

MODERATOR'S ADVENT MESSAGE 2026

ONE BIG PRESENT

As a child I loved Christmas and the build up to it. The expectation, the excitement that was focused on Christmas Day and the Christmas presents. We had a plastic fold-up Christmas tree with flashing lights and a place for presents under the tree. Money was tight for us as a family, so we got one big present and a few smaller ones that came from grandparents and the like.

My father was a minister in a rural parish that would combine its services at one of the four churches in the parish. The chosen church was always full, and then most people went home for their Christmas dinner.

Christmas Day was a Holy Day, like Sundays, with farm work stopping except for essentials. Cut hay would wait for bailing until Boxing Day, and if Boxing Day was a Sunday, until Monday. No-one went on holiday until Boxing Day.

Because of going to church, we were allowed to open one of the ‘little presents’ to show-off at church with the rest of the kids, but the big present stayed under the tree until after church. It was never thought of as being mean to children back then but is pretty much something that happened last century. The present opening was a family thing and very special. I remember getting a big metal Tonka dump truck that lasted for years.

The Christmas story was told and was part of my Christmas upbringing that I never questioned, along with many other stories from the Bible I have carried with me and can recite anytime. In a sense, Christmas and the lead up to the celebrating of it was the beginning, with other things of course, of all the threads that came together when I came to faith in Jesus as the Son of God for myself. To say I never questioned deeply the story of God coming to earth in human form in the person of Jesus would be falsity. That was part of my personal faith journey that came after my childhood faith. And as the threads pulled tight on the incarnation it has been part of my world view for many years.

This is my first year in ministry that I am not preaching during Advent because I have a new colleague in ministry who is taking the load of parish ministry while I'm Moderator. Nevertheless, the season of Advent will remain a devotional time for me. I have never followed the lectionary religiously but have used its readings for both Advent and Lent. The PCANZ uses the Common Lectionary, this year it is Year B - Mark - 2026/27.

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The Lectionary began its life in North America and Canada, brought together by the ecumenical liturgical body known as the Consultation on Common Texts (CCT). These are worth a Google search. Taken together the readings can be very challenging on any of the Sundays in Advent. The lectionary introduces Advent as, "The season of preparation which begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas and in which the church recalls its hope and expectancy in the comings of Christ, past, present and future." Advent kicks off examining the human condition and God's response looking forward to the second coming of Christ. Not readings for the timid preacher.

The Advent readings are about the second coming of Christ, the role of John the Baptiser, visiting angels, the Virgin Mary conceiving a child whose father is supernatural, plenty of topics to present as the beginning of the Christian narrative. I have found it beneficial to preach the text and let it speak to our questions and doubts about the authenticity of what the Scriptures present to us. What the Scriptures give opportunity for is personal and corporate revelation. The time when all the threads of certainty and uncertainty, confidence and doubt, myth and fact, mystery and reality pull together into an "aha" moment and you know in your knower that the Holy Spirit has spoken clearly. I believe over many years of that process happening.

One last story. Time has flown, but 16 years ago my wife Helen and I spent six weeks in the country of Jordan on study leave on an archeological dig. We stayed in the capital city of Amman. It was during the time of the ISIS war in Syria and some aspects of our time in Jordan were affected by that. Every working day we were driven in a bus down into the Jordan valley to a place not far from where the Jordan River enters the Dead Sea.

Amman had about 3 million people and was crowded. There are no parks or playgrounds. The multi-storied terrace housing goes on and on.

Jordan is a moderate Muslim country although Christians were treated like second-class citizens in many respects. We arrived in early January just after the Orthodox Christian Christmas they celebrate on January 6. As we drove through urban areas, Christian houses and apartments had banners and decorations hanging out their windows. Not many in the context of a city like Amman, but enough to witness to the city that Christ the Messiah was born. The incarnation and the birth of Jesus is not only common for Christians across the world, the same story is told as the beginning chapter of the Christian faith.

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