



**Theme Resource Pack  
Advent/December 2023  
(3-30 Dec)**

## Introduction

Christmas, it can sometimes feel like the last straw can't it! Coming at the end of the year, it's cold and dark and then there's all this expense and faff! We've made it into this whole *thing*. Sometimes, honestly, we think, could we not just skip it? Overwhelmed, scunnered, and fed up, "That does it!" we mutter under our breath. But this year as we gather together in the dark and cold of winter we are going to discover that 'the last straw' of the nativity is not the end of something, but only the beginning. For the last straw is that wee handful of straw that held the baby Jesus! Who comes to tell us "I ken, and I care, I love you, come, adore me!"

Let's strip away all the pressure and expectation we've layered on top of Christmas and embrace the irony that 'the last straw' is actually a sign of hope! Together we will be playfully making a thatch of straw, weaving together grace, peace and faith, to make a shelter to gather under and gaze at the wonder of Jesus's birth anew.

Because when it comes down to it, at the last moment, at the last straw, is love.

And you know what, as we go through Advent we see that straw is a recurring image throughout the nativity. So we are going to see what it can teach us about fragility and resilience, vulnerability and courage, and most of all: the sustaining power of God's timeless love as it breaks into the midst of our complicated, messy lives.

## Straw...

The last straw laid by Mary in the manger for her newborn to sleep. The last straw the weary donkey chewed on as it stamped its aching hooves. The last straw of the shepherds huddling on a hillside. The last straw for humanity that was the incarnation, Jesus coming to be with us. The last straws we face that threaten to break the camel's back. This Advent we will make a kind of thatch of all this straw. A place where we can shelter and rest and look up at the strands of grace, peace and faith woven together.

For amongst the straw, motes floating in the air, caught in the moonlight and an angelic glow, a voice speaks to Mary...

For amongst the straw Joseph and Mary bedded down with their donkey on the journey, exhausted but determined...

For amongst the straw the shepherds encountered angels, finding themselves speechless and then speechful...

For amongst the straw of the manger, Jesus was tenderly placed by Mary — vulnerable and courageous...

Straw is a fascinating material that we have been using for thousands of years for its unique properties. It is both fragile and strong, more than the sum of its parts. As well as fodder for animals, straw is an insulator that traps air and has been used in so many ways, such as for bedding, housebuilding, manufacturing, storing and preparing food, packaging, basket making, producing paper, stuffing scarecrows, making clothing.

Just as straw, gathered together to create an insulating thermal effect, can trap heat and ward off the cold and dark, or spoiling and ruining — so can the power of God's grace, peace, and love. When we are clutching at straws, have pulled the last straw, or worried that the next one may break the camel's back, we gather together in God's love to trap the ancient heat of the universe to warm our hands, hearts and souls. Jesus has come!

Christmas is the last straw? Aye, and it's brilliant! Because the last straw is love! [Overview](#)

Starting on the first Sunday of Advent we begin by reflecting on the idea that when we're clutching at straws — Jesus is there with open arms offering us grace! The following week we think about how 'the straw that breaks the camel's back' could be a positive thing if that *camel* is say poverty, or climate change, inequality, or injustice — because the little things we do together can achieve huge outcomes. In the penultimate week we turn to contemplating faith and what it means to hold on when we are concerned we have drawn the short straw. Finally on Christmas Eve we celebrate the fact that as we shelter together this Advent the last straw when all is said and done is love!

## Setting the scene

Each week we offer a visual motif. This is an optional additional focus point for preparing worship services or multimedia inspired by the material.

## Seeds to sow

Open-ended prompts to inspire creative responses to the themes. Perhaps a song, some drawing, or creative writing! They are short and sweet, simply a starting off place for you and your imagination. Expand, tailor and develop as suits you. Often they take the form of a question, to encourage reflection.

## Format

Each week of this four week theme runs Sunday - Saturday and has its own subtheme title. It contains a series of daily Bible readings and prompts for thought that our Daily Worship writers use to write prayers and reflections.

## Clutching at straws: Grace (Week 1, 3 December)

**Introduction:** What if — when we're so deep we can't get deeper, when we're so far-flung we can't be flung further, when we're so broken there's no more broke to get — what if then, with all pretence and illusion gone, we find that the last straw that we are clutching is: grace. It's the ancient love of the universe Father, Son and Holy Spirit saying: I know, I've got you, I understand, I will never leave you. And the voice is familiar. And it speaks from experience, from having weathered all the world throws at it. It's a voice that's qualified to know. It's the last straw. It's grace.

**Setting the scene:** Ruins, ashes, smoke.

**Seeds to sow:** What does Jesus sound like do you think?

- 1. Psalm 80. Clutching at straws.** Flailing around, desperately looking for something to hold on to and grabbing on to God.
- 2. Isaiah 64: 1-9 The clay cries out.** It's a compelling picture — clay itself crying out to be remoulded. In pottery, tempering is when other materials are introduced to clay to help bind it and to reduce shrinkage and cracking. Historically certain plant fibres have been used as part of this process, working through the clay. Perhaps it's fruitful to think of the Holy Spirit tempering us, working through the clay, strengthening us and binding us.
- 3. 1 Corinthians 1: 3-9 Strengthened through grace.** Just as straw is a counterintuitively strong material, so is grace. Sometimes just one straw of it to clutch is enough to strengthen us through what we face.
- 4. Isaiah 53 The voice of experience.** The quiet dignity and grace of the Messiah, who bore all the world threw at him. Jesus speaks to us in our suffering from a place of profound empathy and knowledge.
- 5. Philippians 2: 5-11 A fistful of straw.** The world changing humility of Jesus, who came to be so small nestled in Bethlehem straw.
- 6. 1 Peter 1 Are we all clutching at straws?** As we prepare to celebrate Christmas in a world riven by inequality, uncertainty and conflict are we simply clutching at straws when we say that's God's transforming grace can make a difference?
- 7. Luke 1: 26-38 Motes of dust in the air.** In bright light small particles we normally miss are illuminated and we catch a glimpse of them suspended in the air. As straw is our theme for Advent, we picture Mary illuminated by the angel's light catching a glimpse of a microscopic world of wonder and her life changes course, the contours redefined by grace. This **beautiful poem Annunciation** by Katy Emslie-Smith beautifully sets the scene.

# The straw that broke the camel's back: Peace (Week 2, 10 December)

**Introduction:** Straw has a rich history in human civilisation: in caring for livestock, as insulation, in manufacturing, construction, even in making ice cream! \* *Look at the seed to sow below.* Any strand of straw can seem frail — but just a little bunch and suddenly something is starting to happen. Because straw creates pockets of air, trapping heat inside. So are we as Christians, creating little pockets of warmth, when gathered together we can help store heat and energy. The straw that breaks the camel's back is often a negative expression, the idea of the last thing that finally tipped somebody over. But what if the camel isn't a camel... What if the 'camel' is an obstacle or a barrier? What if the camel is poverty? Or climate change? Or inequality? Or injustice? How can we be straw together, knitting ourselves into something more than the sum of our parts, tiny on our own, but powerful together in other to break the back of hunger, or global warming, or loneliness?

**Setting the scene:** A hay barn.

**Seeds to sow:** \* Before refrigeration straw used to be used to insulate icehouses! What unexpected sweetness could we bring into our communities today, insulated by straws of peace?

- 1. Isaiah 40: 1-11 Comfort!** The transformative peace of God, bringing refreshment, sustenance and comfort.
- 2. Psalm 85 Hearing what God is saying.** Listening out for those points where love is found in faithfulness and righteousness is found in peace.
- 3. 2 Peter 3: 8-15a How a field looks to a blade of grass.** Getting our heads around God's perspective of time and space, and learning to live.
- 4. Mark 1: 1-8 Binding together sheaves of straw.** We are all called, like John, in myriad different ways, to gather together the straw — to create community and space for people to discover God's transforming love. We cannot bring people to faith ourselves, we can only point the way we have gone ourselves.
- 5. Psalm 140: 12-13 Resounding through the years.** The ancient poetry of the psalms resounds over thousands of years inspiring countless movements for a better, more compassionate world.
- 6. James 1: 26-27 That is pure religion by the way.** What is pure religion? Getting your hands dirty amongst the straw of real need in real lives — to avoid the worse stains of hypocrisy and cruelty.
- 7. Luke 1: 39-45 Straw together.** Two expectant women come together to marvel at the unexpected. Their mutually sustaining friendship is a pocket of air, of insulation, to help sustain them for the hard road of motherhood ahead.

## Drawing the short straw: Faith (Week 3, 17 December)

**Introduction:** None of us are insignificant to God. None of us pass without notice. None of us are forgotten or mislaid. When we fear we have drawn the shortest straw, Christ tells us there are no long straws and short straws. We are not ranked in some heavenly moral standings index. There are no loyalty points. We don't get to cash in. Sometimes one of the biggest leaps of faith can be realising that we ourselves are as important as everyone else. Another is: appreciating the equal importance of everybody else.

**Setting the scene:** Mary, singing.

**Seeds to sow:** How 'fair' or 'unfair' do you think daily life is for the average person where you live?

- 1. Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11 For the oppressed and broken hearted.** God is here for any and all who have been dealt the short straw, the raw deal, the heavy burden. There are no short straws in God's love.
- 2. Psalm 126: 4-6 Tears don't have to be the last straw.** Sometimes what we think of as the shortest, last straw, is not the last word. Shoots of hope can and do grow in hard ground.
- 3. 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 Keeping faith.** Keep faith, is something that's easy to say and often hard to do. How can we help one another to rejoice and keep on?
- 4. John 1: 19-28 Where is John? Who is John? What is John? Why John, why?** Faith can be a puzzle that draws others to question.
- 5. Matthew 7: 12 Acting in faith.** Being a decent, compassionate human being can in itself be an act of faith. It's having faith in something more than the zero-sum game of me vs. you, being willing to take into account a bigger picture.
- 6. Romans 15: 13 Abounding in hope.** *Abounding*, what a word! How can we help one another not only to feel hope but to abound in it!
- 7. Luke 1: 46b-55 The Magnificat Seven...** Depending on the translation we can work out around about 7 sentences here over the 11 verses of the 'Magnificat', Mary's earthshaking song. What are the implication of these lyrics to those who feel like they're holding the short straw today?

## The last straw: Love (Week 4, 24 December)

**Introduction:** When it comes down to it. When it comes right down to it. The last straw is love. This Christmas whatever we're facing, whatever pressures are mounting, whatever strains we're under we know that we face them with Jesus, the last straw. To pick up our metaphor from the introduction, the incarnation could be the start of thatch making — the last straw needed to begin weaving together a new shelter, a new home with peace, love and faith.

It's Christmas, let's shelter together.

**Setting the scene:** Straw in a manger.

**Seeds to sow:** What song are you inspired to sing this Advent?

- 1. Luke 2: 1-7 [Christmas Eve] The last straw at the last stroke of midnight.** In a handful of hours it will be Christmas day, here we join Mary in the last straw of her labour as she births the Son of God.
- 2. Luke 2: 8-20 [Christmas Day] The shepherds' last straw.** At wit's end the bamboozled shepherds realise they've been headhunted as heralds of heaven.
- 3. Psalm 96 Under the thatch-work of grace.** Let all the earth rejoice!
- 4. Psalm 97: 11-12 Last straw, first light.** The last straw of Jesus' incarnation shows us that pain and sorrow and despair do not get the last word.
- 5. Psalm 98: 4-6 Let's make some noise.** The last straw is love!
- 6. Titus 3: 4-7 The last straw's legacy.** Reflecting on all we are heir to.
- 7. Romans 8: 12-17 The last straw, the first step.** Jesus hands us a strand of straw and we take a step. And daily in all the steps that follow we learn what it is to be joint heirs of God, one with another.