

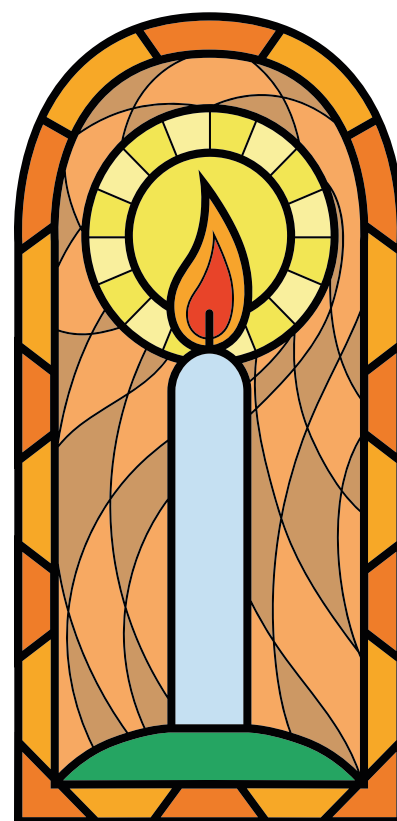
Advent / Christmas 2023

WALK TOWARDS HOPE

Make time this Advent to reflect on Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem and consider where hope can be found in your community.

Thank you for joining with CUF in prayer, reflection and action this Advent season. You can use this seasonal reflection with your church community, at home with your family or as an individual. It can be used at any time during Advent, or whenever you feel called to reflect on the call to walk towards hope.

We've provided a scripture reading, reflection, questions for discussion and intercessions. These can be adapted to suit your context, whether as part of a church service, with a small group or at home. You can ask one person to lead the service or invite a few people to take part in the reading and intercessions. We've also provided an optional prayer walk activity so that you can step out of your building to pray for your community.



You will need:

- Copies of the reading and intercessions if inviting others to participate.
- Prayer walk activity sheet for optional activity.

Opening prayer¹

Lord Jesus, Light of light,
you have come among us.

Help us who live by your light
to shine as lights in your world.

Glory to God in the highest.
Amen.

Readings

Micah 5:2-5 (NRSV)

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.

Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labour has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred shall return
to the people of Israel.

And he shall stand and feed his flock in the
strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.
And they shall live secure, for now he shall be
great
to the ends of the earth;
and he shall be the one of peace.

Luke 2:1-7 (NRSV)

In those days a decree went out from
Emperor Augustus that all the world should
be registered. This was the first registration
and was taken while Quirinius was governor
of Syria. All went to their own towns to be
registered. Joseph also went from the town
of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city
of David called Bethlehem, because he was
descended from the house and family of David.
He went to be registered with Mary, to whom
he was engaged and who was expecting a
child. While they were there, the time came for
her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to
her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of
cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there
was no place for them in the inn.



1. From *Common Worship, Services and Prayers for the Church of England and Common Worship: Times and Seasons* © The Archbishops' Council 2000 and 2023

Reflection

Whether it's a hike in the hills, a stroll round the park or a ramble with friends, many of us enjoy going for a walk. But whether you have chosen to walk or, as in Mary and Joseph's case, you don't have any other choice, walking requires stamina and perseverance. And this is especially true when you are 9 months pregnant and your journey spans 90-miles from Nazereth to Bethlehem, across uneven terrain and steep hillsides.

It helps if you are walking with others who can encourage you along the way, and if you are walking with a purpose: to keep fit, to spend time in nature, to discover new sights or to reach a destination.

Mary and Joseph did not choose their journey, but it wasn't without purpose and they weren't alone. An angelic messenger told Mary that she was chosen to give birth to the Messiah, the child of hope. It was a long and difficult road, but she had faith in the promise and the prophecy of the angel. The prophecy told long before by Micah.

Mary was walking with hope and towards hope – towards the coming of the Messiah, the child of hope she was carrying with her.

As Christians, we can think of our lives as a journey towards hope in Christ. Like Mary discovered on the road to Bethlehem, this journey is not always easy and straight forward. But we do not walk it alone. Just as Mary was accompanied by Joseph, carried by the donkey and met with the provision of a place to rest and deliver her child, we travel in community with others.

What does it mean to be a people, a church, walking towards hope? Mary's journey tells us it begins with faith. We carry the seed of hope with us because we believe in a future in Christ. A future free from poverty and isolation. A future where communities thrive, and everyone's voice is heard and valued.

Mary also shows us that as we walk with hope, we find we are also part of delivering the hope we long to see. So, walking towards hope is about taking action, taking the first step and



then persevering. It might be committing to pray once a week for your community, or participating in a regular community activity that makes a difference - like litter picking, volunteering at a local foodbank, or giving a small amount of money on a regular basis to a charity.

And whether we are walking 90 miles, packing food parcels, serving hot meals to people experiencing homelessness, praying for change or donating our loose change, we can be confident that the God of hope will be with us through his Spirit to sustain and strengthen us and, as Mary and Joseph found, joy and peace will be waiting for us.

Optional questions for discussion

- Where are there signs of hope in your community?
- Where is there a lack of hope?
- How can you as individuals or as a group be part of building a more hopeful community?
- Are there resources you will need, new partnerships you can establish or existing gifts that can be encouraged?

Spend some time praying for your community

Invite people to pray for your community silently or out loud. Or use these words as a focus for intercession:

Thank God for the hope we have in Jesus, the light of the world. Pray that as we journey with and towards him, that our actions bring hope to everyone we meet.

Thank God for the people and organisations in your community who are acting with hope. Pray that they would be given the resources and strength to persevere. Pray that we find ways to work together and support each other.

You may like to close with the following prayer:

Heavenly Father,
Show us how to walk step by step with you in faith.
Guide us on your path, even when we can't see what you are doing.
Through darkness and challenge, help us to see you are our refuge and strength.
Give us your heart for our community, so that together we can share your light and hope where it is needed the most.
In Jesus' name we pray
Amen

**OPTIONAL ACTIVITY:
PRAYER WALK
(see activity sheet)**

Ideas for stepping out in prayer for your community. Including tips for involving people of all-ages.

Prayer of blessing

(from Romans 15:13)

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. Amen

Optional next steps

- Join us this Advent in the [Walk Towards Hope](#) fundraising challenge. We're asking you to walk 90 miles before Christmas, following the footsteps of Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem, to raise money for Church Urban Fund.
- Reflect further on the theme of perseverance and discover more about your community with CUF's [Growing Good](#) resources.

