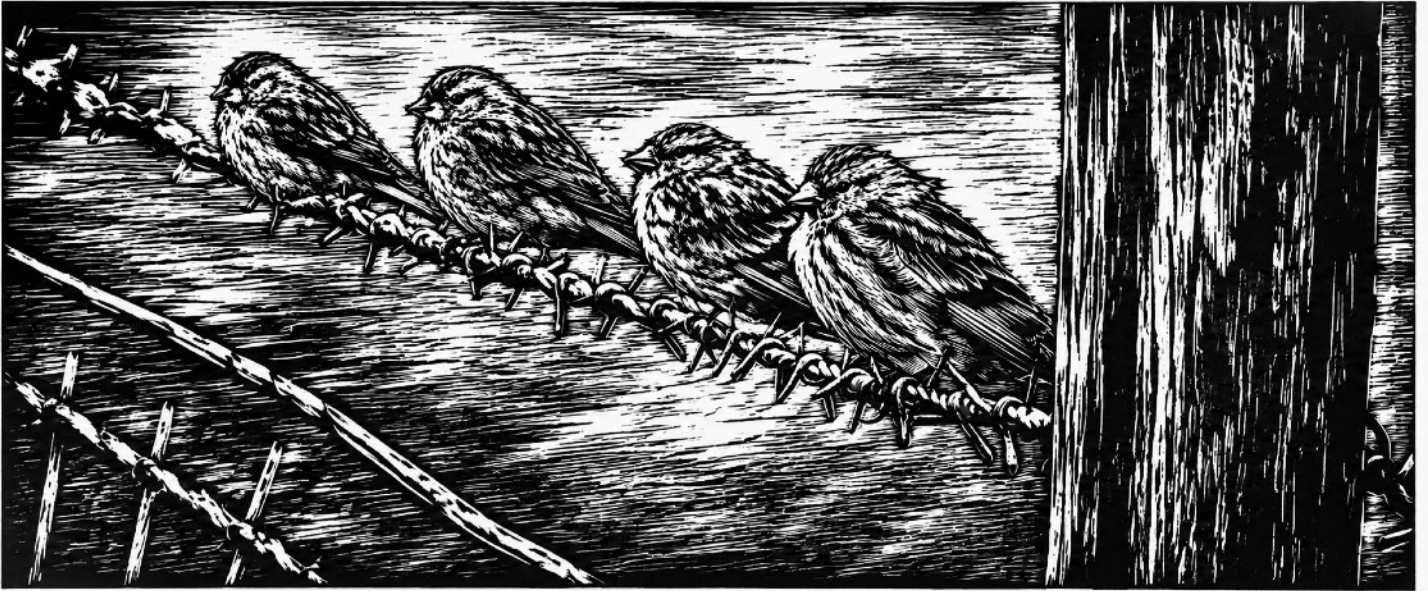


A Choice of Voices

4 Sermons for Advent 2026 (Year B)



These are scripts for the suite of four filmed reflections for each of the Sundays in Advent, based on the Revised Common Lectionary for Year B in 2026

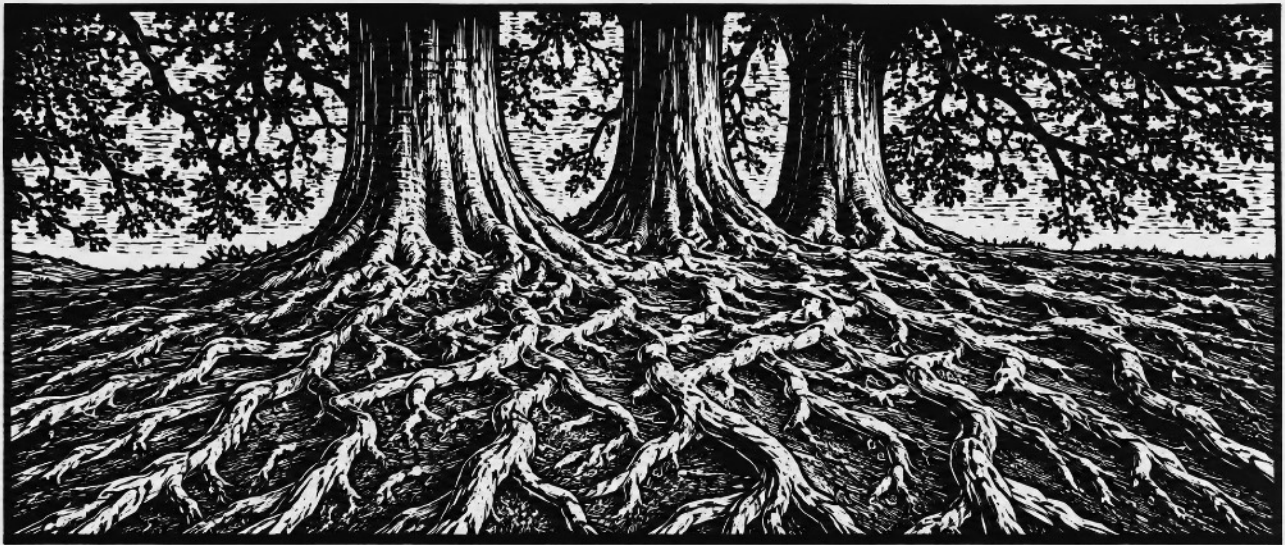
The overall theme/title is **‘A Choice of voices’** reflecting our calling, in Advent, to listen to a variety of perspectives and then discern a way, along the ‘Royal Road’...

This may mean that we re-examine what we thought were familiar visionary and poetic readings in the sharp fresh light of the Crisis of Nature and Climate, which is the overarching context of our life, work and discipleship in this generation.

Use, adapt, enjoy and be inspired. The full videos and short versions will be found, as and when they are made, on our 2026 Advent Page

<https://ecocongregationscotland.org/resources/advent-2026/>

WEEK 1 : THE TESTIMONY OF TREES



The testimony of trees. That's what links our readings. You might pass them by, you might hug them, you might ignore them.

But Jesus didn't recognise that as an excuse.

Creatures we share a home with; These trees with their roots in scripture share and carry the Word of God in our readings today.

Brushwood in a wildfire and fruit trees in season.

So far as the distortions of the seasons allow them to behave the way we expect.

But that too is a message, a sign you don't need a funny hat, collar, title, or years as a hermit to read. To learn.

From shrubs and trees, like those mentioned in the first breath of the Garden of Eden story. With their twin calling: of nourishing fruitfulness and beauty. Trees with a voice. After their kind.

Why are we surprised when we learn how trees communicate. How they share, how they behave?

Not only clapping their hands in praise, but embraced by the vocation of God's prophets - Trees, who speak most truly when not brutally carved into idols, but lovingly shaped of living, suffering, wood by God's own hands.

So many faith traditions, including our own, recognise a Tree of Life, and that's who speaks out, in this year of wildfires and their poisonous clouds, which blot out the heavens, so alien to the clouds which part to reveal the coming of the Son of Man.

So yes, these are and ought to be scary words. Scary for the love of God.

Because we do perennially misrepresent rationality as calm, as detachment.

We do praise procrastination as wisdom.

So let us urgently pray that our leaders do rise to the calling of leadership by sticking their neck out for the earthly personal approach to the Earth and fellow creatures exemplified in Jesus.

For Christian faith is not in sterile detachment, but rather in God's messy immersion, as the vulnerable refugee child of suspect parentage, in the dirt and dust of the world. God chooses to be up to their neck in it. That's what Advent leads up to.

Christ coming as this redundant carpenter who talks terrifyingly and embarrassingly in the most mainstream scripture, of the end of the Age, if not of the world. Christ who, as the head of a teaching staff of trees, and of signs in the life of the sky and the earth, insists on the life-giving and life-saving virtues of alertness and responsiveness in stories which are as full of ultimatum as they are of hope. Yet in which the authenticity of such hope is underwritten by ultimatum.

"Stay alert, stay awake, stay awake!"

And Christ, who is God-with-Earth, not aloof, but coming again.

Christianity is the faith of our trust in God's baptism into the turmoil and violence which human choices *add* to the awesome Acts of God within the life and the cycles of the fragile, responsive, and sometimes angry Earth. The Earth with whom not even kings and presidents can argue.

Thus we hear: Firstly from a singularly distraught Prophet Isaiah, in that painful spiritual predicament of those many - yes, those far more than the billionaire medias will tell you - who find courage to *be* appalled by the intransigence of governments and societies in advancing the just transition we so urgently need.

Isaiah is *so* frustrated and appalled that he's asking himself: what will it take to shift these people, this nation whom I love? His own people of lips unclean with the injustice which wounds the world.

We discover that the expression of hope, under intolerable pressure, may look like a curse. Though hope it remains. Even where the life-saving Gospel of Warning can be written off as gloom, doom and betrayal. Prophets can expect prison, or worse. Isaiah...was sawn in half.

And when Jesus set his face to the cross, it was Peter, the rock on whom Jesus longed to build the church, who tried to talk him out of it.

Even this year, some church leaders cling on to stewardship - janitorially taking care of Creation - rather than a more biblical protection and covenantal partnership - in which you can't but hear those trees screaming, and don't pretend you're either mad or immature if you do. True prophets know injustice injures the Earth.

- This year, the activist Roger Hallam, imprisoned for planning transport disruption, called out the felt obligation of liberal writers to weaken their warnings with "could". And even as they acknowledge the facts of the idolatry of oil, "to name the crime, but not the criminal". Leaving the stage wide open for criminally naive clichés like "climate always changes".
- Jesus does not pepper his ultimatum parables with reservations. Are we loving enough to follow his example. Or is that too much for us to bear?

For we might find ourselves, alongside Isaiah, on the point of praying for just enough unprecedented disaster to *get though to* ourselves, our communities, and the other nations too. How much disaster is "just enough" to wipe out those compulsive laughing emojis whenever the crisis is mentioned .

Isaiah prays for a shaking of foundations, which goes *so far* beyond what can be prudently postponed or written off as just another natural process, that everyone sits up and takes notice of God. God worthy of praise not just because they're God, not just as Creator, but because beauty inseparable from justice throughout creation is God's chosen reason for being.

So what will it take to get through to us, to our churches, communities and nations, to change our minds, our choices, our economies?

Yes, even money move things on. It's bad capitalism to invest in what destroys your market. Speak if you must, in terms the treasurers among you might applaud. But without repeating the enslavement and disenfranchisement of previous industrial revolutions.

So much cheaper, the miracle of Jonah that a nation changes before the disaster hits. As we heard this year, the cost of reaching net zero is less than another oil crisis. We're a week of years on from Greta Thunberg's prophetic call to "go ahead and panic, because the house, our common home, is on fire".

So it's good that as Advent begins it's from Jesus, we hear: from that sensible, meek, mild faithworthy Jesus, that we hear this wild speech.

the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the skies will be shaken.

Words from the Little apocalypse of Mark, to which Jesus is provoked when he is undermined by the misplaced complacency of one of his very own disciples, who gawps and wonders at the solidity of the big stones of which the Jerusalem Temple was constructed.

Words remembered when Mark's Gospel was written down within sight of, or even during the sack of Jerusalem; the strategic smashing by empire of the existential foundation, of the faith which the earliest Christian communities shared.

This scary speech in our most cherished scriptures keeps faith with us in crisis, because it refuses to endanger us with denial, or to anaesthetise as cattle are stunned before slaughter. The Good News, the best news, from our Lord Jesus Christ is "keep alert, keep awake, keep awake". And trust the signs which the voices of denial can obscure but not abolish.

So you see: overlaid with the trivia of chocolate countdowns, Advent has preserved resources for times of emergency. Sharp and stimulating jewels of spiritual encouragement, alertness and responsiveness. Countercultural acknowledgements of endings. Gifts, of honest emergency hope, above all for *communities* and for *nations*. Worth

noting because as individuals, we're so vulnerable to those demons of "what can *I* do?"

But even that question can be transformed to a gateway of hope. To what we need when we find we have been inextricably implicated; dependent on things that harm the Earth and our neighbours including the human ones.

I cannot save the world. But I can be part of it. Because by the grace of God each prayer and righteous choice placed in God's hands is a participation in healing. Every life saved, every bee revived, every tree planted reclaims hope. And builds resilience. Which, by the way, is the point of devotional practices like fasting, and perhaps sacrificial giving.

For my own good and the good of the world, I can take first - and perhaps more importantly second steps and more. As with so many half-understood net zero ambitions, by the grace of God, a direction of travel is more valuable than hitting or missing what may be unrealistic targets.

And if we ask, from our heart- "what can we do: then I can - you can - always choose less harm, as made clear both John the Baptist to sinners and soldiers and hopeless cases who made their way to the wilderness , and St Peter to those who witnessed the birth of the Church at Pentecost- this community in which the dreams of the old, the visions of the young, and the inspiration even of those who are most despised and marginalised by our own cultures; all these are vital resources; to be valued, sifted, modified, transformed, and given thanks for.

By those, as the Psalmist says, are like trees planted by a river: in love with what we're taught though God.

And in times of crisis, for the nations of the world including our own, therein lies hope.

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WEEK 2 : AN ADVENT CAROL



[Scenario - morning on a mountain]

Reading the Bible can be like Russian Roulette. A click . You don't get it, a click, you don't get it. And sometimes Then, sometimes, everything lines up and bang.

The face, the voice or the scenario fits. And an old story, written down in a distant country becomes as explosively and dangerously meaningful as did these verses from Isaiah two months after I was born, through prophetic preaching to a quarter million people protesting **for** civil rights and **against** legalised racism in the United States.

A speech which will echo long after **I'm** gone.

Those folk discovered "the Bible says", that every obstacle, institutional economic, cultural, is to be overcome which obscures the transformative power so rightly called the Glory of God.

That speech with integrity took the straightness of God's road as a lovely inclusiveness, which ever since has boosted to a momentum of respect for diversity, which must not be curtailed, even should the initial aims of that protest be achieved.

This was the voice that got through In such ugly monocultures of Empire, where fellow creatures of another race or species dare not be looked in the face for fear you might recognise God looking back at you.

That fear which blocks so many roads, not least of transformative climate action.

And yet, the wonderful thing about Scripture, and especially prophecy, is that it's not just single-use. Re-use, recycle, repurpose: for prophecy once fulfilled is not prophecy exhausted. Isaiah's vision enriched by John, John's repurposed vision for us.

That's the model Jesus himself so riskily tapped into; the model in which he schooled his disciples, and which in the first breath of Mark's Gospel gave first-century Christians the confidence to piggy-back the power and authority of Isaiah. Not to dismiss or eclipse, yet also not to be so over-awed by that prophet, that their vision could not be used in freshly-inspired and creative ways.

That's also sometimes the place for perseverance, because the help of the Spirit is given not commanded. Not stolen. I think this story of the three spirits, three voices who spoke to Isaiah underlines this. Churches faithfully preserve and re-read our Bible, and sacraments, safeguarding those spiritual resources for such occasions as they truly come into their own.

When I visited Assisi, I encountered the bones not only of St Francis, but of Carlo Acutis - the teenage Saint who died when I was 43) . Carlo, for whom the Mass, the Eucharist, Communion with Christ was a "motorway to heaven" . Fair enough: for a motorway brings together the momentum of so many journeys and starting points.

And as for many byways of Scripture it isn't that there **isn't** a right way through it. There really is a strong overall direction of flow for justice for the poor and for Creation, making accessible a multi-lane highway of God as Creator and Sustainer; of justice. Not a private road. The Glory of God *for me* must always be for others too. When they are lost, we can show, or be shown the way.

This frees us to look again at the choice of voices which come to Isaiah, not in calm and well-fed safety, not with those “decades to come” in hand, that fantasy which I’ve encountered far too often in emails and speeches of our politicians justifying the sluggishness of our just transition. We read best with something of the destabilised urgency in which these visions originated.

Beginning with that recognition that when people are in crisis, punishment is worse than pointless. Adding brokenness to brokenness does not heal. Demanding destinations when the roads are blocked or hopelessly potholed does not get us there.

Yet first of all, a different voice barges in. A terrifying and desperate voice, the full horror of which might become apparent in the beauty of **this** landscape. Or those Burned, scorched so that nothing gets in the way.

We’re not told that this first voice, responding, is the voice of God, and I pray that you may bear with me and question this for a moment.

That you may test this spirit. As I believe did Isaiah.

And this is why.

I’ve spent the last few years translating ‘Amen’ as ‘get on with it’ but just as we may enthusiastically pretend that God’s promises limited to “the end of the age” are simply and boringly open-ended, so transformation, however expeditious, requires more compassion, more justice, more relational investment than snapping fingers and fixing it whatever the cost. Even in emergency, Communities need nurture for lasting change.

That’s why today I’m wary about how we hear that voice of bulldozer and of chainsaw. The voice who in 1945 was content twice to press the nuclear button on the pretext of ending a war whose end was in sight anyway.

Delaying the changes we urgently need to embrace is neither wise nor sensible. But this first voice demands the solution of problems **without engaging with them.**

This is the voice of the final solution: a brutal abolition of the diverse beauty of the landscape. It is happy to make redundant the guides and teachers, and the beautiful relationships of growth and learning.

To abolish even the option to look away from the glory; that choice which in hearts and minds convinced in freedom becomes the greater blessing.

In continuing colonial practice, this is conversion at gunpoint, to the glory of the colonisers, in memory of God. So that the rich homelands and ecosystems can be declared terra nullius. This was Trump's vision for Gaza in the AI video he shared. Last year. Wipe the land clean. Then do what you want to be the whole of the law.

In this short space of my lifetime.... We have heard that voice' assurance that draining the world's wetlands will lead to property and fruitfulness. The voice which trampled so many habitats for the social benefit of HS2, with eight times the environmental impact foreseen. It's the voice which was happy to write and publish hymns thanking God for the gas and oil which **have** exacerbated the wildfires around the world this year .

Is it now also the voice which hijacks the growth in sustainable energy to overload our countryside with the heat islands of data centres?, or that gleeful voice I heard in the lectures at the sustainable energy trade fair in Glasgow proclaiming : "We don't need to rely on ethics any more for sustainable energy: the economics will do the job for us!"

Bulldoze and blow up the mountains. Landfill the valleys with the rubble. And where regulations do cautiously permit development at cost of beauty, remember it's easier to ask pardon than permission.

This is the voice that purports rational prosperity at the cost of beauty; to achieve the aim you've destroyed in the process.

In most of your Bibles at home, the twentieth century translators eradicated the possibility that "all flesh" means more than just our species, though the rainbow covenant is so life-inclusive, though the jubilee allows for wildlife, though Jesus spoke personally to trees and

seas and though the risen Christ mandated Good News to All Creation.

This uniformly featureless waste, which devalues that diversity which is God's will and wisdom; this is for us more of a distortion of and obstacle to the Glory of God as ever a mountain or valley could be.

This first voice simply commands, without asking for collaboration or co-creation. It's not just Jesus who encountered temptation in wilderness. Isaiah faces it too. The Temptation - and in our day it's always crassly underwritten by promises of prosperity - to serve God at the cost of Creation Justice. Promises of immediate but temporary employment as if the planet and their life could be out of sight, out of mind.

This first voice that piles in might seem like growth and comfort, might seem like the justice of a creator God, but beware it isn't hijacked by anything but.

Isaiah doesn't comment. Maybe Isaiah's still reeling.

Who else does Isaiah hear? Thank God, there are other voices, other spirits . Like the ghosts who both haunt and transform Scrooge.

Then, out of the blue...

A voice says, "Cry out!"

And I said, "What shall I cry?"

Cry out! - but this voice trips over the devastating depression of the would-be prophet. The disappointments, the shattered hopes they've experienced.

This second voice expects too much of the prophet. The response is familiar to all of us who work with congregations in which lovely and committed people hear the news, see their neighbours' response or lack of it, and say to themselves - what can I do, and how can I do it.?

Isaiah shares that familiar perceived pointlessness of reaching out to life and ways of life which barely get a foothold; the response to bringing together the fleeting possibilities of one generation with “the Word of God which stands for ever” .We’re grass.We’re just not around long enough to make a difference.

This is tough, and we thank the honesty of Isaiah for that feeling of inadequacy, as if it all fell on our own shoulders alone. The greatness of John the Baptist is that **his** reading of Isaiah does not overwhelm him.

He needs no bulldozers, no infrastructure other than the wilderness’ own self to call and enable the whole community to prepare the way.

Making hope accessible - thus paths straight, or rather beautiful - to those who by rights, and the opinion of the righteous are too ugly to be released from their wrongdoings. Sinners, colonial enforcers, betrayers of their people.

But how much good is opened up, when we attend to those who otherwise continue to do harm. I’ve also tripped over translations which exclude the very biblical significance of beauty.

All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.

Is it the constancy? or is it the real and fragile beauty, the loveliness of created life - of course including us - like the grass which this summer and recently turns so abruptly from its lush Scottish green to irredeemably yellow and brown, even before the fire catches.

How, in such fleetingly fragile circumstance of our lives can we find meaning in a loving power “ which stands for ever” ?

Four cycles of this lectionary ago, for the comfort of my own congregation, I spoke of the resilience of the lush grass on our

damp green hills of the north; a resilience we can no longer take for granted.

Cry out, says the voice to Isaiah,

What's the point when we're a flash in the pan?

And yet grass is there at all because grass can come back. Because there are generations ahead to be mindful of even if we've messed up. We are part of them. We are responsible to them. As we are the Creation we choose either to abuse or care for.

What does the third ghost, the third spirit have to say? The one who's not introduced, but as we read, it's clear another voice has come forward.

The voice that calls as much to the whole downcast people of as to their struggling prophet; to appreciate and value their own responses and ability. A voice for our own societies in which, as a survey in August suggested, our populations often overestimating the real-world actions taken by other people to address the threat, but underestimate how widespread is support for climate action.

Comfort, comfort my people. Make the road lovely! AMEN.

WEEK 3: UNTICKING THE BOXES



It's the most classic delusion, that WE are on a mission from God.
But we could be wrong.

So *we* set up committees and commissions: to see how, when and if God might be at work in the people and places we encounter.

Whether it's truly God - or someone or something else.

Terms of reference are always vital - are they so set around with security features that not even God can log in?

Or are they so loose that the community of faith can be trampled and exploited, and their spiritual authority enlisted, as faithwashing, for violence, exploitation, ecocide? From which the people need protection? Institutional churches, quite *rightly*, do not *lightly* bestow their blessing on teaching or actions outside their own control.

But within our own faith? It's an urgent concern, as I heard last year from the Vatican Eco Department, who are involved, as are we, in the Season of Creation, that Christian faithwashing colludes with extractive injustice, where poor nations suffer the curse of mineral wealth, attraction the vultures of multinational corporations.

To be part of a committee, an assessment panel, - like that official delegation from Jerusalem who struggled out to the wilderness to interrogate the wild wisdom of John the Baptist - to be part of such is a spiritually demanding duty, made more so by this question:

Which is worse: tragically to discount and dismiss how God may truly be at work, or to endorse and bless those toxic plastic Jesuses which Jesus - *the real one* - mentions in that scary speech¹ with which this Season of Advent began

Meanwhile, it remains the most classic *delusion*, especially of the powerful, that "they're on a mission from God".

Nonetheless, if our honest *conviction* is for with justice, peace, and a caring partnership with Creation, why would *we* not be?

Taking that as read, by what right should we disregard good news beyond our own jurisdiction? Jesus, you recall, held back the disciples

¹ Mark 13:22

from shutting down the unauthorised healers in his name. Good News is of God, whether or not it's of us.

That too, I'd like to say, is the message of these chapters of Isaiah which we dust off or even unleash in Advent.

The foreigner, the migrant, the disabled citizen, and the outcast. God's an equal opportunities employer. Inclusive even of Isaiah, who saw himself as a person of unclean lips among a people of unclean lips. There's Isaiah's powerful image² of the despised and rejected suffering servant - a messenger of God, like the Earth today, disabled and disfigured, attending to whose voice is vital to the good of all.

And whatever our claim to authority, our key qualification to act - our faith - is one which authorises and amplifies our efforts and voices us towards a better life, for the good of all the Earth.

-If that's how it is for ***you, then*** blessings and congratulations-

Elsewhere... are we too scared of the ridicule and contempt of an age which is not at all "secular", but rather riddled with the interwoven idolatries of money, power oil, militarism .

(And possibly their newly-appointed prophet, AI.)

Are we too intimidated to hitch a ride on the free bus service of Scripture and tradition to be part of God's gifting for the good of all?

Are we too feart to be open with others about how our faith might motivate and enhance ***the good life we try to lead in love*** for all our neighbours of the Earth?

Are we too timid to be as craftily, fear-lessly, disingenuously, ***knowingly*** open as was John, with his blunt and straight answers to that respectable committee of investigation, who had struggled out into the wilderness outpost of Bethany - a place-name which hints at a "house of affliction and poverty" -only to find themselves obliquely characterised, by one in the clothing of a harmless hermit, as bad shepherds and wolves in sheepdogs' clothing.

That's not in the Gospel reading ***as such***.

But that image of bad shepherds and ravenous dogs would leap out at anyone familiar with chapters of Isaiah before John's quote.

² Isaiah 53

In the other *Gospels* John pulls no punches with his description of the institutional visitors to the run-down site of his riverside revival, as poisonous snakes.

They remind me of that group of gentlemen from an overseas partner church. Big men in suits with expensive shoes, whom we once hosted in the local church in Barrhead. We tried to share with them the beauty of Loch Lomond, but the mud and snow of the West of Scotland got the better of the attempt.

John's popularity has twisted the arm of *this* official delegation - compelled to head out of their comfort zone. In amongst the poor and afflicted, where, in order to introduce the Messiah, whom they might or might not prefer to be looking for, John confidently takes the role of his warm-up act.

Already a popular and respected figure amongst the people, John turns the tables of authority on this unfortunate committee, who squirm, desperate to have something to report back.

To be fair to them, they don't come entirely *without* respect. They *can* see he *has* something about him. Which they themselves don't.

Put yourselves in their - well-heeled- shoes. Prophecy is much less threatening when it's tamed by ancient history. When simple financial and fiduciary *duties* can be relied on to trump more demanding spiritual ones. When we pretend we can't afford that baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Awww will be well..

Just so long as, that scary stuff in the Advent readings don't start sounding *-as this year they frequently have done -* like news reports from wherever you may be around the world this year.

In the last few years it's seemed to me that even as we rely on the help of that Wild Wind the Spirit to take scripture *seriously rather than literally*, the climate crisis has been the death of "mere metaphor" or of "only poetry" as something abstract and alien.

John's ministry is strengthened by inhabiting that wilderness in which Isaiah locates their words.

And with a green perspective, Advent is no longer a time of irrelevantly quaint wild words leading to a time for the children or for consumer excess; with every passing year of crisis, this Season wakes us up all the more to God's invitation to change our minds, our attitudes, our

habits, our economic policies; to rejoice with Mary in the pulling down of the mighty from their thrones, and raising up whatever life is trampled, because therein lies the key to healing and the repurposing of our world.

So what are the questions on the form for investigating annoying fake prophets?

Are you THE Prophet³ - the one like Moses, whom the people must obey? No, John doesn't have to be bothered with fitting into that box, nor the one of the Messiah.

Nor does John claim he is the one *doing* the work of preparation. Rather, he is calling everyone - yes you- who might to listen, to *our participation* in a just and holy transition. To a rebirth, which, with the Hebrew understanding of the linkage of creation and justice, has to be rooted in partnership with the Earth, rather than any mere ideology.

Isaiah's language, endorsed by John, is so rich in partnership with fellow creatures: the flowers which pop up after the wildfire ashes. The venerable oak trees of justice, to display God's glory. The mention of what we call everlasting covenant - of which we note both that the Hebrew talks of a covenant of salt - that is, both a resource preserved until it's needed, and a memory of the rainbow covenant with all life on Earth; with the soil who teaches hope...

For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.

For all that, it remains the most tantalising temptation for any preacher, to claim of their own slanted and prejudiced words, that this is what "God says" or more dangerously, whom God hates. Or those on whom vengeance is due.

Or as with John the Baptist, those sinners who are so annoyingly, be let off the hook if they change direction. Criminals who haven't suffered enough! What a scandal!

³ Deuteronomy 18:15–18

What right had John to offer what that other “*John*”’s Gospel assumes we have heard elsewhere - a *Baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*”.

Why not that more comforting pseudo-prophetic message which a veteran politician once preached in the garden of my church, that “punishment is primary”, with which he expected me as a ‘man of the cloth’ to be in agreement. No.

What we like to think of as punishment has no value in itself except to the extent that it promotes the real primary aims of healing and repentance, and perhaps deters further harm. Truth and reconciliation are primary.

Certainly not ‘vengeance’ which in Scripture is too much of a slippery slope to be the prerogative of any but God.

Yet responsibility has to be brought home - that’s the justice behind ‘Loss and Damage’ which acknowledges the harm done especially by the global north, which ought rightly to quake in fear at -as friends in the Pacific would see it, the reasonable anger -AKA the destabilisation - of the living Earth.

Luke records Jesus quoting this script from Isaiah in an incident which nearly got him thrown off a cliff, even though Jesus rolled up the scroll before he got to those words about vengeance, mixed in with ‘the year of the Lord’s favour’.

Perhaps we might risk hearing once more that talk of vengeance, but transformed by an awareness of that Old Testament principle, grounded in a very holistic concept of an all-embracing God, that cause and effect -like cutting down a tree, and the damage that ensues when it falls on a neighbour’s greenhouse - are an example of divine vengeance. A modern concept of peevishness and vindictiveness truly misleads our understanding, and dangerously so, when we’re having to learn once more, that our chosen actions *are* chosen consequences. Our chosen continuation as a nation or a culture of the burning that knowingly harms the Earth, killing and displacing our neighbours, of all species, and stealing from future generations that stability and reliability of seasons to which our Scriptures love to appeal as a sign of God’s faithfulness “whilst the Earth lasts”.

Pressed by the delegation for a way of understanding what he’s up to, John does finally concede the divine sending proclaimed by the Gospel writer. He repurposes Isaiah, by making it real.

Since nothing about Earth without Earth is for Earth, he speaks *in* the wilderness of the wilderness. John recycles the outrageous prophetic attention to diversity and inclusion of Isaiah, whose prophecies demolish traditional barriers of race and physical imperfection, which throughout history seem more wont to be rebuilt than any ancient ruins. In that sense, John's rough path out by the river becomes as level a playing field and as straight a Way of the Lord as could be desired.

WEEK 4: SERIOUS DREAMING



Where do you live? What's your house, your home? Could God live there?

I wonder how *your* house and the houses around about now look as we get closer to Christmas.

Reflections for Advent 4 mostly have something of the Father MacKenzie about them- a sermon that no one will hear. I pray this is worthwhile, even if it's just for you and me.

Because all else around is getting overlaid with the plastic trappings of Christmas, and in some places and cases, with annoyance or impatience that there's anything more to be said sung and pondered before we actually get there.

But never mind how many "sleeps till Christmas": just now, let's make space for dreams, for sustaining visions. To help us be in a condition, at the end of this terrifying year of wars and wildfires, to welcome Christ, the hope of Nations. Christ the refugee child. To our house, our community. Our world.

So: Where **do** you live? What **is** your house, What **is** your home? Our readings for the 4th Sunday of Advent playfully interweave various valid ways to talk of house and home.

Of place and community. Of that with-ness which God chooses in Christ: Emmanuel : God-with-Us, God-with-Earth.... Who sends encouraging angels to young women and dreams of rebuke to mature royal advisors who thought God could prudently be contained in the posh box of prestige building projects. How silly that is!

This irrepressible God, who sends love to all Creation. And sends us to express that love. In this house, the common home we share. The family house God made for life to live in. The house God so wonderfully decorates to celebrate the sacred goodness of the house's self.

Think about that, as you see the beauty of trees overlaid with tinsel. Even the plastic ones. They're trying! Celebrate, and enjoy, but remember a tree is far more than a decoration. And with each press-ganged Norway Spruce, give thanks for every tree. Learn, as Jesus said, from all the trees. Fellow creatures who breathe in what needs removed from the atmosphere, and breathe out what we need to survive and offer praise.

Then ask yourself: Where **do** you live? What **is** your house, What **is** your home?

In the last few years, the interwoven meanings of house, home, family, have deeply informed the Assisi Conferences which brought together the widely splayed branches of the world's church families, meeting, at first,

as preparation, in a once-ruined church, where a privileged, previously fun-loving and extravagant young man came to pray. Previously...

Because the glamorous tales of military glory Francis had been raised on were brutally shredded in his year as a prisoner of war, broken by ruinous sickness and deprivation. Perhaps not surprisingly after that, Francis was prone to visions, and in the ruins of San Damiano church, praying before what was already an ancient cross from which Christ still looks down, he received, in prayer, a commission very different from the military or the merchant's life of his family.

Francesco, va' e ripara la mia casa che, come vedi, è tutta in rovina”
“Go and repair my house, which, as you see, is all in ruins”

So he got to work, initially, in the most obvious way. Chuck money at it. Sell off his father's property. Even the horse. Leave behind the values you grew up with. But that's what it took to realise there was more to repair than one building. And more to repair than one faith tradition. The common home, of which we can see so clearly, the ruins, when we set out to count depleted wildlife. Or walk the scorched hills.

In passing: Francis has been given credit for the first presentation of Christ's birth amidst the live animals of the farmyard. A gimmick? Maybe. But reading the early account, it's not a *cheap* gimmick, but a *deep* gimmick. A risky devotion, in pursuit of the sounds sights and smells of the earthy sanctity of the holy birth.

Profound spiritual experiences of calling, and change of plan are not *un*-common. Especially in crisis. As our world, our home is indeed in crisis. We look to some sort of answer; to the desperate, impossible question: in the face of all this, what can I do? If... Maybe, when all around are losing their heads, we *shouldn't* stubbornly keep ours.

History shows: the deeper sanity of sanctity may not always correspond to 2020 vision and peak physical fitness or common sense and financial prudence

As many of us who've been involved in *bereavement* ministry will have observed.

Our perception can change in crisis, and **neither** always, but **nor** infrequently, in a way which gives comfort, or furthers healing. In crisis it may be God's gift that we do experience reality differently. As, in scripture, the infants, the poor, and especially the oppressed are bearers of God's word.

Such are gifts of humanity which are not best served or valued by forensic over-analysis.

In the destabilising crisis of bereavement, we do well to accept any quiet blessing, conveyed in whatever way, of those who've relocated to God's wider household. The informal experience of the Communion of Saints.

Such genuine pastoral experiences are an aspect of how human beings are made. Connecting us with the visions of the young, like Mary, the dreams of the old, like Nathan. It neither confirms, but **nor** does it discredit faith to observe that our species - and likely **not uniquely** - has **evolved** the apparatus of spirituality.

Indeed, being rigorously honest, there is no rationality **without** spirituality.

The church at their best both tests and gives a robust context of truth to aspects of life too rich and complex for mere words alone. And sometimes too much to digest alone.

True visions are not given to hoard, but for people in community. In an atmosphere of truth and trust. When we piously read the Bible together, we honour mysteries which sustain us. And that shared sense of reverence has survival value.

Because yes, trivialisation and sensationalism - what Francis tried, at all costs to avoid when he devised the crib with living ox and ass - shoddy shallowness **endangers** our fragile listening for God's voice within Creation.

Intrusive thoughts and voices may - clinically - get out of hand, whilst blurting out what needs confidentiality, wisdom and insight to process, can do more harm than good.

There are good and precious things which have helped and encouraged me, which I could not share with you unless we were face to face, eye to eye, and we'd learned to trust each other beyond formal politenesses.

But in this late stage of Advent, we thank God that, in some way, Mary shared what changed her life, and ours in the child - and the motherhood - she chose to welcome as from God.

Some faith traditions *require* such things from members, others seem to treat their presence as an embarrassment.

There *was* a strand of Calvinism which, attempted, but largely, failed, to relegate miracles to the rounding off of the apostolic age.

How dare we suggest that in our life and the life of Creation around you, God is still speaking?

How reassuring, that God has never consented to be ruled by theologians.

Nor God's Creation by what the wisdom of the wise decreed are the limits of the possible.

Science describes.

Faith interprets.

Only God can finally explain, or at least, in the story shared with Mary about the houses of Jacob and David, sufficiently encourage that we rise to our calling.

In the Gospel of John, the talk is rather of 'signs'. Not bothered about forensics, or whether a test can be established, absurdly to prove whether an *experience of* Creation contradicts the *nature of Creation*.

To further God's will and wisdom of justice in a diverse world... Read *those* signs, says Jesus. As Christ from that cross, to Francis: "My house, *as you see*, is all in *ruins*". Spoken *amidst* the ruins, as John *amidst* the wilderness, spoke of wilderness. Sanctity is about reality. The more connected, the more holy.

A friend who's writing a book on St Columba asked me to imagine what was distinctive about the often hyper-romanticised community people love to label the 'Celtic Church'.

From what I've read and pondered, I ventured to suggest that the treasure it can offer was a straightforward, a literally down-to-Earth attitude to dreams and visions. A profound connectedness to Creation. On which the stories of our faith are built.

In these years when my job is to reflect on how green church is more church, I've been confronted by the emphasis in the teaching of Jesus on taking notice of crisis, on responding to danger, on speech of warning, even ultimatum as Good News. **My** home, which **you** see is all in ruins. Learn from the builder on rock to take notice and survive.

It's with the resurgence of racist fascism in our society, we see once more the sense of the Psalmist's watchword, that without vision, the people perish.

And that, as Jesus showed, unclean spirits, driven out, unless the gap is filled with love and justice, return with more and worse.

Most of us will, and perhaps should **struggle** to discern and interpret these stories of the visits of our fellow creatures the angels. But **Wrestling** with Angels is one heritage obliquely highlighted in the Annunciation: the household of Jacob.....

Thank God for that. Because stories of such very decisive turning points may cover a multitude of wider struggles to find a home and a purpose.

And I'm not a detached observer here, with, from my late twenties, a series of life-changing experiences - and looking back, more than I noticed and put together at the time. Eventually I managed to convince the church to train and employ me.

To cherish and repurpose the turning-point treasures of faith in God, for whom nothing shall be impossible.