

Fourth Sunday of Advent
Sunday, December 24, 2017
The Rev. Jamie Samilio

Advent, a time to clean the attic, leap and risk.

What are you waiting for? For the messiah? For the king? *This year, the Fourth Sunday of Advent and Christmas Eve fall on the same day, so the waiting time is pretty insignificant. In this age of instant gratification, we can relate to such a quick waiting time. And for those of us with expectant hearts, the arrival of the Christ Child can't come soon enough*.*

In reality, the king is already here. He has already made it. The whole idea of Advent is odd for us. Jesus came, but we already know the rest of the story, we know about the resurrection. It must be strange, being God, because Jesus is here, now, walking through Advent with us – waiting with us for Himself to come. (Ponder that a moment)

So, if Jesus is already here, why do we go through this season, why do we hear the story over again? Why do we hear all the stories over and over again?

It is not enough for most humans to simply be told a truth, and then to believe in the truth, and base every life choice, now and forever on a truth, told to us but once.

Do you need to be told something more than once? I know I do (ask Denise, or the staff, or Sylvia.) Do you need to be told something multiple times, even if you are certain about it? If you are in a relationship, or have a child, do you tell them only once you love them? There are times when we need to hear those words repeated. Sometimes we just want reassurance that we are loved, cared for, and valued. I think very few of us have no need for positive reinforcement. Imagine if your boss told you in your first week of work, good job, you are a valued employee, and then say nothing to you for the next ten years? We are human, and we need feedback, and we need to be reminded about who we are, and whose we are – over and over again.

We need reinforcement, we need relationship, and we need to know we are part of the story. We are beloved children of God, and Jesus gets us – Jesus understands our human nature, and we can relate to Him.

We need to hear the stories over again because over time, the details become hazy, and the story becomes cluttered and lost amidst all of the things we deal with day-in and day-out. The clear path to the truth becomes, blocked by the duties and details we hold in our heads, and the story gets pushed aside and buried. When we are not reminded afresh of the wonder of the coming Messiah – the joy, anticipation, and hope of our life in Christ remains blocked, hidden by the clutter, and of lesser value.

The Collect reads, “...*that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself;*” We need to make space, make room for Jesus. Clear away the clutter, dampen down the dust and haze, open our heads, our hearts, and our souls to receive the Christ, our hope, our joy, our peace. Advent is a time to clear away the clutter of your life that is stored in your head. Clear a path to the story we share, a story that makes us brothers and sisters, beloved children of God.

How do we de-clutter? Nadia Bolz-Webber is a modern Theologian. A tattooed, edgy, down to earth person who has a way of putting things in terms which are easy to understand.

During the Advent series we showed a clip of Nadia talking about waiting for Jesus, and referencing scripture that refers to Him as a Holy Thief. In it she said, “*What if, instead of making Christmas lists of all the things that we want Santa to bring us, perhaps we can make Advent lists of the things we want Jesus to break in as steal from us.*” Things like poor self-image, lack of empathy, greed, anger – imagine Jesus breaking in and stealing from us those things that *keep us from* having a healthy and loving relationship with Him and each other. Come Lord Jesus come, as a Holy Thief, and restore our hope, and clear away the clutter that blocks our path. Clear away the clutter, make room for Jesus – the Gospel today clearly tells us He is coming.

In the Gospel Mary is told, “*Do not be afraid.*” And Mary proclaims the greatness of the Lord – that is, Mary’s soul magnifies, the Lord. “*Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”*” Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord.” I found myself repeating those words...say them with me... I realized, indeed Mary’s soul magnifies the Lord – I asked, does mine? Does yours? I have to hand it to Mary, God was making a “big ask,” but she chooses to say yes. She does not make it about her will, her schedule, her fear, or her needs -- she makes it about God’s will and the people of God. Does my soul magnify love? What is God asking me to risk? What could I do to increase the magnification, to risk even a little more? The Christian life is not safe. If you feel like you have been living a safe life, centered around your happiness, then perhaps the next time you feel inspired to take a risk, or engage in a ministry – find the courage to say yes, here I am, let God’s will be done. Mary was one person, yet her “yes” to God, changed the world. What Mary did was beyond normal expectations, but do not disregard the impact that your simple acts of kindness can have.

That said, I wondered if Mary had “buyer’s remorse” after she said yes? I imagine she did, Mary was human, the same as you and me. Having a baby must be an overwhelming undertaking. A friend told a story about a woman who got to the hospital, was in the process of giving birth, and after one particularly painful contraction, announced to everyone present, “I changed my mind!”

I wanted to give some insight into the person of Mary in this sermon, so I want to read you a poem by my friend Kathy Staudt, a poet and adjunct professor at Virginia Seminary that speaks a bit to the humanity of Mary.

On the Way to Bethlehem
The timing could not be worse
But it’s the law. My husband has to go,

Even though I'm well along.
You are lively within me, moving and kicking me.
Your kicking hurts. It wakes me in the night,
Reminds me, as I walk
More and more laboriously,
You are coming soon.

I suppose we are safe enough
After all, it was an angel who came.
Looking back, I have never doubted that.
My husband has been tender, despite my disgrace.
He is sure, too, about the angel.
So I suppose we have no cause to worry.
It's only my aching back
The sharp pains from your tiny feet,
The smell and press of crowds, and all the delays.

The only thing that matters now, is bearing you safely
Into this messy world
And now even that I cannot control.
I did what I could do, but it's all left behind.
At home, we had a place prepared for you.
I longed to see you soon.
Then I hoped you would come later, after our return
But now I know for sure that you will be coming
To a place we did not know.

I catch my breath at a sudden squeeze of pain.
My body recognizes the agony,
Already begun. ...

Clare Beam said in her reflection this week, *“Even the most ordinary of pregnancies presents mothers with great anticipation and excitement, but not without fear that they cannot live up to the moment. ‘But imagine if you were carrying the Son of God.’* Faith is hard. Mary, was human, just like us, she cleared a path, and took a leap of faith that we might become brothers and sisters to her Son – the living God.

Ask Jesus to come, take away that which keeps you from Him and each other. Have courage, and take a leap of faith -- it is never too late. Be still, know that God is with us, especially when we are doubtful, scared, humans who need each other, and who want to be accepted and loved. Following Jesus is risky, but like Mary, we need to keep moving forward, no matter the burden or the pain. For now, for one last day of Advent, take a breath, and be still. Amen

- * **The Rev. Liz Tomlinson**
- ****On the Way to Bethlehem, By Kathleen Henderson Staudt**
- (from *Annunciations: Poems out of Scripture* (Mellen Poetry Press, 2003 – reprinted with permission))