

Assembly Reflection: Hope in uncertain times



The aim of this resource is to focus attention on the Advent message of hope. It may be included in an assembly or to form the basis of a longer Advent liturgy.

We've reached the season of Advent: a special time of preparation for Christmas. Throughout this unusual year we've all probably tried to make preparations of one sort or another: for birthdays, for holidays, for exams! But the uncertainty of the year has scuppered most of these.

We're not used to uncertainty. We don't like it. If our weather app predicts sun and we get rain, we're annoyed. If the internet cuts out when we're due to attend an online lesson or meeting, we're stressed. We've even introduced Video Assistant Referees, so we're not vexed with the uncertainty of an offside rule. We've got used to knowing what is happening, to being in control, to making firm plans.

But for most of human history people had to live with uncertainty. Many of the Bible readings we hear during the season of Advent remind us of this. These Advent readings from the Old Testament were written by prophets who lived hundreds of years before Jesus, in times of great instability caused by conflict, injustice, famine and disease.

In these ancient times, many became overwhelmed with fear and worry. People began to doubt God's love for them; they weren't even certain that God was there. For the prophets who lived in these times, things were different. Even when the world wobbled around them, their faith in God provided stability and hope.

The prophets listened out for God's voice and looked for evidence of God's presence around them. And when they heard God speak of his love for the world and all its peoples, the prophets became messengers to guide and console others.

They reminded people that, although God may not *prevent* disasters, he will never fail to see us through them. We just have to stay faithful and follow God's example. In a famous Advent reading, the prophet Isaiah explains what this would look like in his prediction of a saviour sent by God to lead us:

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse and a branch shall grow out of his roots: on him the spirit of the Lord rests, a spirit of wisdom and perception, a spirit of understanding and authority, a spirit of knowledge and reverence. He does not judge by appearances or gossip; he will judge the poor fairly and defend the rights of the helpless. Isaiah 11:1-4 (adapted from JB)

Since the days of Isaiah there have been others who although surrounded by fear and uncertainty, have seen evidence of God's healing presence in the world. They've communicated God's message of hope and peace to others. One such person is Dr Tamura-Snider.

Dr Tamura was ten when the first atomic bomb was dropped on her home city of Hiroshima, in August 1945. The bomb killed an estimated 75,000 people outright and obliterated large parts of the city. Amazingly Dr Tamura survived – along with the stumps of several ancient trees.

The scientists who had created the atomic bomb predicted that after the blast, because of the radiation, nothing would grow in Hiroshima for around 75 years. But six months later, during the spring of 1946, new shoots appeared from the ancient tree stumps.

Watching nature return to life helped Dr Tamura return to life too. It wasn't easy. She'd experienced great trauma and the loss of her parents. But in time her hope grew, as did her desire to communicate God's message of love and peace.

And so in 2015, Dr Tamura began taking shoots from those few surviving Hiroshima trees, tending the shoots until they grew strong, then sending the saplings around the world so that new Hiroshima trees could grow – as symbols of hope and healing.

Even amid uncertainty, Dr Tamura and Isaiah show us how to prepare for a better future. Dr Tamura does this by taking shoots from Hiroshima's surviving bombed trees and tending them so new life can grow. So far she has planted 35 Peace Trees and spoken around the world about our need to live as one human family.

For Isaiah, the shoot he chose to give attention to signified the birth of Jesus – the stump of Jesse referring to the ancient family from which Jesus was descended. This birth fulfilled a promise God made long ago – that whatever was going on in our lives, God would never leave us. That we are loved by God so much that he wants to be close to us – to be one of us – to work alongside us to build a better future.

And a better future is something we can all prepare for, regardless of the uncertainties around us. So between now and Christmas, look out for signs of God's constant presence in your life and in our world: in nature; in the smile of a relative; in the kindness of strangers. Listen out for God's voice in the encouraging words of a friend; in the lyrics of an inspirational song; in scripture or prayer.

Then communicate the hope these give. Be missionaries of God's love and share that hope with others. Do something good with it. Believe you can make a difference. Help someone who needs a hand. Pray for those who are out of reach. Share what you can. Plant a tree! Or support Missio and help poor communities around the world to plant trees and to plant hope **See Advent call to action*

With these thoughts in mind, let's close our time with an Advent prayer.

God of hope, who brought love into this world, be the love that dwells between us.

God of hope, who brought peace into this world, be the peace that dwells between us.

God of hope, who brought joy into this world, be the joy that dwells between us.

God of hope, the rock we stand on, be the foundation of our lives.

Prayer courtesy of faithandworship.com

***ADVENT CALL TO ACTION: TRULY GREEN CHRISTMAS TREES**

St Francis Xavier mission parish has inspired this Advent Action. Supported by Missio, it aims to become the first Ecological parish in Malaysia: planting fruit trees to minimise landslides, feed the local community, and raise awareness of recycling by having eco-conscious Christmas tree competitions!

Why not follow their lead and invite students to create your school's own 'truly green' Christmas tree! St Francis' used plastic bottles but there may be other recyclable materials you could try too? Donating money saved from the purchase of a real spruce to Missio would spread hope to other communities around the world! Send photos of your efforts to @MissioUK

