

SERMON, Sunday, 4 Advent, RCL Year C, 2018

It's all well and good, and a gripping narrative, to learn that long ago, God chose Mary to bear the Messiah, and Elizabeth to bear the great prophet who would prepare his way.

What if I announced to you today that God has a plan to come to us, to move in with us, and dwell in us and work redemption and salvation among us?

That is the Christian Church's repeated message in Advent. Wake up! Get ready! Be prepared! You have an important visitor, already on his way, who plans to move in and live with you.

On the fourth Sunday in Advent, the gospel lesson always walks us through Mary's response to the announcement that she will bear the Christ child. Our patron saint, the Angel Gabriel, brings the message. We all know her responses. First, the natural and rational question, "How can this be?" In other words, "nothing in my current life or in my circumstances seems right or ready to move ahead with this plan." And then, persuaded by Gabriel, that with God, all things are possible, she gives the exemplary response of a faithful heart, "Be it unto to me according to thy word."

The collect for the 4th Sunday in Advent leads **all of us** to consider **ourselves** as those in whom the Christ is intent to come to life and flourish. We pray that Christ "**may find... in us ... a mansion prepared for himself.**" Not a spare room; not the tent out back, set up for special receptions; not an architectural wonder that we visit with hushed voices when we go to the capitol city... We Episcopalians pray that God may find **in us, in these hearts, minds, imaginations, and wills** the most resplendently hospitable place to dwell that anyone could possibly imagine.

The Advent hymn guides us through this sequence:

"Then cleansed be every breast from sin;
Make straight the way for God within,
And let each heart prepare a home
Where such a mighty guest may come."

The theme continues into the Christmas season, as in the carol, "Joy to the World:" "**Let every heart prepare him room...**"

God is intent to come to live with us...

How might we act if this message from above found a home in our hearts?

We affirm this intent of God every time we pray the Lord's Prayer, asking for God's will to be done on earth, as it is in heaven. We--just regular folks--are the primary agents through whom nature, purpose, and power of God continuously pulses and inspires. We are the ones God

enables and directs to do his will on earth. But something in us naturally protests, doesn't it? "We're flawed! We're inconsistent! We're busy; distracted; and sometimes compromised. We're confused. We're unprepared. No... Sorry, Lord. At this moment, we don't feel worthy or ready for this kind of collaboration with the Almighty."

The following are words of one of the most faithful parishioners I know, who worships with us each week. She was describing her sense some of the inward voices that would diminish or derail her life with God:

"You're not good enough;" "you should spend more time praying;" "God doesn't love you, why would He love you? What do you do to deserve His love? You're just a fake (slob; nobody...);" "you shouldn't have done that;" "you should do more;" "nobody's going to love you;" "you're not worth it, so you might as well (drink, eat...);" "you're so fat and ugly;" She commented, "I think we spend much more time being angry with ourselves than with others, turning our anger back onto ourselves out of fear of losing what we have... what love we have from the other... what security we have, what thread of acceptability we have...." Do you know those voices, too?

Some of us had children before we thought we were ready for parenthood. Some of us enlisted in military service without sure confidence that we would demonstrate courage under fire. We took college courses that we weren't sure we could master. We have offered wealth to help another, without being sure that there was going to be enough to meet our own needs. Leslie and I weren't sure, in 1985, that we could guide and serve four remote outpost fishing village churches in northern Quebec with two tiny boys in tow. All of us know something of this challenge of our perceived insufficiency.

We all would do well to listen to Gabriel's explanation. "***With God, all things are possible.***" If God wills a good thing to be done in us and through us, then our perceived incapacities are as nothing alongside God's love, good will, and spiritual power. God is unwilling to let us languish in self-disqualification when his love and mercy are sufficient to sweep us into the struggle and redemptive drama of His plans for our world.

Most of us in our 80s are not going to volunteer at this point to do evangelistic mission work in Borneo. Most of us in our 70s are not going to come out of retirement to energize planned giving for Episcopal Relief and Development. Most of us in our 60s are not going to begin the discernment process to become ordained leaders in leading parishes. But every single one of us here, today, can say, in Christ, "Lord, whatever I can do with my life to glorify you, to deepen my life in your Spirit, to build up the Body of Christ, and to serve our neighbors, I'll do it. I'm available to you... if you will fill me, enable me, and guide me as you did with Mary, and with Joseph; with Zechariah and Elizabeth; with John, and with Jesus."

Beloved and Holy Father, We believe that you are still filling the hungry with good things, doing great things for us; casting down the proud, and lifting up the lowly. We want to find, and step

into our parts in your continuing work of redemption. Be it unto all of us, we pray, according to your will. Amen.

1024 words.