, she is told when Jesus is a baby. She will lose him for three days when he's 12. She will think he's gone mad when he's 30. She will despair completely for a further three days in Jerusalem, as the God she now wildly celebrates seems to have deceived her (that, too, is part of

the same Jewish tradition she draws on in this song). All of us who sing her song should remember these things too.

Why did Mary launch into a song like this? What has the news of her son got to do with God's strong power

overthrowing the power structures of the world, demolishing the mighty and exalting the humble?

Mary and Elisabeth shared a dream. It was the ancient dream of Israel: the dream that one day all that the prophets had said would come true. One day Israel's God would do what he had said to Israel's earliest ancestors: all nations would be blessed through Abraham's family. But for that to happen, the powers that kept the world in slavery had to be toppled. Nobody would normally thank God for blessing if they were poor, hungry, enslaved and miserable. God would have to win a victory over the bullies, the power-brokers, the forces of evil which people like Mary and Elisabeth knew all too well, living as they did in the dark days of Herod the Great, whose casual brutality was backed up with the threat of Rome. Mary and Elisabeth, like so many Jews of their time, searched the scriptures, soaked themselves in the psalms and prophetic writings which spoke of mercy, hope, fulfilment, reversal, revolution, victory over evil, and of God coming to the rescue at last.

All of that is poured into this song, like a rich, foaming drink that comes bubbling over the edge of the jug and spills out all round. Almost every word is a biblical quotation such as Mary would have known from childhood. Much of it echoes the song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2, the song which celebrated the birth of Samuel and all that God was going to do through him.

Now these two mothers-to-be celebrate together what God is going to do through their sons, John and Jesus.

This is all part of Luke's scene-setting for what will follow, as the two boys grow up and really do become the

agents of God's long-promised revolution, the victory over the powers of evil. Much of Mary's song is echoed by her son's preaching, as he warns the rich not to trust in their wealth, and promises God's kingdom to the poor.

But once again Luke hasn't just given us a big picture. Mary's visit to Elisabeth is a wonderful human portrait of the older woman, pregnant at last after hope had gone, and the younger one, pregnant far sooner than she had expected. That might have been a moment of tension: Mary might have felt proud, Elisabeth perhaps resentful. Nothing of that happens. Instead, the intimate details: John, three months before his birth, leaping in the womb at Mary's voice, and the holy spirit carrying Elisabeth into shouted praise and Mary into song.

Underneath it all is a celebration of God. God has taken the initiative – God the Lord, the saviour, the Powerful One, the Holy One, the Merciful One, the Faithful One. God is the ultimate reason to celebrate.



*Jumping for Joy by Corby Eisbacher*

## **For Reflection or Discussion**

When was the last time you had cause to really celebrate?

What sorts of events make you want to jump for joy or throw a party?

How do you think the church could help to spread the joy of faith more widely in their communities?

Where do you find joy, even during difficult times?

*Content adapted from 'Luke For Everyone' by Tom Wright,  
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