



Preparing to Become the  
**BELOVED  
COMMUNITY**

# Welcome

*In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God ...  
Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together. - Isaiah 40:3,5*

Advent is a season of preparation: shopping for gifts, decorating our homes and sanctuaries. Advent is also a time to prepare our hearts and communities for the coming of Christ, the Almighty God who came among us poor and homeless, a stranger and a child. There may be no better time to reflect on how we as the Episcopal Church embrace the Holy One who continues to draw near in the neighbor, the stranger, the refugee, or the one who seems most “other” to you. It is the ideal season to commit to becoming Beloved Community and growing loving, liberating, life-giving relationships across the human family of God.

We make the journey not only as individual Christians and congregations, but as a whole church. This spring, Presiding Bishop Michael Curry and President of the House of Deputies Gay Clark Jennings and their supporting officers shared “Becoming Beloved Community,” a new vision document that lays out the Episcopal Church’s long-term commitment to racial healing, reconciliation, and justice. A second resource — “Becoming Beloved Community Where You Are” — details many ways for individuals and congregations to take concrete steps toward change and healing. Both are available at [www.episcopalchurch.org/beloved-community](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/beloved-community), along with a host of resources for faithful reflection and action.

The journey is framed around the labyrinth. Why? In the ministry of racial healing and justice, none of us walks a straight line. We enter the labyrinth wherever God has provided an opening – telling the truth about our church’s story around race; discerning and proclaiming God’s dream of Beloved Community where we are; learning and practicing Jesus’ way of healing and love; and bravely working to transform systemic racial injustice. We keep moving from one quadrant to another and back. No one is ever really finished. That is the way of ongoing spiritual formation.

As you “walk” sections of this labyrinth, gather a group, and together engage the scriptures, reflections, and activities. Designate a facilitator who will carefully preview the session. Set aside at least 45 minutes for each session, and consider these **Conversation Tips**:

*Speak from your own experience. Be genuinely curious about what others share.*

*Imagine you can disagree without someone being wrong. Avoid debate and stay with the story.*

*Seek Christ in others and seek to embody his loving, liberating, life-giving way.*

You will find printer-friendly online resources and alternative activities for a variety of contexts – at [www.episcopalchurch.org/beloved-community](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/beloved-community). Feel free to also explore daily offerings and ongoing conversation about Becoming Beloved Community on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

Presiding Bishop Michael Curry regularly welcomes us to live not just as the church but as the Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement: the ongoing community that follows Jesus into loving, liberating, life-giving relationship with God, each other, and creation. May God bless and grow us into vibrant embodiments of the Christ we welcome and follow, this Advent and always.

Prayerfully offered,

The Episcopal Church’s Racial Reconciliation Team

[www.episcopalchurch.org/reconciliation](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/reconciliation) - [reconciliation@episcopalchurch.org](mailto:reconciliation@episcopalchurch.org)

## **Advent I – Beginning December 3, 2017**

### **Telling the Truth about Our Churches and Race**

#### **Pray the Collect for This Sunday**

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

#### **Read the Scripture Together: Mark 13:24-72**

"Jesus said, 'In those days, after that suffering, 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 heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.'

“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.’

“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

#### **Reflection: Keep Awake**

In the gospel, Jesus promises a new day is coming. He also urges people to wake and get ready. What does that mean for us? One of the earliest, hardest steps toward becoming a community that reflects God’s dream is telling the truth. Like the servants left behind, we may be tempted to bury our heads, but there is grace and truth in examining our church’s story and bringing to light what has been hidden. Jesus invites us to see what is really happening and then to ask for the Spirit’s power to live anew.

#### **In the Labyrinth: Telling the Truth about Our Churches and Race**

We cannot become what God created us to be unless we also examine who we have been and who we are today. Who are you, as a church community? What groups are included and excluded? What things have you, as a church, done and left undone?

## **Make It Real: Inside/Outside Exercise**

Gather in groups, ideally of no more than eight people. Share the **Conversation Tips**:

*Speak from your own experience. Be genuinely curious about what others share.  
Imagine you can disagree without someone being wrong. Avoid debate and stay with the story.  
Seek Christ in others and seek to embody his loving, liberating, life-giving way.*

Now invite people to pause and recall a particular time and place when you felt welcome, as if your voice, ideas, and presence were valued (if it has never happened, imagine it in detail). Pair off and tell the story to a neighbor, for about one minute each.

Next, recall a particular time and place when you felt unwelcome, as if your voice, ideas and presence were not valued or received. Share with the same neighbor. Then reflect in the small group. What did it *feel* like to share about being welcome? Unwelcome? To hear someone else's story? What did you learn?

Now as a whole group, take a large sheet of paper and draw a circle within a circle.

- What racial, cultural, and ethnic groups experience their voices, presence, and ideas as valued and welcome in your congregation today? Which groups have been welcome and shaped your church's story since its founding? Write those groups in the inner circle.
- What racial, cultural, and ethnic groups are not present and/or not welcome in your congregation today, although they are in the same or a nearby town, area, or region? What groups have been unwelcome or on your church's margins in the past? Write those groups in the wider circle.

How do you *feel* as you recall and share these realities? Where do you see possibilities for growing into Beloved Community? Name them together.

**Closing Prayer:** You may wish to give thanks for God's grace, wisdom, and abiding love, and for the honesty, courage, and vulnerability people demonstrated. You may return to the promise of forgiveness and new life that we receive in Jesus Christ.

## Advent 2 – Beginning December 10, 2017

### Proclaiming the Dream of Beloved Community

#### **Pray the Collect for This Sunday**

Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

#### **Read the Scripture Together: Mark 1:1-8**

“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

#### **Reflection: Proclaim Good News**

God sent John the Baptist to proclaim the good news that we could repent, be forgiven, and return to God’s dream of restoration and salvation. John didn’t just cry out in the wilderness; he prepared people to enter the waters of baptism, to share their deepest truths, and to rise up ready for healed and reconciled relationship with God and with their neighbors.

#### **In the Labyrinth: Proclaiming the Dream of Beloved Community**

Healing, reconciliation, and justice are big ideas, but they all begin with exploring our stories, shared history, and deepest longings. If you listened closely to your church and your neighbors and civic partners, what might you hear? What experiences have people had around race, ethnicity, and culture? Is there a shared vision of Beloved Community? What collective commitments and behaviors could you all make that would begin to foster Beloved Community?

#### **Make It Real: Listening & Learning Session**

Gather in groups of ideally no more than seven people each. Review the **Conversation Tips**:

*Speak from your own experience. Be genuinely curious about what others share.*

*Imagine you can disagree without someone being wrong. Avoid debate and stay with the story.*

*Seek Christ in others and seek to embody his loving, liberating, life-giving way.*

Ask each participant to tell a story using one of the prompts below. Allow at most two minutes for each story, with a little silence but no discussion between each. Each group should designate a timekeeper who will gently but clearly indicate when each speaker has 30 seconds left, then 10 seconds, and when time is up.

### Story Prompts for Group Sharing:

1. When I walk around this neighborhood/town/city/community, I feel ...
2. When I look at our neighborhood/town/city/community, I dream of ...
3. To me, Beloved Community looks like ...
4. I was especially aware of my race when I ...
5. I was saddened about race in our neighborhood/town/city/community when ...
6. I was grateful for race in our neighborhood/town/city/community when ...
7. To foster Beloved Community, I hope to ...

Offer everyone the opportunity to share a story. If there is time, go a second round and invite each person to choose a different prompt. Leave 10 minutes to discuss the following questions:

- What surprised you? Did someone's story change the way you view a situation or idea?
- What stories and perspectives do you wish you could hear? How can you humbly invite those voices to the listening & learning process?

**Closing Prayer:** You may name hopes for deeper relationship with neighbors who differ from the gathered group. You may also acknowledge the dreams each person has shared, and how they resonate with God's dream of healing and wholeness for the whole creation.

## Advent 3 – Beginning December 17, 2017

### Practicing the Way of Love in the Pattern of Jesus

#### **Pray the Collect for This Sunday**

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and forever. *Amen.*

#### **Read the Scripture together: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11**

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,  
because the LORD has anointed me;  
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,  
to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and release to the prisoners;  
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,  
and the day of vengeance of our God;  
to comfort all who mourn;  
to provide for those who mourn in Zion—  
to give them a garland instead of ashes,  
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,  
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.  
They will be called oaks of righteousness,  
the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.  
They shall build up the ancient ruins,  
they shall raise up the former devastations;  
they shall repair the ruined cities,  
the devastations of many generations.  
For I the LORD love justice,  
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;  
I will faithfully give them their recompense,  
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.  
Their descendants shall be known among the nations,  
and their offspring among the peoples;  
all who see them shall acknowledge  
that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed.  
I will greatly rejoice in the LORD,  
my whole being shall exult in my God;  
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,  
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,  
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,  
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.  
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.

### **Reflection: Stir Us Up**

The Prophet Isaiah envisions a holy community where all people flourish and seek the good for each other, and it all begins with the anointing of the Holy Spirit. How often do we pause in our efforts and ask God to stir, anoint, and equip us for the journey? Remember that we are always learning and practicing the way of Jesus, who blesses and teaches us to live his way of love.

### **In the Labyrinth: Practicing the Way of Love in the Pattern of Jesus**

Loving our neighbor takes formation, practice, and commitment. How will each of us learn to be reconcilers, healers, and justice-bearers in Jesus' name? How could we practice sharing stories, growing relationship across dividing walls, and seeking Christ in the "other"?

### **Make It Real: This Far by Faith Exercise**

Gather in circles of no more than 15 people. Review the **Conversation Tips**:

*Speak from your own experience. Be genuinely curious about what others share.  
Imagine you can disagree without someone being wrong. Avoid debate and stay with the story.  
Seek Christ in others and seek to embody his loving, liberating, life-giving way.*

Now reflect on ways your congregation or ministry engages in loving your neighbors, within and outside the church. Make a list of the most significant ministries (no more than three). For each ...

- Recall the story of how your church took up this ministry. Who had the idea? Why did others say "yes"?
- Describe the process of beginning the ministry. What was hard? What made it work?
- What (and who) did you not know at the beginning that you know now?
- How has God blessed you and your church through these ministries?

Now consider your conversations over the first two weeks. Think about people groups - racial, ethnic, and cultural, but also socioeconomic, ideological, and theological - with whom your church has experienced separation or even tension. With which of these do you wish your church would develop deeper relationship? Once the circle has decided, reflect together:

- How could the ministry experiences you described before help you to approach the challenge of forming these challenging new relationships? How are those experiences a gift you can offer?
- What new learning and practice would help you to prepare for relationship across difference and division? Book study? Dismantling racism training? Story-telling training? Pilgrimage? Prayer? *(For specific information, check [www.episcopalchurch.org/reconciliation](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/reconciliation))*

**Closing Prayer:** You may give thanks for particular gifts of the Spirit that are now or have been present in your church's life (humility, resilience, generosity, compassion, etc.). You could also ask for God's gracious accompaniment as you venture into spaces of difference and discovery.

## **Advent 4 – Beginning December 24, 2017**

### **Repairing the Breach in Institutions and Society**

#### **Pray the Collect for This Sunday**

Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. *Amen.*

#### **Read the Scripture Together: Luke 1:26-38**

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her."

#### **Reflection: Here I Am...**

Imagine young Mary's surprise: She has just learned she carries the Messiah in her womb. Impossible! Rather than balk at the enormity of her call, Mary leans into the power of the Spirit and says "yes." The idea of healing and transforming deeply broken systems, structures, and institutions may sound impossible to us. We can borrow Mary's courage and faith and say as a church: "Here I am, the servant of the Lord."

#### **In the Labyrinth: Repairing the Breach in Institutions and Society**

God came among us in Jesus because of the deep, divine longing to love and repair this world. What social institutions and systems are broken around you? Where do you notice systems and structures that reflect racial injustice? How could we together participate in the repair, restoration, and healing of institutions and systems?

### **Make It Real: In Solidarity Exercise**

The coming of Christ is so close we can sense him. Dwell for a moment with your own longing for Jesus' coming. After some silence, as a whole group, sing or speak this hymn:

O Come, O Come Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel  
That mourns in lowly exile here, until the son of God appear  
Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel

Invite people to pause and silently imagine communities near and far who wait for ransom and relief: refugees, immigrants with or without documentation, prisoners and detainees in the criminal justice system, victims of human trafficking, and many others. What unjust systems and institutions in our society disproportionately target people of color? In a posture of deep prayer, name these systems aloud. Name and capture them.

Once again review the **Conversation Tips**:

*Speak from your own experience. Be genuinely curious about what others share.  
Imagine you can disagree without someone being wrong. Avoid debate and stay with the story.  
Seek Christ in others and seek to embody his loving, liberating, life-giving way.*

Now reflect as a group:

- Which of these systems and institutions most intersects with the life of your church or community? Agree on no more than two.
- What efforts can you identify, as a group that contribute to healing and transforming the systems you have named? Research options on the web in real time.
- How could your church actively participate in repairing one of the systems the group identified? Together, set one concrete, achievable goal for engagement in the year ahead.

**Closing Prayer:** Invite people to name what graces they have experienced in these Advent sessions. Name the gifts you need, as individuals and as a congregation, to keep walking the labyrinth and becoming Beloved Community. You might finally ask Jesus to dwell richly in you, so that you can share his light and be Jesus Movement people in the world.