

Advent Course 2020: Matriarchs, Patriarchs, Prophets: the Hope and Promise of Jesus

Week 1: Introduction and Matriarchs and Patriarchs

The Advent Wreath

The Advent Wreath has three purple candles, reflecting the liturgical colour for Advent, with a pink candle for the Third Sunday, when rose-pink vestments are traditionally worn. The first candle is lit on Advent Sunday; additional ones are lit, one on each Sunday, and a white (or gold) one in the Centre which is lit on Christmas Day.

There are several traditions about the meaning or theme of each candle. The scheme that accords best with the Common Worship Principal Service Lectionary that we use is:

Advent 1	The Patriarchs
Advent 2	The Prophets
Advent 3	John the Baptist
Advent 4	The Virgin Mary
Christmas Day	The Christ

Each of the four Sundays of Advent then reminds us of those who prepared for the coming of Christ. 'The Patriarchs' can naturally focus on Abraham, our father in faith, and David, the ancestor in whose city Jesus was born. But let's not forget the matriarchs either – Sarah, equally our ancestor in faith, Rachael and Leah, and Ruth, whose story we've been reading recently. 'The Prophets' gives an opportunity to reflect on the way the birth of the Messiah was 'foretold'. John, who proclaimed the Saviour, and Mary (also a matriarch of a kind), who bore him in her womb, complete the picture.

This course reflects around these four themes. For each theme, we'll reflect on a liturgical text or prayer, a scripture reading, a poem and an image.



ADVENT

Patriarchs and Matriarchs

Liturgical Text:

Blessed are you, sovereign Lord, God of our ancestors:
to you be praise and glory for ever.

You called the patriarchs to live by the light of faith
and to journey in the hope of your promised fulfilment.

May we be obedient to your call

and be ready and watchful to receive your Christ,

a lamp to our feet and a light to our path;

for you are our light and our salvation.

Blessed be God for ever.

(Common Worship: Prayer lighting the candle at the Advent Wreath)

A Patriarch and a Matriarch: Abraham and Sarah

Genesis 18.1-16

The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, 'My lord, if I find favour with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.' So they said, 'Do as you have said.' And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, 'Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.' Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.

They said to him, 'Where is your wife Sarah?' And he said, 'There, in the tent.' Then one said, 'I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.' And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to



be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, 'After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?' The Lord said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh, and say, "Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?" Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.' But Sarah denied, saying, 'I did not laugh'; for she was afraid. He said, 'Oh yes, you did laugh.'

The Matriarchs and Patriarchs – the 'Cloud of Witnesses':

Hebrews 11, 12.1-2

11 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ² Indeed, by faith* our ancestors received approval. ³ By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.*

4 By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable* sacrifice than Cain's. Through this he received approval as righteous, God himself giving approval to his gifts; he died, but through his faith* he still speaks. ⁵ By faith Enoch was taken so that he did not experience death; and 'he was not found, because God had taken him.' For it was attested before he was taken away that 'he had pleased God.' ⁶ And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. ⁷ By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household; by this he condemned the world and became an heir to the righteousness that is in accordance with faith.

8 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹ By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰ For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹ By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised.* ¹² Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, 'as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.'

13 All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, ¹⁴ for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

17 By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, ¹⁸of whom he had been told, 'It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named after you.' ¹⁹He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead—and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. ²⁰By faith Isaac invoked blessings for the future on Jacob and Esau. ²¹By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, 'bowing in worship over the top of his staff.' ²²By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave instructions about his burial.*

23 By faith Moses was hidden by his parents for three months after his birth, because they saw that the child was beautiful; and they were not afraid of the king's edict.* ²⁴By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called a son of Pharaoh's daughter, ²⁵choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. ²⁶He considered abuse suffered for the Christ* to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking ahead to the reward. ²⁷By faith he left Egypt, unafraid of the king's anger; for he persevered as though* he saw him who is invisible. ²⁸By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel.*

29 By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. ³⁰By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. ³¹By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient,* because she had received the spies in peace.

32 And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— ³³who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. ³⁵Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. ³⁶Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two,* they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented— ³⁸of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

39 Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰since God had provided something better so that they would not, without us, be made perfect.

12Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely,* and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ²looking to

Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of* the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

World's End – Malcolm Guite

So we begin to contemplate the End
With shadowed glimpses of apocalypse.
How can we even start to understand?
The heavens shaken, and the vast eclipse
Of everything that we have ever known.
Then, suddenly revealed, the power and glory
Once-veiled in symbols of the lamb and throne,
The all-revealing climax of our story.

About that day, you tell us, no one knows
But we must wake and watch for you, look up.
Yet hidden in this warning you disclose
A tender yearning, a deep stirring hope,
And bid us, in the visions that you bring,
To see the world's end as a sign of spring.

Andrei Rublev: The Harrowing of Hell (Icon)

