

The Fourth Sunday of Advent – Year B – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony

2 Samuel 7:1-11,16 – Canticle 15, Romans 16: 25-27, Luke 1: 26-38

Today is the fourth Sunday of Advent. We are in the home stretch. Before another Sunday passes we will experience again the miracle of the birth of Jesus into the world and into our hearts. For the past three Sundays we have been focused on who this baby is destined to be. We started in the first Sunday of Advent by wondering about the why of a Messiah. St. Mark gave us an answer that is as much mystery as it is concrete response. We are instructed to keep awake, because we do not know the day or hour that the Messiah is coming in great power and glory. We still do not know the day or hour, or perhaps we do. Perhaps the Messiah comes every day and every hour to those who make room in their hearts for such a coming. A mystery. Mark, in the gospel, writes that the promise of a savior made by God to human beings was about to be fulfilled. Looking back each Advent, we can see that the pledge has been redeemed. The Messiah has come, and continues to come into the world and into our lives, and each year we begin the Advent journey by reminding ourselves of the truth that God has kept God's promise.

In the second and third Sunday of Advent we begin to explore who Jesus was for the people of Palestine 2,000 years ago, and more importantly who Jesus is for us this day in this place. Who is this one who came from God, who took on human flesh and human nature, who is this savior of the world? We've done that by paying attention to the beginning of Jesus ministry as an adult.

The mystery becomes a bit clearer when we listen in the second and third Sundays of Advent to the words of John the Baptist, the one who came to prepare the way. We've listened to the questions asked of John the Baptist and heard his response. "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." In answer to the question who, John responds that this is someone sent from God who will bring God's presence into human life in a new and recognizable way.

Last week we heard a different message. We are told that John the Baptist was "...a man sent from God, ...who came to testify to the light...He himself was not the light but he came to testify to the light." John came, in his own words came to "Make straight the way of the Lord." These are words of preparation, of making ready for the coming of the mystery into our lives. It takes time to absorb such a gift from God, the gift of God's own self into our lives never to leave.

Advent brings us two images of God who came into the world in the person of Jesus. The first is the one who is the light, who helps us see in the darkness that so often surrounds us. I am reminded of the story of creation in Genesis. What was first brought about out of chaos, was the light, divided from the darkness and enabling all the rest that was to come. Now, a new light has come into the world, the light of the Messiah. John came to testify to the light, to bring the message of hope and encouragement to us. The second image of the Messiah is as the one who brings the Holy Spirit into our lives, the Holy Spirit who is the energy and active force of God in our lives. With light and spirit the Messiah comes.

Finally, this Sunday we hear a gospel that has some connection with what we think of as the Christmas story. Today we hear from Luke about the angel Gabriel and his message to Mary. We hear of God's choice of this young woman to be the mother of Jesus. The eastern church has recognized the mystery of what happened by giving Mary the title "God bearer". For that is what she was. Mary is sometimes depicted as someone who simply accepted the message of the angel and did her part. That, for some, is called faith. But Mary is far more than someone who simply accepted without thought the role assigned to her. Reading the Gospel carefully we find in the response of Mary a guide for our own faith.

Mary's first reaction to the message of Gabriel that she was a "favored one" was to be "much perplexed", wondering what sort of greeting this might be. Mary gave this whole event, from the very beginning much thought and contemplation. She pondered the words of the angel. Faith, deep faith is perplexing and requires energy and reflection if it is to be active in our lives. It is rarely easy and never thoughtless.

The angel had much more to say to Mary beyond this greeting. Gabriel went on to outline for Mary what God was asking. It is important to note that God was *asking* and that Mary had a choice. She could have declined this ministry, for ministry it was. Mary could have refused. In matters of faith and of what God asks of us we too have the option always to say no, to choose not to engage. When we choose not to answer God's call, we are not punished, but in some ways I think our lives are diminished. In any case, it is always an option to say yes as well, knowing in faith that God will walk with us in our yes.

Mary then does something that we sometimes hesitate to do in our exchange with God. Mary questions God and the message, and ministry outlined by Gabriel. "How can this be?" That is a question we should all ask in prayer and meditation when we believe we hear the voice of God in our lives. How can this be? We may not get a clear answer, or an answer we understand fully, but asking the question opens up the possibility of discernment. In asking the question we take the first step in being able to do the work God is giving us to do.

Gabriel outlines the work that God has for Mary. As a virgin Mary is to bear a son, who she is instructed to name Jesus. A son who will be great, who will be called the Son of God, a son who will be given the throne of King David. A son whose reign will be forever, a kingdom without end. It must have been not only mystifying but terrifying as well. Jewish kings in Roman occupied Palestine did not succeed, in fact they rarely survived.

Yet, in spite of this Mary goes one step further, asking the question "How can this be?" Gabriel answers Mary's question with an explanation which to say the least must have been alarming. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the most High will overshadow you, therefore the child to be born will be holy." This was to be something unique in all the world. Unexplainable except by the power of God, a mystery. In recognition of the enormity of what is being asked of Mary, Gabriel goes on to tell Mary of the pregnancy of her cousin Elizabeth who for many years was thought to be barren. It allows Mary to take the next step of faith, to accept the words of Gabriel that "nothing is impossible for God" and with confidence enter into the mission for which God had prepared her. "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Faith as demonstrated by Mary is the model for all who would follow God. Listening for the voice of God, discerning that the voice you hear is authentic, choosing to accept the task offered, asking questions and finally, if it seems in accord with the will of God, saying: Here am I, servant of the Lord, for nothing is impossible for God.