

Fourth Sunday in Advent
December 22, 2013
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Good morning.

So, here we are, on the fourth—the last—Sunday of Advent. Christmas, the day we have been waiting for, preparing for, is almost here at last. Yesterday was the winter solstice, the day with the fewest hours of daylight of the year for us in the northern hemisphere. So this morning, after that long, dark night, the sun has begun to shine a few minutes more every day, just in time to welcome the birth of Jesus, the light of the world.

This fourth Sunday of Advent finds us poised at the transition between seasons: fall to winter, Advent to Christmas. So it seems a good day to look back at the lessons we've heard from the lectern and the pulpit in the past three weeks. What have the Scripture readings and the sermons told us? What are we called to do in Advent? We are to wait. To hope. To trust. To repent. To prepare the way of the Lord. To carry the Word with us into the world when we leave church each Sunday.

Today, our gospel lesson teaches us of another step to take as we move toward Christmas, as we prepare for the coming of Christ. The Gospel according to Matthew opens with a genealogical list, tracing the generations from Abraham to Jesus, the lineage of his father, Joseph. And immediately following is today's story, of Joseph's discovery that Mary, his betrothed, is with child. We can imagine his dismay, his shame, his anger at what he must see as an unforgivable betrayal. But he is a righteous man, we are told, too decent to expose Mary to public disgrace. And so he decides he will put her aside quietly, presumably sending her back to her parents, washing his hands of her. But then he sleeps, and dreams, and in his dream an angel appears before him with a message from God. Notice the words of the angel: "Joseph, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife." We hear an echo of other angelic visitations, which all seem to begin with "Do not fear." Do not be afraid, the angel tells Joseph, but believe. Trust. Hope.

And when Joseph awakens from this dream, what does he do? There are a number of verbs we could use. He heeds the message. He obeys the command. But here's one I want to emphasize: Joseph surrenders. He surrenders his will before the will of God. He knows, as Elizabeth reminded us two Sundays ago, that it's all about God, that God is the center of the universe. Joseph puts aside his betrayal, his hurt, his anger, his shame. He puts aside his own will and surrenders to the will of God.

Joseph is not the first character in the Advent story to surrender to God. It's not in our lectionary cycle this year, but you are probably familiar with Luke's version of the birth of Christ. It tells of an earlier surrender, when Mary listens to the words of an angel, who tells her, also, "do not be afraid." Told that she will conceive and bear a son, Mary bows her head and says, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Mary surrenders her will, her entire being, to the will of God.

Both surrenders foreshadow a third, one that will come 33 years later. Jesus, echoing his human parents, says, "Not my will but thine" in the garden of Gethsemane and goes to his death on the cross. He surrenders to the will of God. We are called to follow Christ, to be Christ-like. If even he surrendered his will before God, we must then do the same.

If you're at all like me, this isn't necessarily an easy concept to put into action. What exactly does surrendering my will to God's mean? What does it look like? What does it feel like? How do I know God's will, God's specific intent for me? What am I supposed to do or say? When and how will an answer come?

I've been thinking about these questions for years, trying to discern God's will for my life. And as I prepared this sermon, I got a glimpse of how the Holy Spirit can work to show us God's will, because the inspirations I needed for this sermon began falling into my lap. Some of you were with me here two weeks ago, when Holy Cross had an Advent retreat on the very topic of surrender. We talked about seeing beauty in our brokenness. About emptying ourselves to let the Holy Spirit fill up the hollows left behind. About putting God at the center of our lives instead of ourselves. And that retreat was when I saw the theme of surrender in today's Gospel lesson.

Now, maybe I'm a bit of an overachiever: I went to another Advent retreat a week after ours, at Virginia Theological Seminary. The Most Reverend Frank Griswold, the former presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, led an Advent quiet day. And something he said gave me the next concept I needed. It wasn't quite like meeting up with an angel, but his words filled me with wonder. He said that another way to translate the Greek word that we usually refer to as the will of God is "the loving desire" of God. Think about that for a moment. The loving desire of God toward us. God's will for us is that we feel God's loving desire toward us.

And that raised an echo of a message I had received this Advent from the brothers of the Society of Saint John the Evangelist: maybe we should take a break from constant self-improvement and see ourselves as awesome creations of God. To remind you again of what Elizabeth said here two weeks ago, it's all about God, not about us, our egos, our work to make ourselves better. We are what God made us. No amount of work on our own will get us one step closer to becoming what God wants us to be, but God's loving desire can lift us up and help us become just a little more of what we are in God's eyes.

I'm still pondering these ideas and how they fit together, and I'm not sure they make a complete answer to my questions—to your questions—about how we discern and respond to God's will. But I can see connections between all the calls we've heard during this Advent season: between trust and hope, between faith and surrender, between repentance and preparation. And I have renewed belief in something you've heard me say hear before: that God loves each of us exactly as we are, that there is no contradiction between God's desire for us to grow and God's love for us as we were created.

So, although winter has just begun, I urge you to look ahead to the light: the light IN the world that will lengthen each day, and the light OF the world who will be born to us in a few days. And I invite you to consider the Christmas season as a time to surrender—to accept God's gift of loving desire toward you; to see yourself, just a little, as God sees you; to put aside the feeling that you have to be better to earn God's love. Follow Joseph and Mary and Jesus, who trusted, hoped, believed—and surrendered. Amen.