

## ADVENT AUDIO RETREAT 2023

### 'The Door to Hope' | Episode 2 | "Being Present"

## Episode transcript

Advent is a strange season. Unlike Lent, when we remember Jesus in the wilderness, Advent does not have a Biblical foundation, and yet it is nonetheless anchored in scripture. Because the Bible is not only a record of past events, but also permeated by calls to look to the future, to see the door through which God has walked countless times in the past, and be ready to see it open again, in our futures and in our present. The very message of Advent is that this door will open in our lives in our present, but ironically these few weeks are often the ones in which it is hardest to be present, to live in the here and now. We're busy getting ready to look back 2,000 years to a cold night in Bethlehem.

But we are busy by looking forward to our own celebrations, whether that's by preparing services and dusting off our carol sheets, or by wrapping presents and dusting off our decorations. This focus on the events of 2,000 years ago of God being present in a particular historical time and place is vital, because we know that because of what happened then, he is also present in all time and all places.

We sing the great Advent hymn, O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, reminding ourselves that this very name, Emmanuel, means God with us. But are we even present to ourselves? And so we need to start by being present, fully present in our lives. For how can God be with us in our present, in our today, if we are not really here ourselves? If our mind is dwelling in the past, or worrying about the future? Advent is a time to prepare for the coming feast of incarnation, for the opening of that door through which God enters our lives, by being present.

So let's take some time now just to be. We are human beings made in the image of one whose name is I am, not I was or I will be. And it's certainly not, I do. So let us take time to be. Sit quietly, breathe, feel the floor, your clothes, your chair, be in the present. Be aware of what is beneath the soles of your feet, reaching down to the earth, to the bedrock, part of the same earth that Jesus trod. The air you breathe, the molecules of oxygen, nitrogen, carbon dioxide, Jesus breathed them too. God in flesh occupied this earth, breathed this air. God in spirit is still present, in this place, in this time, in this moment, in us, God is.

Psalms 95 begins with a resounding song of praise to God, 'O come let us sing unto the Lord'. It ends with God remembering his impatience and frustration with the people of Israel as they turned aside from him in the wilderness. The hinge point though, is the line: 'Today, if you will hear his voice'. Today. Today is always the day of encounter with God.

For an example of someone who is fully present and ready for the opening of the door through which God will come into the world, we need look no further than Mary. She is fully present at the Annunciation. 'Here I am', she says to Gabriel, the Handmaid of the Lord.

Artists often present biblical scenes in their own time to make them present to the viewer too. The email accompanying this audio has two examples of Annunciation scenes, each painted as if the event were taking place in the world of the viewer.

The first is by the 15th century Flemish artist Robert Campin. In the largest middle panel of the three in the triptych, the angel and Mary take centre stage in an elegant interior. Mary in a billowing red dress, engrossed in a book. The angel in a similarly voluminous white robe, wings rather truncated, to fit into the picture frame. And in the panels either side, we see the scene extending into the world of a 15th century Dutch town. To the left of the angel, a prosperous couple kneel in the garden of Mary's house in front of a gate leading onto an everyday street. To the right, a carpenter is at work. But is this Joseph or a Dutch craftsman, since his window again looks out into a square where 15th century artisans and townsfolk mingle? The fact that this is a triptych means these left and right panels of 15th century Holland turn in to enfold Gabriel and Mary in an embrace of the painter's own time and landscape. What about in our day?

The second picture is by John Collier, an artist working in our own time. This Mary says, Here I am. As she stands on the doorstep of a suburban house, wearing trainers and a blue pinafore dress. The angel who confronts her has robes and wings almost matching the colour of the house door and plasterwork. Behind him, a similar house can be seen with its own neat lawn and shrubs. Encounters with God and God's messengers are not confined to history. Mary peers at Gabriel over the top of her book, leaving behind the world in which she had been immersed. Entering the present moment, saying here I am. I wonder what lies beyond these pictures, each of their own particular time with its own threats and fears. In Luke's gospel we read of the angel appearing in a time of strict social expectations, which would condemn this young girl for a pregnancy out of marriage. A time of Roman occupation and Judean fears, which would lead to tragedies such as the slaughter of innocent children, and ultimately an ignominious death for Mary's son.

What lay beyond the prosperity of the Dutch merchants, in whose house Campin's Annunciation took place? Memories of the plague and the growing precariousness of life, in a land constantly battling against the encroaching sea. An increasing merchant navy, which would lead to colonial expansion. What lies beyond the serenity and affluence of the 21st century American suburb, among whose western affluence Collier's Annunciation takes place? Fears for the future of the planet as the climate changes? An ever more divided society, in which inequality and poverty flourish, and racism and other prejudice continue to dominate the lives of so many? And what of the world in which you say, 'Here I am', to God?

As you set aside the memories and nostalgia which tempt you to look back, and the plans and preoccupations which pull you forward, as you enter fully into the present moment, what is the world of your present like? Tragic? Beautiful? Frightening? Awe inspiring? A world of plenty and of poverty? Of injustices and of kindnesses, a world of suffering and of compassion? This is the world in which God responds to your presence. To your here I am, with his own great I am. The world in which he not only steps through the door of hope, as Emmanuel, God with us, but is the door of hope. The door through which the light of eternity shines, in our here and now. If only we can be present to welcome him.