



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, 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 60 minutes for each session or adapt for shorter timeframes, 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.

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 - reconciliation@episcopalchurch.org

Advent I – Beginning December 2, 2018

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: Luke 21:25-36

Jesus said, "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

"Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

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 9, 2018

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: Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

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 16, 2018

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: Zephaniah 3:14-20

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!
The Lord has taken away the judgments against you,
he has turned away your enemies.
The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst;
you shall fear disaster no more.
On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:
Do not fear, O Zion;
do not let your hands grow weak.
The Lord, your God, is in your midst,
a warrior who gives victory;
he will rejoice over you with gladness,
he will renew you in his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing
as on a day of festival.
I will remove disaster from you,
so that you will not bear reproach for it.
I will deal with all your oppressors
at that time.
And I will save the lame
and gather the outcast,
and I will change their shame into praise
and renown in all the earth.
At that time I will bring you home,
at the time when I gather you;
for I will make you renowned and praised
among all the peoples of the earth,
when I restore your fortunes
before your eyes, says the Lord.

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)*

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 23, 2018

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 1:39-55

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

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.