Advent Services Resource Pack

Linking the familiar Christmas story to the stories of those living in the lands of the Bible TODAY. To make your Advent services relevant as you and your congregation prepare your hearts and minds for the Christmas celebrations.

Here are various elements of a church service, containing links to modern-day Bethlehem and the work of Embrace the Middle East and the Christian-led projects we support. The resource pack is designed so that you can pick and choose the parts which would be most helpful to you in the planning of your Advent services. Through using these, we hope that you and your congregation will learn more about Christians in modern day Holy Lands, and that this will enable you to connect with the reality of the Christmas message. If you would like to take up a collection for the work of our charity in response, please contact us to obtain Gift Aid envelopes. We are very grateful for your support and interest in our mission.

If you would like a representative from Embrace to visit and give a talk or presentation about our Middle East partners during your service, we would be happy to arrange this for you. Please contact us and we will put you in touch with one of our Regional Managers.

Contents:

1 Explaining Advent, the Advent wreath and the candles
   This is intended to serve as an introduction to your service, with helpful unpacking of the representation and symbolism behind our traditions, as well as food for thought on modern-day issues faced by those who now live in the places we read about in the Bible.

2 Sermon suggestions
   Several sermon series, each along a particular theme, with Scripture passages and suggested titles to act as a starting point with sermon preparation. You could follow an entire series for the four weeks of advent, or just pick one which grabs your attention and use that as part of a themed service on the Bethlehem of the Bible and the Bethlehem of today.

3 Suggested hymns and songs for your service
   There are, of course, many more not listed here. However, this is intended to be a starting point and to begin to prompt other ideas as well. There is also a CD of music available from the Embrace catalogue/website to accompany congregational singing, and our Bethlehem Carol Sheet is free this year. Follow this link to order as many copies as you need.

4 Ideas for interactive children’s teaching slots/games within the context of the service.
   These are ideas to be used in an All Age service setting, or Sunday school, to engage the children with the themes of Advent.

5 Additional readings on the theme of Advent and modern day Holy Lands (non Scripture)
   Presenting the story from a different perspective, this reading (and others which will later be added), offer additional material to help people connect with the reality of the Holy Family’s journey to Bethlehem. It might bring a freshness and an alternative flavour to your service.

6 Ways to support Embrace the Middle East over Advent
   Alongside raising awareness of our charity’s name and work by using our resources you can help by praying for us and by raising money through collections or events. This section provides a few more ideas.
1. Explaining Advent, the Advent wreath and the candles

‘Advent’ simply means coming and is a period of waiting which remembers the time leading up to Christ’s birth in Bethlehem as foretold in Old Testament prophecies. Advent represents our expectation, anticipation, and preparation for who Christ is and what He has done for us. He arrived into the world as a human being, both fully God and fully man. He came to identify as one of us, as the Son of Man, as a baby born in a manger. He came for us; He comes into our lives and hearts today; He is coming again in great power and glory to bring His Kingdom to fruition.

As we consider the preparations undertaken by the Holy Family ahead of Christ’s birth, we might also think of those families living in Bethlehem today who are making preparations for the arrival of their own babies, perhaps without the access to healthcare provision which we in the West take for granted. It also reminds us that these children are being born into a society in turmoil, which desperately needs the sort of peace and reconciliation that Jesus taught and brought.

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2. Sermon suggestions

3. Suggested hymns and songs for your service

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The wreath

Traditionally, during the Christmas season we have an ‘Advent wreath’ in our churches. This cross-denominational tradition dates back to the beginning of the 19th century in Europe. The Advent wreath has five candles, four of which are in a circle to symbolise Christ’s eternity (as a circle has no beginning or end), with one in the centre. They are arranged on a base of evergreens which mean that He is ‘ever with us’. The red berries of the holly represent the shedding of Christ’s blood.

And again, Isaiah says, “The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; the Gentiles will hope in him.” May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 15:12-13).

Embrace the Middle East offers an Advent study resource called ‘Jesse’s Tree’ which you or your church congregation may find useful as a tool for reflecting on God’s Word and reconnecting with Him during this period. Find it in our online shop by following this link.

The candles

The Advent candles represent the light of God coming into the world through the birth of His Son. They are lit during the worship services each week in progression until Christmas Eve or Christmas Day when the last candle (the Christ candle) is lit.

Each candle has a special meaning. There are several traditions as to what these meanings are. Here are some options on which to base your reflections:

- The first candle
  **Candle of Hope**, or candle representing the Patriarchs.
  Both interpretations remind us of God’s faithfulness to generations of man, and of the way in which He keeps His promises, which offers us future hope (Romans 15:12-13). This reminder of God’s relationship with His people since Genesis helps us to see the bigger picture of His plan for His people and His world. Even though we often see the Holy Land appearing in the news for the wrong reasons, because of ongoing conflict, we can be certain that God continues to walk through it with His people, and has a plan to prosper them and not to harm them (Jeremiah 29:11).

- The second candle
  **Candle of Preparation**, or candle representing the Prophets.
  “Help us to be ready to welcome YOU, O GOD!” (Luke 3:4-6). This candle prompts us to look ahead to what we know is coming – to what we can firmly believe in even though we have not yet seen it with our own eyes. This is true for us today with a view to eternity as it was for the people of the Bible. In many ways we can and should identify with our brothers and sisters who still live in the Holy Land today, generations on from those who were there at the time of Christ’s birth. Yet it is all too easy for us to distance ourselves from our fellow Christians living out the gospel in the very places where Jesus lived and worked. Perhaps part of our Advent preparations should involve putting ourselves in their position and thinking about how we could extend a helping hand.

- The third candle
  **Candle of Joy**, or candle of John the Baptist.
  You might use this candle to recall that the angels sang a message of JOY! (Luke 2:7-15) proclaiming Jesus’ arrival, or to think about John the Baptist who explained that he was not the One but was merely pointing the way to the One. Both serve as reminders that Jesus is at the heart of what we are about to celebrate at Christmas, and all the trappings of commercial Christmas are superfluous, especially when we consider that many people face poverty and hardship today in the land where Jesus once walked. They do not have the luxury of expensive presents, decorations, or tables piled high with food. We need to be the message of JOY proclaiming Jesus’ light and love to those who are in need of such compassion.

- The fourth candle
  **Candle of Love**, or candle of the Virgin Mary.
  For some, this candle symbolises Christ’s love and the fact that God sent His only Son to earth to save us, because He loves us! (John 3:16-17). For others, it is a reminder that Jesus was somebody’s child, and that both his earthly parents and Heavenly Father loved him immensely yet were going to have to watch Him suffer. This is a tragic situation in which many parents in the Middle East find themselves, when their children are caught up in the continuous fighting and animosity, and it feels impossible to offer them a safe home.

- The fifth candle
  **Christ Candle**
  Lit on Christmas Day, this symbolises the Incarnation; the heart and reason of the season. It is positioned in the centre, since Christ’s light is central, radiant, and God’s gift to the whole world.
2. Sermon suggestions

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Series: The story unfolds
Advent week 1 | Luke 1:5-25 | An angel speaks to Zachariah
Advent week 2 | Luke 1:26-38 | An angel speaks to Mary
Advent week 3 | Luke 1:39-66 | Mary’s visit to Elizabeth; The birth of John the Baptist
Advent week 4 | Luke 1:67-80 | Zachariah’s prophecy

Series: The coming of the King
Advent week 1 | Ephesians 1:15-23 | Christ the King
Advent week 2 | Mark 13:24-37 | No one knows the day
Advent week 3 | Mark 1:1-8 | Preparing the way
Advent week 4 | Luke 1:26-38 | Foretold to Mary

Series: Who is Jesus? Gospel glimpses of the King
Advent week 1 | Matthew 13:1-23 | Jesus, the Sower of the Word
Advent week 2 | Mark 8:22-38 | Jesus, the suffering servant
Advent week 3 | Luke 2:25-38 | Jesus, Saviour of the world
Advent week 4 | John 20:11-20; 24-29 | Jesus, the man – physically resurrected

Series: The Songs of Advent
A series which looks at the poetic words uttered around the birth of the Messiah. The texts of the songs are below. More texts can be added to flesh out the stories.

Mary’s song | Luke 1:46-55
Zachariah’s song | Luke 1:67-79
John the Baptist’s song | Luke 3:1-18
Angels’ song | Luke 2:14
Simeon’s song | Luke 2:28-32

Series: Hidden Characters of Advent
A series which looks at the characters in the Advent story not usually highlighted.

Joseph | Matthew 1:18-25
Herod | Matthew 2:1-18
Jesus | John 1:1-18 [The perspective here is that we can forget that Jesus existed before all time, and that creation was made – and will be remade - through him.]

Additional options for Scripture readings:
3. Suggested Advent Service hymns and songs

- O Come O Come Emmanuel
- Come Thou Long Expected Jesus
- O Little Town of Bethlehem
- It Came Upon a Midnight Clear
- Lo He Comes With Clouds Descending
- Everlasting God (Brenton Brown)
- Mighty to Save (Hillsong)
- You Never Let Go (Matt Redman)

If you don’t already have copies of our carol sheet, you can follow this link to place an order!
4. Children’s activities

- Make a large advent calendar out of cardboard which children can be invited to the front of church to open each week. The image behind the door can be a clue about the theme of the week’s service.
- Audience-participation illustrations or games about being prepared or about waiting.
- Show part or all of the VeggieTales series DVD, The Little Drummer Boy (Big Idea Productions)
- Make and decorate a Jesse’s Tree and decorations as a group project over the four weeks.
- Do a short talk, imagining the Queen is coming to visit, and getting help from the children to demonstrate with props how they would prepare the church/ home/ room for her arrival. www.sundaychildrensfocus.com/index.php/advent-childrens-sermon-be-ready-for-christs-return.html

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I didn’t want to go. But when she gets an idea in her head, there’s no stopping her. She said she had to go to Bethlehem, and that was that. I couldn’t let her go back there on her own. Too many soldiers about for a start. Besides, she insisted on starting well before it was light.

‘All right, all right,’ I said. ‘I’ll come, though what the point of it all is I can’t imagine. All that way for some ruddy Jews.’

‘What do you mean, “ruddy Jews”?’

‘Bloody Yids, if you prefer Bloody Yids! Always causing trouble, and if they’re not, you can bet your last farthing they’re about to start.’

‘My grandfather was a “bloody Yid”,’ she said quietly. ‘And he died because too many people thought him so. With six million others.’ She slipped a bag over her shoulder, and went out into the street.

We walked in silence for several miles. The sky was all a-dance with stars, but I did not notice. Her grandfather was a Jew. I had not known that. Six million had been told that, but I had forgotten. I was still caught in such thoughts when I became aware that she was speaking to me.

‘It must have nearly killed her,’ she was saying. ‘Who?’

‘The child’s mother. It must have nearly killed her. Nine months pregnant nearly, and she had to walk all the way from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Must have taken them ten days at least, more in her condition. And why? Because the occupying power said so. Pax Romans! Pax Romana! What do the Romans know of peace? Their precious peace meant she had to walk for days on end when she was nine months gone! Not surprising she had her baby as soon as they got there. A miracle she didn’t have it on the way. She could have died in labour, too. She had nowhere decent for the birth. Only the place at the back where they kept the animals. And no midwife, imagine! Exhausted, worn out after the trek from Nazareth, in a strange town, among strange people, no women friends to help, no midwife, in the cold dark of the night, and her labour pains begin. She must have been terrified. Her first child as well. And she’s so young.’

‘But why all this way to see her and her baby? We don’t know them after all.’

‘You’ll see.’

We reached the edge of the town just before dawn broke. The new sun would soon rise huge above the mountains to the east and turn the round hills of the desert to pink and gold. The thin line of the waters of the Dead Sea would shine silver in the distance far below.

There was a check-point at the edge of the town. We were the only ones on the road, but the soldiers were very much awake. They searched our belongings, and then us. They were quick and efficient about it. They asked us where we were going. I didn’t catch what my companion told them, but they seemed satisfied enough, and let us through.

The small square in the middle of Bethlehem was still quiet. We passed beneath the high fence round the police station. The soldier on duty on the tall watch-tower put his finger on the trigger of his machine gun, and watched us pass.

‘Not a pretty place, Bethlehem,’ I said. ‘No,’ she said, ‘This way.’

She led me up a narrow street leading off one corner of the square. A cat slid out from one doorway into another. The silences of the night had not yet been broken. But then I heard a baby crying. New-born, I could tell. She touched my arm. ‘Through here,’ she said.

And there they were. The mother lying exhausted in the straw, the man cradling the baby in his arms, rocking him gently and singing him a lullaby. ‘They look so young,’ I thought to myself. ‘She’s scarcely more than a girl, and he’s only a young lad.’

The man smiled at my companion. ‘I’m beginning to get the hang of it,’ he said. ‘You’ve brought him with you after all, I see.’ He turned towards me. ‘You are most welcome,’ he said. ‘Sorry about his crying, but it’s what babies do apparently.’ He grinned. ‘The shepherds woke him up. They didn’t mean to. They’ve just left.’ He began his song again.

I felt awkward. I didn’t know these people. Why were we there?

‘I’ve brought you some food and water, and a little wine,’ my companion said. ‘That’s wonderful!’ he said. ‘Mary will say you’re an angel,’ and his grin spread even wider. ‘Here, take the baby, and I’ll give her something. She’s very weak.’ He looked at me. ‘She nearly died, you know.’

My companion took the child and slowly rocked him till he fell quiet and closed his eyes. She held him tight against her for long minutes. Eventually she turned towards me. ‘Your turn,’ she said softly. ‘Take him, and you’ll find out why we have come.’

She passed the baby to me. He was so very small, that new-born Jewish boy, and I held him to me in the cold dawn, in a smelly stable, off a back street of an ugly little town, watched over by soldiers, in a God-forsaken country run by foreigners who would make a woman nine months pregnant walk for days so they could put her and her husband on their wretched lists. And I tell you, at that moment I held all heaven in my arms. And when the baby stirred suddenly and twitched his arms and opened his eyes, it seemed, and still it seems, that I looked into the eyes of God.

Mary’s voice came from the bed of straw. ‘You know why you have come,’ she said simply. ‘I looked down at her. ‘I know now,’ I replied, and burst into tears.

5. Non-scripture readings

All Heaven in my Arms – by Trevor Dennis (from Imagining God)

On 6 January, 1992 I was in Bethlehem. It was not my first visit to the town, nor my last, but it was the only time I have been there for the Orthodox celebration of Christmas in the Church of the Nativity. Security was tight. Never mind its fame as the birthplace of King David and Jesus, Bethlehem had then long been a grey town, starved of funds under Israeli military occupation, and frequently under curfew. On the way to the church we were searched for weapons, and when we got to the Manger Square, we found it dominated as usual by the police station, with its huge fence and its guard tower manned by two heavily armed soldiers. Inside the church, as we waited for the great procession to begin and the reading of the Christmas gospel, the police swaggered about. Not one of them removed his cap. It took me straight back to the stories of the birth of Christ in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. They too speak of the dictates of an occupying power. They too speak of poverty and fear, and with his story of the massacre of the infant of the town by King Herod, Matthew tells of appalling violence far beyond anything (thank God!) we witnessed in the place. There is a very dark side to the stories of the birth of the Christ, which is there for us all to see in the Gospels, if only we will keep our eyes open for it. That darkness, and also my memories of Bethlehem (somewhat altered in the telling), as well as the common memory of the Holocaust, lie behind parts of this story. Thus I have deliberately blended together our own times with those of the historical Jesus, not just for effect, but because the story of his birth is as much for our generation as it was for his own. Time has proved its timeless quality and its eternal significance. I have tried to capture a fragment of that here.
6. Ways to support Embrace the Middle East during Advent

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- **Take up a collection** during one (or all) of your services using Gift Aid envelopes
- **Hold a coffee & cake sale** after your service and pass the proceeds on to us
- **Buy Christmas gifts** and further resources from our catalogue
- **Order the Bethlehem Carol Sheet** (free + p&p) and use it for carol singing events, raising money for Embrace as you go along.
- **Visit our website** to find out more about ways you can get involved with Embrace’s work.

For further help and information, please contact us via e-mail at info@embraceme.org or telephone 01494 897950.