

“ADVENT INTENTIONS: LOOK AND LISTEN”

Luke 1:26-56

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Rev. Jerry Duggins

Westminster Presbyterian Church

This year, the fourth Sunday of Advent, is pushed right up against Christmas. In a matter of hours, we will gather again to celebrate the birth of Jesus. I'm not quite sure whether Christmas Eve begins the Christmas season or ends Advent, but the content is definitely Christmas. We're done waiting. We're looking into the manger, marveling at Emmanuel, God-with-us, in Matthew's version of the story. We're pondering the "Word made flesh" in John's version; and looking on a child, wrapped in swaddling cloths, who is Christ the Lord in Luke's. We haven't got much time to "get ready."

With the minimum of three weeks to prepare, you may be feeling pressed for time. A little shopping yet to do this afternoon? The ham to pick up? Presents to wrap? A Christmas Eve sermon to finish? So much to do and so much less time to do it in. Maybe you're not ready for all the merrymaking? Maybe the crunch is making you a little crabby?

If this is the place you find yourself in, on the verge of Christmas, maybe you'll find this comforting: Christmas isn't about you or your preparations. As the Grinch discovered, Christmas comes even if you've worked hard to prevent it. "It comes just the same." Christmas is something that God does. It's not about your giving, but about God's giving. Our gifts are a response to God's gift, not a preparation for it. Seen from this perspective, one wonders what this season of preparation is all about. Why get ready for something that God is going to do?

Well we have a few hours left to ponder this before the gift "arrives." Perhaps this story can provide a place to begin our thinking. We see an angel named Gabriel engaged in conversation with a woman named Mary. We see Mary taking a trip to visit Elizabeth, a relative, with a sense of urgency. The visit goes well. Elizabeth is filled with joy, or more accurately the child within her womb. Elizabeth, herself, is filled with the Holy Spirit, and says something to Mary that she is very excited about, which sends Mary into song.

The action is driven by the conversation. We see some odd things, and we hear some odd things. I mean, what do we do with this greeting from Gabriel? Mary seems surprised at the greeting, but not at the appearance of an angel. Gabriel tells her not to be afraid, though there's no indication that she is in fact afraid. Despite the awkward opening, the message is clear. God likes Mary, has chosen her to give birth to Jesus, who will be called, "Son of God." When Mary asks how this is possible, Gabriel informs her that the Holy Spirit will come upon her. She is then told about Elizabeth conceiving a son in her old age, and that "nothing will be impossible with God." The whole conversation is about God's gift to the world.

But what I notice when I look at the scene and listen to the dialogue is that Mary holds her own with the heavenly being. Luke opens his gospel with a scene between Zechariah and Gabriel in which Zechariah is struck mute when he questions the angel's message. Mary gets an answer to her question. She doesn't lack faith, but she wants to know the plan. And at the end of the conversation, she says this: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word." It's the same answer all the greats of Israel's past gave when God called. "Here am I," said Abraham. "Here am I," said Moses... said Samuel... said David... said Isaiah... said Jeremiah. Some of these greats didn't want to do what God was asking of them. Some argued with God. "Let it be with me," says Mary. God's gift comes with Mary's consent.

And Mary knows what she's consenting to! Elizabeth's outburst, inspired by the Holy Spirit, releases Mary's song. To the Holy Child, she sings, "Yes!" To the child he brings mercy to the lowly, but scatters the powerful, she sings, "Yes!" To the child who feeds the hungry and rejects the influence of the wealthy, she sings, "Amen!" And her song tells us why. "God has looked with favor on the lowliness of their servant." God loves Mary, and so she agrees to participate in God's giving.

In W.H. Auden's Christmas oratorio, *For the Time Being*, he imagines a garden scene for the Annunciation. He tells us that "many before have wandered in, like her, then wandered out, unconscious of their visit, and unaltered...." God's gift waited for one to embrace it. The "word becomes flesh" only when Mary consents!

Why get ready for something God is going to do? The gift of the Christchild isn't forced upon us. We aren't always ready to welcome the birth of Jesus. We may not be prepared to be changed not just by this birth, but by the life and teachings of Jesus. Jesus isn't the sort of gift that we can put on a shelf and take it off to read when we feel like it. The danger is that we will sentimentalize the birth, that we will walk into the stable and leave it unchanged.

We can prepare for the scene at the manger by taking cues from Mary, by looking and listening. Looking for God's messengers. Where do we see the angels who bring good news, who announce the coming presence of God? Where do we see the need for God? Are we willing to put ourselves in those places and among those people where angels speak. Are we willing to stand with the shepherds of today's world, to see the lowly, the oppressed, the neglected and abused? Are we looking at our world with eyes to see where the love of God is most needed, most likely to find welcome.

Getting ready for Christmas involves listening. Mary's song tells us that she understands God's desire for the world. Her consent to participate in the work of God is an informed consent. Initially confused by Gabriel's greeting, she quickly understands the importance of what is to come, and embraces the gift and accepts the invitation to participate.

For us, Christmas is the reminder that God still comes, that God still gives, that God still loves the world. Advent prepares us to look into the manger and see something more than an infant, something more than love even from which we move on. It prepares us to

see a love that changes us. It prepares us to hear the invitation to partner with Christ in bringing good news to the poor, release to the imprisoned, and freedom to the oppressed. Will Christmas be something we observe, unchanged? Or will we look into the manger and be “altered” by what we see? Will we hear the message of the angels to the shepherds and make haste to Bethlehem? Will we not only sing with Mary and the angels, but also understand and welcome God’s invitation to participate in shaping a new world?

Advent is quickly coming to a close for this year. Christmas is just hours away. Are you ready?

Amen.