

BRF ADVENT BOOK

Image
of the Invisible

Daily Bible readings from
Advent to Epiphany

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Image *of the* Invisible

Daily Bible readings from
Advent to Epiphany

AMY SCOTT ROBINSON



For my husband Tiffer,
who checks my theology, laughs at my jokes
and keeps my teacup full.

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Introduction

When you hear the name 'God', does an image come into your head? Do you think of him as a shining light, with a human shape, as an anchor in the storm, as a rock or as a fortress?

The Bible is full of metaphors for God, images that help us to experience a little of his character. Some of them are more familiar to us than others, perhaps because of well-known verses, songs or prayers in which God is named as a rock, a good shepherd or a king.

'Metaphor', from the Greek *meta* (between) and *phero* (I carry), literally means 'carrying across'. In fact, the word 'transfer' comes from exactly the same two words in Latin. So we can think of each of these biblical images as a way for our huge, inexplicable, incomprehensible God to be *carried across* to us, *transferred* from a heavenly truth to an earthly understanding. Each metaphor does this so that we can comprehend, encounter and worship God. The rich number of images means that we are able to keep meeting God, and praising him, in new ways throughout the seasons of our lives.

Metaphors for God respond to human need: sometimes we may greet him with joy like the morning star; at other times we may hide in him as our stronghold, run to him as our parent, feed on him as our bread. Since God is best described in relationship like this, each metaphor for God also has something to teach us about ourselves, our spiritual needs and how we can find those deep needs met in God. In every metaphor for God, we will find ourselves also pictured: as a baby bird hiding under its mother's wings, as people who are hungry or thirsty or stranded, or as someone waiting in darkness and longing for light. The better we know God in scripture, the better we see our own spiritual condition as well.

Very early on in the western church, before the sixth century, a tradition began of singing seven Advent prayers, one for each day of the week leading up to Christmas. These are known as the O Antiphons, and each one addresses the coming Christ directly, using one of the titles that come from the Old Testament: Wisdom, Adonai, Root of Jesse, Key of David, Rising Sun (or Morning Star, Dayspring), King of Nations and Emmanuel. These titles are linked to Old Testament prophetic metaphors that described the expected Messiah. Although the O Antiphons are seldom chanted in churches now, they survive in the familiar Advent carol 'O Come, O Come, Emmanuel'.

The O Antiphons imaginatively link us to the people who were waiting for the first coming of Christ, needing the Messiah they had been promised. The images offer us metaphors not only for God but also for humanity without God: people in need of wisdom, a king, a key.

This book, leaning in to the tradition of the Advent antiphons, offers a selection of metaphors for God, not just for the final seven days but for every day of Advent and all twelve days of Christmas, finishing with Epiphany on 6 January. I would like to invite you to explore them all and to pray with me, addressing God with all these different names, so that we can wonder all the more richly at the incarnation: the fact that, in Jesus, we have the 'image of the invisible God' (Colossians 1:15), God with us on earth. In Jesus, at Christmas, the waiting was over and all the needs and hopes named in the antiphons were fulfilled.



Week 1

WHEN GOD APPEARS

Many of the metaphors in this book come from the inspired poetry and prophecy of the Old Testament writers. Some of them come from the mouth of Jesus himself, from his 'I am' sayings and parables. Most of them are metaphors in the sense of being a comparison, an invitation to 'think of it like this', a tangible object or image to help us grasp one aspect of an intangible God.

However, we are beginning this journey by exploring metaphor in its literal sense of something being carried across, so we will look at some of the different ways in which God carried himself across to communicate with his people during the time of the Old Testament. These stories are remarkable, because God, who is everywhere and eternal, found a way to also be in one place and at one time in history.

In these stories of Moses and Elijah, Joshua and Hagar, we can see what happens when God appears and how he is directly experienced by his people. How did God choose to represent himself to them, and what might those images mean for us today?

1 December

The burning bush

Exodus 3:1-3

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.'

Once upon a time, a murderer was sitting up a mountain looking after his father-in-law's sheep. At the top of the mountain, he had reached the bottom of himself. Brought up as an Egyptian even though he was born a Hebrew, he had spent his childhood being served by his own people as slaves while he lived uneasily in the palace. Eventually, in his confusion and anger, he had killed an Egyptian slave driver.

He had only tried to be a go-between, a peacekeeper, as he always had, and he didn't learn from the experience. After the murder, he confronted two squabbling Hebrews and tried to solve their quarrel. When they reacted angrily, showing that they knew what he had done to the Egyptian, he ran away. He met his Midianite wife when he rescued her and her sisters from shepherds who were trying to drive them away from a well: the go-between yet again.

Stretched between three peoples, his name meant 'pulled out' and that's just how he felt: pulled out of an identity, pulled in all directions, pulled out of society and community and humanity,

sitting there with someone else's sheep. He was a failed peacemaker, a go-between who had been squeezed out, belonging nowhere. Then he looked up and saw a bush on fire.

Except the bush was not really on fire. It was more that the fire was on the bush; the bush itself was not burning up. And then a voice spoke from it, and history changed forever. The go-between was chosen to go between God and his people. Old Pulled Out ended up pulling God's people out of slavery, parting the sea, receiving the ten commandments and leading Israel through the wilderness until, from the top of another mountain, he glimpsed the promised land.

In this first encounter with Moses, God carries himself across in a number of important ways. He shows himself as a great and holy God: Moses has to take off his shoes to stand on such sacred ground. He demonstrates that he is a God of miracles and power: in their ensuing conversation, Moses witnesses his staff turning into a snake and back, as well as himself both developing and being healed from leprosy in record time. God names himself as Yahweh, 'I Am', an awesome, unquestionable and all-encompassing name. He also uses an image: God represents himself to Moses by showing him a fire on a bush.

The image piques Moses' curiosity; he says, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight.' But perhaps there is more to it than that. As we will see, elsewhere God appears as a consuming fire, coming out of nowhere in power to accept a sacrifice, his holiness represented in unbearable heat and flame. Here, though, the fire that should destroy the bush does not consume it, and the God who should be too holy to approach does not destroy Moses, the runaway murderer. Moses must take off his shoes, but beyond that he does not behave like somebody face-to-face with a holy and powerful God. In fact, Moses argues with him. He disagrees and refuses and makes excuses, and still Yahweh does not destroy him or even give up and choose someone else.

There is an unusual grace in the burning bush, because it is an image of pure light and holiness that does not destroy. The bush is transfigured with holy fire, but it is unharmed; it's still the same bush underneath, rooted where it was before, its randomly seeded place on the mountainside accidentally making it a megaphone for God's voice.

The burning bush sets a theme for Moses' relationship with God from then on, because as the go-between Moses will become a megaphone too. Moses, the same Moses with his roots exactly where they needed to be in both the Egyptian palace and his Hebrew family, will need to veil his face because it shines with God. His encounters with God will transfigure but not destroy him.

The burning bush offers an image for the future of Israel too, as they encounter God's anger alongside his mercy and grace. They will spend 40 years in the wilderness with God but emerge unharmed: still Israel, still God's people, still heading for the land he promised them. Over and over again, Moses will be the one standing between God's fury and God's people. Moses will be the only one allowed to talk back, to plead, to argue. He will carry across the complaints of the people to God, and he will carry God's instructions and mercy back to the people. The whole relationship of God with Israel will be based on justice and mercy: the justice of fire that is meant to consume and the mercy of the bush remaining unharmed.

It's a fitting beginning to a collection of metaphors for God. In every image, we will see the holy and omnipresent God revealed in a particular earthly object. The presence of God, even as a comparison, transfigures the object and makes it shine with holiness, so that in a bird or a seed or a door we can momentarily glimpse the divine. These things are still themselves, and we are still ourselves, but God has allowed us to experience his holiness and remain unharmed. Unharmed, but not, perhaps, unchanged.

A suggestion

Today, look out for the holy in the ordinary. Where can you see glimpses of light, hints of God, in your encounters or in everyday objects? Where do you find examples of grace, of mercy? Watch for the moment when you can turn aside, get a little closer and find yourself on holy ground.

A prayer to God in the burning bush

Lord, you are holy, unnameable, indescribable light and power. Yet in your mercy you have invited me to come closer, to hear you, even to answer you. I am standing on holy ground, but the sight of you beckons me. Speak, Lord, even hard things: I will try to listen, try to follow.

2 December

Pillars of cloud and fire

Exodus 13:21–22

The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.

A few days ago, I was on a train that I think may have crossed into another dimension. Here's what happened: we were rattling along in wintery sunshine, listening to the announcements giving familiar excuses about why this train would be delayed, when I looked out of the window and saw a magnificent double rainbow just ahead of us. The end of the rainbow started in the field to our right and arched up and over the railway track, so that it looked like a bridge deliberately placed for the train to travel right underneath it. This sight stayed ahead of us for about ten minutes, the rainbow always seeming to start at the far edge of the next field along. But then the train really did seem to enter the rainbow, because suddenly everything was bathed in that golden autumnal light that makes the trees look as if they are carved out of precious metals. At this point I checked my ticket to make sure that we were still heading for Norwich rather than Fairyland, but when I next looked up there was something else ahead of us: deep grey and purple cloud. We had travelled into a rainstorm. Everything continued to look like Tiffany stained glass for another minute, and then the first drops spattered on the window pane; we left the Elysian fields behind us and continued on our journey to Norfolk.

As the sky changed back to bleak and boring, I wondered what God must have looked like when he went ahead of the Israelites in the wilderness inside a weather system. All Exodus tells us is that God was in a pillar of cloud by day. Do you imagine it as white, grey, purple or shot through with rainbow colours? Angry like a thundercloud or shining with a sunburst?

God's appearance as cloud and fire to guide his people shows him as mysterious, unknowable. If the Lord was in the pillar of cloud, he remained unseen. When we lose our way, we sometimes describe life as foggy or clouded, but here God is giving clear guidance from inside the fog. He uses the cloud, the very thing that hides him, to lead the way and make his direction clear.

The cloud is always ahead of the Israelites. Just as a rainbow always seems to begin in the next field along as you approach it, God is leading them and is with them, but they can never get closer to him. There's a constant distance in their relationship. He is there and not there, like mist, like a cloud.

Then, at night, the guidance system changes to become a pillar of fire, and the description in Exodus adds 'to give them light'. Now God is not only guiding, but also acting as a lamp to light their way. I wonder how quickly the cloud transformed into fire as the sun went down. Exodus doesn't say, but I imagine that the darker it got, the brighter God shone for his wandering people. The psalmist says: 'Even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you' (Psalm 139:12).

The God in the pillar of cloud and fire is brighter in our darkness, more visible and present the harder things get. This is reflected in human nature: it's in the worst moments of life that people report sending up desperate prayers. The tougher life is, the more urgently we look for a reason, a hope and a guide. It's in those moments that we may fix our eyes on God as a beacon. He may still seem distant,

still moving away ahead of us, but at least he is visible, giving light enough to lead us.

Finally, and most touchingly, the writer of Exodus points out, 'Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people' (v. 22). These images in which God revealed himself to Israel may have held impressions of mystery, holiness, even distance; but the main impression was constancy. God might sometimes guide us from inside a fog of uncertainty or through our desperate need for light in dark times, but he does not depart from his purpose: to lead us until we find our rest in him.

A question

What about these images of God most attracts you: a guiding cloud up ahead, a light in darkness, a constant companion? Is it something that is true for you or something that you long for?

A prayer to God in pillars of cloud and fire

Guiding God, go before me every day and keep my eyes fixed on you. You are my clear way in times of uncertainty, you light my road in times of deep darkness, you fill the air with coloured light in times of joy. I praise you for your constant faithfulness.



Finding God in scriptural metaphor

When you hear the name 'God', does an image come into your head? Do you think of him as a shining light, or with a human shape, or as an anchor in the storm, a rock, a fortress?

As we look towards celebrating the incarnation at Christmas, we consider how God chose to express himself, in a moment in history, as a tiny baby. But what other images describe God in the Bible, and what can we learn about his character through them? How does an invisible God reveal himself to us in scripture and in Jesus? Amy Scott Robinson, a poet and storyteller, answers this question with imagination and a close reading of the text.

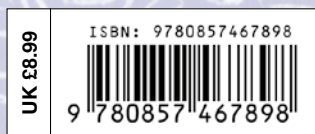
Week 1: When God appears Week 4: Veiled in flesh
Week 2: God the creator Week 5: Visible in creation
Week 3: God the owner



Amy Scott Robinson is an author and performance storyteller. After studying English at Christ's College, Cambridge, she trained as a teacher and began writing for charities and providers of liturgical resources, before publishing her own works on puppetry and story.

'Amy Scott Robinson's selection of daily readings and commentary makes for a powerful and transformative Advent journey. Strongly recommended.'

Malcolm Guite, priest and poet



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