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20 December 2020

St. Barnabas Episcopal Church, Florissant

4 Advent, Year B

“Speak, Lord, for your servants are listening. Amen.”

Well, folks, we’re out of time. Christmas is just a few days away, and there is a rapidly closing window of time to accomplish whatever preparation you knew you had to take care of before December 24. And I’m not just talking about the kind of preparation that immediately springs to mind. I’m not just talking about the online last-minutes gift deals and the frantic rushing out for another roll of wrapping paper. I’m not just talking about the dog eating the chocolate that was supposed to go in the stockings and the frantic rush to Kroger at 10 a.m. on December 24 to buy onion salt, cranberry sauce, a meat thermometer, and all the other once-a-year kitchen items you forgot to get to prepare food for your guests, most of whom this year will be on Zoom.

I’m letting you know that the window is also closing on the last opportunity for our spiritual preparation, which by the way is the original purpose of this entire holiday season. We can be forgiven for perhaps forgetting from time to time—after all, the reminders to remember the “true spirit of Christmas” have become as trite as the twinkling lights and blaring songs about Rudolph and Frosty.

But today is our last Sabbath before Christmas. It’s time to pause, stop, and reflect on where we have been. How did we arrive at the moment four days before our Savior’s birth? What has been happening to you spiritually for the past four weeks? What have you been doing to prepare a place to welcome the Christ Child within your life, your self, your mind, your heart? How have you seen God at work in your life, leading you and guiding you toward the star in the East that grows stronger and brighter with each passing day?

God has been very active in my life in 2020, through the wild ride that this year has been, and I hope that’s true for you as well. God has been teaching me about the strange interplay between my weaknesses and my strengths, about poverty and the greatest riches I have, which are the wonderful people who surround me in this diocese and in my life. I have learned about change and how hard it is, about discernment and how elusive it is, about fellowship and how precious it is, about trust and how crucial it is to faith, hope, and love abiding. I have learned how sustaining and strengthening it is to have people believe in you, and how deeply I am called to believe in other people, to believe in their potential, to believe in their love, to believe in their beauty. What is the deepening that has happened in your soul through this pandemic and all its upheavals, through the renewal of our call to racial justice, through the economic downturn and all its struggles and fears? How have you seen God’s call to new depth in your soul grow even richer and more challenging through Advent?

As we examine what has transpired in our own lives this Advent season, let us wonder for a moment what the bearer of the first Advent might have been thinking on this day. What was Mary thinking on December 20 two thousand years ago? It takes about four days to get from Nazareth to Bethlehem on a donkey, so she would already have gotten on the road and have

three long days to go. Can you imagine riding a donkey along country roads for four days while nine months pregnant? It would leave a lot of time for wondering how you got into this position and whether you should have thought a little longer and harder before agreeing to this plan.

That is the scripture that comes to us today from the Gospel of Luke, and that is where I imagine Mary's mind might have been on this day so long ago. Mary had her life planned out before Gabriel came to her. She was engaged to a lovely man. She was respectable. She knew what was coming next. Then her life is totally interrupted by an otherworldly being: "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." The scripture says how confused and perplexed she was. And she, at first, is not really sure she's on board. Because we know that Mary will turn out to be so courageous and faithful in the end, we can often skip over her initial skeptical response.

She has just been invaded upon by the Angel Gabriel, a sight that would fill any of us with awe and slack-jawed wonder. When an angel of the Lord appears to you personally and says that God favors you, that would be enough to strike me dumb. But then Gabriel comes out with this whole list of things that are about to happen: "And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

At that point I'm sure I would be so blown away by the whole experience that I would just say, if I could speak at all (which is doubtful), "Okay! Sounds great!" But not Mary. She is skeptical. She questions an angel of the Lord. That takes guts. In the midst of this epic supernatural event, she is still thinking about how things work in the world she knows. "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" That practicality and down to earth quality of Mary no doubt stood her in good stead when raising Jesus, and might have been part of why she was picked in the first place.

But Mary is no longer here. Now *we* are called upon during Advent to prepare a place for the Lord. Gabriel's words are not just for Mary, they are for us too. Listen to them now and don't hear them for Mary, hear them for yourself: "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you...Do not be afraid, for you have found favor with God...The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." A little more intense when the Annunciation is not just to Mary but to you personally, isn't it?

And you may be asking the same question Mary did: "How can this be?" Well, once again we look to Mary to see her response. She asks for an explanation and gets one, but it doesn't really answer all the questions she may have. But Mary, seeing that God is ready to answer her and still wants to bless her despite her skepticism, has all the answer she needs. She says, "Let it be unto me according to thy word."

What questions or doubts or fears do you have about God making a home in you? What prevents you from answering the same way that Mary does? For many of us, it is the conviction that God has plenty of other people to manifest in, he doesn't need plain, boring, mixed-up and sinful me. We say it on the community level too. There's no way that God needs the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri or St. Barnabas Episcopal Church or bring in the Kingdom of God—surely we're just extraneous, right? Like maybe sort of helpful bit players but probably not going to take center stage. But that's not the case. God seeks out the humble and the lowly to lift up. God wants to be manifest and incarnate in the most unexpected places ever. And you are it. God needs you. God chooses you. God gives Godself to the world through you.

It seems amazing and perhaps unattainable to muster even more spiritual courage after the year we've had. But if you look at it from another angle, perhaps we are more ready to

welcome the Christ child this year than we ever have been before. This year, there were no familiar habits. It was impossible to get distracted by the holiday noise, frantic shopping, overwhelming parties and social obligations—all of that was diminished to the point of nonexistence. As painful as this year has been, as badly as we miss all of our usual holiday traditions, it has been an opportunity for a spiritual reset. When everything is thrown into chaos, we reexamine our priorities. What really matters the most? What is the core of our life together? Where is God in this year of tragedy and disaster? And who is God calling us to be in this moment? Mary understood what it was like to have her life turned utterly upside down, with no assurance that everything would turn out okay. She said yes to that, welcoming God to make a home in her. Now it is our turn to do the same.

You are the dwelling place that God has chosen, and you are out of time for doubts or second guesses. For us, just as for Mary, we have long gone past the point of no return. At some point in our lives, perhaps in not as explicit of a moment as Mary, we said yes to God, and God got to work changing, molding, and shaping us to bring the light of Christ into the world. We may not *feel* ready, but we are ready, because God will be with us, just as God was with Mary in the dying days of December two thousand years ago. We've had our chance to prepare, and no matter how hard we worked or how much we slacked off, God's grace is sufficient to carry us through. There's something amazing coming to us this week, something that no pandemic could ever dim or diminish. All that's left to do for us is to hang on for the ride, and then rest and rejoice the grace of God with Us. **Amen.**