

Advent 4C
December 22, 2024
Anglican Parish of Salt Spring Island
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I love Advent. It's my favorite season - and I believe in many ways it is the season that best embodies how we live our lives all of the time. It's the season that first taught me the beauty of living in the liturgical calendar, when the rhythms and practices of the seasons first made sense deep in my soul.

As I looked back this week, I remembered that thirteen years ago, I preached my first sermon as a priest. I was ordained just two days prior, and so this fourth Sunday of Advent was my first day to celebrate the Eucharist. I preached about how much I loved Advent and how meaningful it was to be ordained in this season because to me, it embodies how we live as followers of Christ - knowing that Christ has come and is among us and yet eagerly expecting his Kingdom to come fully among us still, living in the tension of the now and the not-yet.

It's this incredible, liminal time - a time we live into in many ways throughout our lifetimes - as we transition from childhood to adulthood, as we welcome children and send them off, as relationships begin and end. And you are living in it now as a community as you search for a new incumbent - knowing someone new will join you in ministry but left in so much unknown of what that will look like.

In Advent, we are invited into the knowledge that these times, while hard, are holy. In these times, a place is grown in us that often opens us to something new, something we may not have been open to otherwise.

And this is why I love Advent. But looking back this year, I also remembered the year after I was ordained. I preached on the exact lectionary we use today, but it was a very different sermon. That year we were only days past the shootings at Sandy Hook, when 20 children in Grade 1 and 6 staff members were killed in a school shooting. That anniversary hit even harder this year with my oldest child in Grade 1.

One of the stories I remember most from that day was about a boy locked in a closet hearing the shooting and saying, "I just want it to be Christmas."

After years of lauding the spiritual practice of waiting in Advent, I realized that boy proclaimed a profound truth that I had lost in my love of Advent. In the church, we talk about the goodness of waiting all through Advent. We slowly light the candles one by one. And sometimes we look down on those who get caught up in the rush to Christmas, but in celebrating what Christmas truly means, it is truly we who should be in the greatest hurry; we should be filled with desperate longing for it to be Christmas already. The truth is that all of our Advent waiting cannot be separated from an urgent desire for Christ to be here among us, now, because our world is aching for our Savior, desperate for the healing God

will bring. Living in Advent is living in a hope that truly goes against everything we see. Such hope can seem crazy in our world.

As we turn to our Gospel passage today, when we turn to that first time of expectant waiting, we are given our example of living in hope that goes against everything we see. Two women are pregnant with impossible pregnancies... Elizabeth, barren for her whole life and now past childbearing years, and Mary, a virgin. Each were marginal in society - Elizabeth had lived most of her life unable to produce children in a day when that amounted to her worth as a person, and Mary is an unwed pregnant peasant.

And yet it gets crazier. Not only the circumstances of their pregnancies, but the substance of them are incredible. Elizabeth carries a child who was promised by an angel in the temple to be set aside to prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. Mary is pregnant with the one prophesied, the Messiah, the incarnate God.

Did you get that? *She is carrying God.*

All the craziness of this passage fades in comparison to this. Perhaps we even get distracted by focusing on the fact that God chose her, a poor unwed peasant girl in a conquered, weak nation, because really - isn't it crazy enough that God is being carried in a human?

As it turns out, with most of this sermon already written, this morning my 6 year old asked me, "Why did God decide to grow in the belly of a person instead of just creating a person? If God had already created people in the beginning, why didn't God just do that again?" It's one of those questions where I think a kid actually articulates what plenty of us think. Why did God do it this way? Why would God *choose* to be carried?

As I remembered my ordination this past week, I cannot help but remember one of the things that was different, but makes it special to me. I was hit by a car days before, injuring my leg severely, and I had to be carried up to be ordained.

When I've reflected on that time, I've always understood those who helped carry me, literally in that moment and figuratively at other moments, as being the hands and feet of Christ to me. We tend to think of God this way - even think of the classic footprints poem where God carries someone through the rough times. But being carried is something we only do when we cannot do anything else, not something we do by choice, and not something we think of as Godly.

Here in Advent, I am struck by this reversal - the image of Christ being carried.

This is what we celebrate at Christmas - that God chose to come into our world through a person - not just in human form in Christ, but so completely like us that he had to come through a human, by waiting and growing and being carried by this woman. It is the absolute opposite of what we expect of God, and this causes Mary to break into a song.

These chapters from Luke sometimes remind me of a musical - people seem to break into song all the time, in daily life. Mary sings when she meets Elizabeth, Zechariah will belt out a song when his son is born, and the elderly Simeon will break into song when he sees the days-old Jesus brought to the temple for the first time. It can seem as unbelievable in some ways, but perhaps regular words could not express the hope that they proclaim and they must turn to song.

The Magnificat is the longest we ever hear the mother of God speak in the Gospels. These are the primary words we have from her, and this song has been said and sung over and over throughout the centuries because it beautifully expresses the world we long for, the world in which we were created to live, a world that seems crazy compared to what we see today. It's an incredible vision of the promise and hope that she bears within her very body.

Her words are still revolutionary today. Mary proclaims her own blessedness -but not as something that is hers alone. She goes on to express that her blessedness cannot be separated from the salvation of all. Sometimes her words can sound scary - God not only fills the hungry with good things but scatters the proud and brings down the mighty.

That scares me really - it sounds unstable. Sometimes I wonder if I really want my world overturned. But then I think of how I have felt many days this season, watching more and more governments become unstable, seeing nationalism and prejudice grow everywhere again, paralyzed by fear because there do not seem to be any easy answers to what could possibly get us out of so much struggle. We truly need this God our Savior, and we need our world to be turned upside down. Mary's song proclaims hope for us today as much as her day.

In a day of growing income inequality, when wealth increases for the few and poverty increases for the many, where housing is becoming more of a luxury than an basic right, Mary's song envisions a world where all have access to what they need in order to live.

And for those who believe they need no one else who look only after their own needs: they will realize the good news that in fact, their life depends on others, Which is incredibly good news because it means they are not in fact alone in this world. What Mary proclaims is that none of us are alone in this world, and that each of us is called to take part in bringing this world, the world God created us for, into being. Each of us has a ministry and a purpose in this world, each of us is invited and called to take part in bearing God to our world. I wonder what this looks like here on this island, for this community and for each of you. How is God calling you to bear Christ here?

In this season, we celebrate the God who created the universe coming to be carried by a peasant woman, for his life to literally depend on her. This shows us something about how humans are intended to live. Even God chose not to be self-sufficient, and Mary's song envisions a world where this is realized by everyone, where this truth saves us all.

Like Mary, in Advent we too are called to refuse to believe that the world is stuck like it is, that what we see around us is all that can ever be. Perhaps we are crazy to believe such a thing.

But that is our call in Advent.

In Advent, we refuse to believe that the problems around us are permanent and unfixable. We refuse to accept that violence is simply part of our nature and join in its cycle.

We hold out that there is a better vision.

We refuse to believe that people are so broken and because we cannot prevent all tragedies, we give up our responsibility to prevent any of them. We refuse to believe that those we spend the holidays with are unworthy of forgiveness and incapable of change - and we refuse to believe that we are either. Whoever we are, whatever we have done, God is longing to be born in us.

Living in Advent means living like Mary, living in hope that goes against everything we see, and bearing that hope for our world. The 13th century mystic Meister Eckhart said, "We are all called to be mothers of God - for God is always waiting to be born."

Like Mary, we are to bear Christ to our world, to be the hands and feet that carry the hope of a world turned upside down, a world made right, a world that is healed, a world made whole.

As we live these last days of Advent waiting for Christ, may we know waiting as a desperate longing for God to be here with us. May the prayer of our hearts come forth as a song, "O come, Emmanuel, o come, God with us. Come, Lord Jesus, come." Amen.