

Sermon: Advent Meditation: Learning the New Song
Luke 1:5, 8-25a, 78-79

“The Commonplace is shot through now with new glory ...
despite all the crassness, life is saved by the singing of angels.”
-- Howard Thurman

*‘Twas the month before Christmas and all through the house,
not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse.
The Christmas wreaths were hung by the pulpit with care
In hopes that someone, anyone, would stop by and pray there!*

Clement C. Moore I’m not ... But the longing, the waiting, the telling of stories of hopeful anticipation ... That is the spirit of Advent. The four-week season leading up to Christmas and Jesus’ birth, Advent means “coming toward.” By marking the Advent season, we are acknowledging the journey that we’re living right now.

This year unlike any other in a century ... As the virus rages tsunami-like, it's hard. And as Dr. Fauci says, it will get harder before it gets better.

We’ve been doing it for nine months already and have another 6-8 more to go according to the experts. Already we are weary and worn, already we watch as livelihoods shrink and restaurants close. Already we know the hospitals are over capacity and food lines across our country are up something like 400 percent. The economic and racial disparities are only growing wider.

Instead of Christmas shopping the way we used to, lingering together can only happen outdoors. Holiday choir rehearsals are nonexistent. We can’t even have a caroling party this year. Or a church Christmas potluck. We’re probably going to do for Christmas what many of us chose to do for Thanksgiving. Juggling dinner and pie while social distancing outside or Zooming with those we love.

In many ways, we are in exile from what we used to know, how we used to live. Believe it or not, that is why we need a little Christmas right this very minute! Advent is a luminous place to start. It holds the promise of what can be as we look forward to the “not quite yet” world we seek.

A season for dreamers and seekers, Advent is made not just of days but fashioned from ancient stories, traditions, songs, rituals, memories and candlelight. A time to hear again the story of an outsider God of mystery who walks with us into the world, God-with-us, Emmanuel.

Maybe this year, this season will mean something more to you than it has in the past. I know it will for me.

There’s no going back to the way things were. Ever. There’s only Adventing forward. And singing quietly outside behind our masks.

We can practice being on the lookout for wonder, savor the starry night at the fireside and remember again that the soul *knows* its worth when love is born anew.

Hopefully, at the end of this global pandemic, we'll be recommitted as citizens of the world to being the neighbors we endeavor to be. Perhaps we'll finally understand in our bones what Thomas Merton meant when he said, "The gate of heaven is everywhere."

Author Madeleine L'Engle (whose birthday would have been today) wrote tons of magical stories. She said, "Stories no matter how simple, can be vehicles of truth; can be in fact, icons. Jesus taught almost entirely by telling stories, simple stories dealing with the stuff of his day. Stories are able to help us be more whole, *to be Named*."

Our greatest challenge may be in letting the stillness, the iconic stories and the sameness of days change us. As much as we are more than ready to turn the page of 2020 and leap into Spring 2021, with Advent time we're invited to wait. To wait and to trust. We must try to do what Teilhard de Chardin called, "trusting in the slow work of God."

This trusting and waiting was a hard task for the main character in Luke's opening scripture today.

Luke chooses to begin the first page of the first chapter of his gospel with a guy named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth -- foretelling the birth of John the Baptist, who paves the way for Jesus coming even before he's born and Mary enters the scene. You can almost hear the voices of the Hebrew prophet, Isaiah, crying out in the wilderness, preparing the way (Isaiah 40:3).

It is set in the time of King Herod, oppression and exile abound. Zechariah is visited by the angel Gabriel and the rest is history.

Only the gospel writers Luke and Matthew contain the stories of Jesus' origins and birth, each with their own holy slant. Luke crams this first chapter with heaven as he weaves an extraordinary tapestry of iconic characters with parallel lives. There are double annunciations, angelic visitations, fear and trembling, two pregnant mothers named Mary and Elizabeth, leaping for joy with the twin birthings of John and then Jesus. There are life questions to grapple with, dreams, prophecies and songs, oh my.

In our text for today, though, Zechariah is minding his own business in the temple when he has an unexpected encounter with the angel Gabriel (who will appear to Mary in a passage or two). Gabriel announces that he and Elizabeth, both quite old, will miraculously bear a son named John.

Zechariah sounds like he's taken off guard, as angel visits are wont to do. His question, "*How will I know?*" must have echoed off the sanctuary walls. Doubting the news, he's rendered utterly speechless. He has been silenced to wait in hope for this child.

How will we know everything will work out?

Living in a time of fear as we are, I'm always struck by the angel's words. Over and over, throughout the gospels we hear the angelic visitors reassuring soon-to-be parents, shepherds and wise travelers. *Fear not!* And throughout Jesus' ministry, he says it to reassure the disciples. *Be not afraid ...*

Sometimes fear can render us speechless.

I remember the profound experience of losing my voice a few years ago, I had some kind of cold and awoke one morning with barely a rasp at my disposal. For the better part of a week, no problem solving or lemon honey tea would do the trick.

Without a voice, I had no idea how I would be able to do my job. How would I talk to people? How would I teach and preach?

All I could do was wait, rest, and try *listening* for a change. I became good at writing cryptic messages and using my hands to communicate. While losing my voice was a temporary condition, I also gained something else. I found myself listening more deeply, being more present to my family, to my friends and to those I served. And hopefully, when my voice returned I would try to remember to speak more wisely, too.

I only had to listen. And actually, hear the words under the words being shared with me. This is an art and more challenging than we think. True listening is about presence as much as receiving and about connection more than observing. To my embarrassment, I began to see that I'd spent an awful lot of my listening time not listening at all -- but thinking and preparing my responses.

I wonder about the angel's motive with Zechariah. With Zechariah's voice cut off, it's Elizabeth's voice we hear. There's a power shift.

I wonder at the role of listening in our lives today. And the kinds of communicating we've done in the past versus what the events of 2020 have thrust upon us. Our conversations and connections, our ways of meeting and greeting one another, our social lives and cultural lives have changed hugely. We try to say it all with our eyes.

Over this year of social isolation and loss, in this season of shrinking light and shrinking budgets we're invited to wait and listen deeply into what is being spoken around us in the dark. Who is speaking now and who is silenced? Who are those voices that need to be heard for once for all?

This year has been a watershed year for that lesson. Many of us have been working at waking up to the voices of black and brown people in our country. To kneel in silence at the cruel reality of suffering and hate and our own culpability in the history of racism. It is time to make our way to the messy manger out back and strain to hear the singing of the angels. To use our voices when it matters most. To locate ourselves in the Christmas narratives and listen in to what is being asked of us by the most vulnerable.

Howard Thurman, theologian, activist, and leader of civil rights in his time, knew the impatience and exhaustion that the fight against social injustice can often lead to ... It was Thurman's book, *Jesus and The Disinherited*, that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was said to have carried around in his suitcase.

Thurman wrote, "The old song of my spirit has wearied itself out. It has long ago been learned by heart so that now it repeats itself over and over, bringing no added joy to my days or lift to my spirit ... so I will sing a new song. As difficult as it is, I must learn the new song that is capable of meeting the new need. I must fashion new words born of all the new growth of my life, my mind, and my spirit. I must prepare for new melodies that have never been mine before, that all this is within me, within us, may lift my voice unto God. How I love the old familiarity of the wearied melody -- how I shrink from the harsh discords of the new untried harmonies."¹

It's our Advent task in these days of exile to learn new songs. Untried harmonies. What is the new song? What might be your song? Much later, in Luke's first chapter, Zechariah's child John, is born. He speaks his name out loud for the first time and is made whole. The crowd surrounding Zechariah and Elizabeth ask a resounding question that every one of us wonders at the birth of a baby: "*What will this child become?*" (v.66)

And then, Zechariah is given a new song to sing. A prophecy, a benediction:

*"In the tender compassion of our Lord
The dawn from on high shall break upon us,
to shine on those who dwell in darkness
And the shadow of death,
And to guide our feet into the way of peace."*²

The new growing out of the old prophecies. Advent invites us to slow down and make some room for the unexpected, to listen in to the miraculous and yes, even, the uncomfortable. To pay closer attention to the inklings of grace. And make room once again for the stories of Love and how a child ... can change everything.

Amen.

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¹ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1976).

² From Zechariah's Canticle known as the *Benedictus*, Luke 1:68-79.