



SERMONS
THAT WORK



SERMONS FOR
Advent and Christmas 2023

An offering of
Sermons That Work

THE *Episcopal* CHURCH 

Advent 2023

Thank you for downloading “Sermons for Advent and Christmas,” a collection of materials prepared by some of the best preachers from across The Episcopal Church.

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Each year when I sit to write this introductory letter, I come in with high hopes to be immediately inspired with a pithy vision and message for the readers of this piece. Reflecting on the year thus far, I consider what congregations and parishioners have told me of their joys and struggles, and then wait. And wait. And often wait longer.

To help the process along, I sometimes take out my grandmother’s hymnal and page through the Advent section until a phrase jumps out. And, what do you know, I remembered a hymn that we sang occasionally growing up, but I couldn’t remember how the tune went—so I visited YouTube and searched the name. There was organ accompaniment after organ accompaniment, but very few with sung lyrics—which seemed strange, until I realized that these accompaniments were posted for Advent 2020 and 2021, when most of us couldn’t sing, hadn’t heard live performances in months, and wouldn’t

be able to participate in the communal traditions through which many of us encounter the living God.

The last several years have been hard. Very hard indeed. One hopes they’re the hardest we will have to experience, but here’s the thing: Every single year is hard to some degree. I have no doubt that 2024 will be hard, as will 2025 and 2026 and 2032 and 2091. But just like it was in these more recent hard times, life is punctuated with moments of joy, heroism, love, and hope. In every moment of pain and angst, we can turn to our truest hope, who has already given away the ending. Though it may sound weird to our ears today, we dare to hope: “The King shall come when morning dawns and light triumphant breaks; when beauty gilds the eastern hills and life to joy awakes.”

On behalf of Sermons That Work and The Episcopal Church Office of Communication, I wish you a blessed Advent and a merry Christmas.

Your brother in Christ,

Christopher Sikkema
The Episcopal Church

First Sunday of Advent

COLLECT

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

READINGS

ISAIAH 64:1-9; PSALM 80:1-7, 16-18; I CORINTHIANS 1:3-9;
MARK 13:24-37

BEARING WITNESS

by Michael Toy

Advent—that wondrous season of longing, penitence, and expectation—is upon us. The Advent candles and the purple or blue altar linens and vestments are pulled from their closets. This season is one of introspection and fasting, all in the service of entering into an embodied dramatization of the birth of Jesus through liturgical rhythms.

In the coming weeks, the Advent readings will walk us through the story of John the Baptizer and continue on to the angel Gabriel’s Annunciation to Mary. But before the heavenly hosts show up, before the shepherds find the baby in the manger, the lections point us to the apocalyptic. Traditionally, Advent is a period when the church dons bi-focal lenses: reenacting the great yearning and expectation for the Messiah articulated in the Hebrew Scriptures while simultaneously looking to the second coming of Jesus.

That first sense of longing is felt in the lyrics of today’s psalm, where three times the refrain is voiced, “Restore us, O God of hosts; show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.”

The weight of anticipation for divine deliverance is perhaps even more keenly pronounced in the passage from Isaiah 64: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!” The desperation of the prophet is almost palpable. It is a cry that can only emerge from a place of anguish and desolation. And it

is a cry that reverberates today in the hearts of all those suffering oppression, war, or injustice: God, when will you return? When will the second coming of Jesus take place? When will you rend the heavens and come to liberate us all?

The gospel reading for today from Mark addresses just this question. Initially, Jesus seems to give the disciples portents or signs of his return with a picture of apocalyptic terror. At the end of all things, what theologians refer to as the eschaton, there will be suffering. The sun will be darkened. The moon will not be giving its light. The stars will fall from heaven. He then offers a horticulture analogy. Just as the ripe fig heralds summer, Jesus says, “When you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.”

And yet as soon as Jesus indicates that there might be clues that the end is truly nigh, he takes it all back. He says, “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.” Not even Jesus knows! And if not even Jesus knows, then how could anyone correctly predict the portents and signs and omens? Here, what seemed like a teaching of interpreting prophecies of signs now shifts through this last bit of the passage. The instruction is not to spend time and energy trying to make predictions of the future, but instead, the injunction is to keep watch.

But what does this keeping watch mean, if not to interpret the signs? Jesus, as he so often does, offers a parable. He describes a landowner going away on a journey and commanding the doorkeeper to keep watch. The doorkeeper is instructed to stay awake, but there is no indication of when the landowner might return. Jesus concludes this parable by instructing the disciples, “Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

But this is an impossible task. One cannot keep constant vigilance without fatigue. And yet, three times in this passage, Jesus instructs his disciples: Keep watch.

New Testament scholar Leroy Huizenga points out that this injunction in Mark 13 to keep watch is literarily connected to the events that unfold in the Garden of Gethsemane one chapter later. The temporal pattern of the owner’s return is not of a twenty-four-hour system but of evening, midnight, cockcrow, or dawn. This four-part division of time mirrors the events of Jesus’ final night: the last supper in the evening, the arrest in the night, denial by Peter at cockcrow, and delivery to Pilate in the morning. Furthermore, in the Garden of

Gethsemane, Jesus thrice tells his close disciples to keep watch with him. And thrice they fail. They fail to stay awake with him in his final hours.

So, what's Mark doing here? What do the events of Gethsemane have to do with the end times? What does Jesus' arrest and death have to do with the apocalyptic? Mark is setting up this literary mirror to let the reader know that the apocalypse is wrapped up in something bigger than knowing when the End will come.

Keeping watch does not mean paying attention so one can be "in the know" about what is happening or what will happen next. The call to be watchful, alert, and aware is an invitation into the unfolding divine mystery. This mystery is somehow personal yet universal, offering glimpses of a boundless God amongst a groaning creation.

At the crux of human finitude and divine transcendence sits a holy uncertainty. Mark makes it clear that it is impossible to fix our eyes on the moment of the Messianic return. And in that uncertainty, we fix our eyes on the one thing we can: The person and promise of Jesus Christ. The mystery of the Incarnation is impossible to disentangle from the mystery of the eschaton, which is, in turn, impossible to disentangle from the mysteries of the Crucifixion and Resurrection. Fixing our eyes on Jesus means embracing these mysteries in all their fullness and in their incomprehensibility.

This Advent, let us heed this call to keep watch both spiritually and also within the physical world. Jesus directs us to keep watch in Gethsemane. He directs our gaze to the anguish around us: to the destruction of the temple; to the horrors of war; to the anxieties borne from all threats to human life. In this holy uncertainty, Christians are called to be attentive to the suffering of the present. The failure of the apostles in Gethsemane becomes our failure when we turn our gaze away from those in anguish.

Episcopal priest Fleming Rutledge notes that, as an Advent people, the church is called both to wait and to bear witness. She writes, "Bearing witness is an active stance; waiting is a passive stance. Both are part of the message of the herald of the age to come."

In keeping watch—in entering into solidarity with the sick, imprisoned, and oppressed—we will find ourselves waiting in the depths crying out, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!" But our gaze is directed not only at Gethsemane but to the promise of the resurrected Messiah: That suffering, death, and agony will not have the final say. And for that promise, we also keep watch. As a church and as an Advent people, we bear witness

to that promise together. There will be suffering around us. There will be pain. There will be anxiety. And in those moments of feeling like the world is crumbling around us, there comes a whisper of Messianic hope: Keep watch.

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“Mark makes it clear that it is impossible to fix our eyes on the moment of the Messianic return. And in that uncertainty, we fix our eyes on the one thing we can: The person and promise of Jesus Christ.”

-Michael Toy

1. Is there a piece of music you know that evokes themes of longing, expectation, and hope? Play that piece and reflect on how the music connected to this sermon.

2. Advent is a time of anticipation. What have you been anticipating this season? Do you find it difficult or easy to watch and wait?

Second Sunday of Advent

COLLECT

Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

READINGS

ISAIAH 40:1-11; PSALM 85:1-2, 8-13; 2 PETER 3:8-15A; MARK 1:1-8

COMFORT, COMFORT

by the Rev. Terry Parsons, 2002

The first sentences of the Old Testament reading will be familiar to many as the opening words of Handel's masterpiece, *The Messiah*. "‘Comfort Ye, Comfort Ye my people,’ says your God!" It would be difficult to estimate the millions of people who have heard orchestras, soloists, and choirs proclaiming these words of hope and the promise of delivery from the oppression, despair, and sin of the world.

The Messiah has been called the most influential and widely performed oratorio of all time. Opera, as we know it, has strong roots in Italian culture, but the oratorio is a very English form of music. Oratorios are somewhat like opera in that they are dramatic works, but they are performed in concert, without costumes or staging. Most are based on Old Testament stories. One of the important aspects that sets *The Messiah* apart from other oratorios is that it focuses more on meditation than action.

The story of Handel's writing of this work is also inspiring. George Frederic Handel was born in Germany in 1685. His father wanted him to become a lawyer, but as a youth he demonstrated extraordinary musical gifts, mastering several instruments and composing in a variety of styles while still in his teens. He composed music for some of the most important patrons in Europe before settling in England. There, he became London's leading composer and director of Italian opera. He also became interested in the characteristics of English music and eventually abandoned his operatic writing to concentrate on the English oratorio.

After thirty years of popularity and prosperity, Handel found his fame fleeting and more creditors than admirers at his door. A stroke left him with partial paralysis on his left side. He had difficulty sleeping and suffered from rheumatism. He was depressed. Without another musical success, he feared his next home might be the debtor's prison.

In the midst of this dreadful summer of 1741, two critical letters arrived. The first, from the Duke of Devonshire, invited him to Dublin to produce a series of benefit concerts. Proceeds from the concerts would be for the relief of the prisoners in the several jails in the city and for the support of a hospital and an infirmary. The opportunity of a change of scene and a temporary escape from his creditors was an attractive one.

The second letter came from his friend Charles Jennens. Jennens was a somewhat eccentric English landowner who had written some lyrics for Handel in the past. This letter was a compilation of Old and New Testament passages that comprised the story of Christ's birth, crucifixion, resurrection, and future reign.

Handel shut himself in his room and completed the entire oratorio in the incredibly short time of 21 days. Part I, the prophecy and birth of the Messiah, took only seven days to complete.

The first official performance of *The Messiah* took place on April 17, 1742, and was a tremendous success. Handel conducted the work many times in the remaining years of his life, including a performance eight days before his death on April 14, 1759. During his lifetime, *The Messiah* was most often heard in the Easter season. Handel himself conducted an annual performance to benefit the Foundling Hospital in London.

Today, while the oratorio is often performed in its entirety, it is most often heard in Advent, and then frequently limited to the first section and the story of Jesus' birth. This music leaves the concert hall ringing with Isaiah's prophetic words of comfort, release, and God's glorious return to the earth.

Listen, just for a moment to a few of Isaiah's words that have become familiar to so many of us as lyrics from that oratorio:

Comfort ye, comfort ye my people
Prepare ye the way
Every valley shall be exalted
Then the glory, the glory of the Lord shall be revealed
Behold your God!

Isaiah is speaking to a captive people. Israel's Babylonian captors have been conquered themselves by Cyrus of Persia. Conquerors have a tendency to gloat over the conquered and Cyrus was no exception. In his case, however, he celebrated his victory by releasing the peoples who had been conquered by the Babylonians. So, when Isaiah spoke of comfort and the glory of the Lord being revealed, captives celebrating their release could readily imagine a return to the better days of their history when God had felt closer.

Compare this to the time of today's Gospel reading. The Book of Mark begins in a time when what is left of Israel, the kingdom of Judea, is once again a conquered people, this time ruled by the Romans. Once again, they hope for God's liberation. Isaiah's words must have been very familiar to them. Indeed, Mark quotes from Isaiah 40, verse 3, in the very reading we have just heard.

John, however, is different from the images Isaiah calls to mind. In his own time, he was something of an eccentric. In today's culture, he would have been a genuine curiosity. His wardrobe was the extreme of the natural fibers fashion trend. Imagine how he must have looked with the roughly textured camel's hair, thrown over his body and belted with a strip of leather. His diet of locusts and wild honey surely conveyed some significant message to his culture. For us, familiar with diets ranging from high to low carbohydrates, the grapefruit diet, liquid diets, high and low protein, vegetarians of various descriptions, and a host of others, bugs and honey still sounds very strange.

If his dress and habits have a rough texture to them, listen to his message. John speaks of repentance rather than comfort. He preaches more baptism for the forgiveness of sins than God's exaltation. John is quite clear that one greater than he is coming. He is the prophet, not the fulfillment. It is the time to get ready.

This is where we find ourselves this second Sunday of Advent. The musical promise of what is to come of Handel's *Messiah* may be mostly confined to churches and concert halls, but those sounds still mingle in our minds with carols on mall loudspeakers and the virtually constant cacophony of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, Santa Claus, The Grinch, White Christmas, and more.

Advent is the season of preparation. The Advent wreath's first candle has already begun to burn lower. Today we light the second. One fourth of the current year's portion of preparation time has already passed. Now, it is time to address some significant questions. What are we preparing for? Who needs to be prepared? Who will prepare them?

What we are preparing for is the easiest question. Song and text make it clear that we are preparing for no less than the kingdom of God. Think of the

words we pray so often: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done." That is what we prepare for and work for, today, and every day, here, and wherever we are.

Fortunately, we do not need to invest in camel's hair and leather wardrobes, or check out the Internet for a good source of locusts and wild honey. We do, however, need to be very clear about who it is who needs to be prepared and who will do the work of preparation. The answer to the first question, of who needs to be prepared, is much bigger for us than it would have been for Isaiah. Isaiah spoke to those who believed themselves to be God's chosen people. Abraham was the one whom God told that his descendants would be a witness to God's presence in the world. They grew from a tribe of nomads into a small nation of shepherders, farmers, and merchants. They may have been the main characters in the familiar stories that make up the Hebrew Scriptures, but they were very minor players in the empires that came and went in that part of the world.

In this time of the global economy, for us, the answer to who needs to be prepared is the whole world. It is everyone included in the instruction to "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

Now, let us consider the final question. Who will prepare the way? Isaiah and John have become the stuff of legends. The disciples are history. But we are gathered today as a community of believers. We believe that God so loved the world that he sent his only son that we might have eternal life. We believe that all who choose to truly repent will be forgiven. We believe that nothing of this earth can separate us from the love of God.

Like John, we are not the way, but we know the way. It would seem, therefore, that we are today's prophets. We are the ones who can give voice to the good news that Christ has died. Christ has risen. And Christ will come again. We know what we are getting ready for. If we do not share that, who will?

You will have a few thoughts about how to do that but here are a few to get you started:

- Remember those persons who introduced you to Christ and the love of God. Remember how they did that. Was it the Bible stories they told, the example of their lives, or something else altogether? Are there places in your life where you can do similar things? Offer a prayer of thanksgiving for their work in preparing you for your place in the kingdom of God.

- Invite a friend to experience the Christ in Christmas at a church event. Special music, a social occasion, or special worship services are just a few possibilities.
- Tell a child the Christmas story.
- Be patient with salesclerks and checkout people. Wish them Merry Christmas. Tell them one of the things you most enjoy about Christmas is that it reminds you of just how much God loves each of us.
- Have a family conversation about what life in the kingdom of God is like. Think of ways we can help make our lives more like that.
- Pray for a world ruled by the Prince of Peace.
- And, if you have the opportunity, sample a foretaste of the sound of heaven by listening to a bit of *The Messiah*.

This sermon was written for Advent 2 (B) in 2002 by **the Rev. Terry Parsons**.

1. Listen to “Comfort Ye, My People” from *The Messiah*. How does it make you feel? Where do you hear messages of hope and anticipation?

“Now, it is time to address some significant questions. What are we preparing for? Who needs to be prepared? Who will prepare them?”

- The Rev. Terry Parsons, 2002

2. This sermon does not shy away from our role as evangelists – perhaps heirs to John the Baptist, in this regard! How comfortable are you with this role? What is one small step you can take this week to become more comfortable with it?

Third Sunday of Advent

COLLECT

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen.

READINGS

ISAIAH 61:1-4, 8-11; PSALM 126 OR CANTICLE 15 (OR 3);
I THESSALONIANS 5:16-24; JOHN 1:6-8,19-28

REJOICE ALWAYS

by the Rev. Israel Alexander Portilla Gómez

We are already a week away from Christmas, and for good reason, this Sunday is called “Joy Sunday”. This is because of the exhortation given to us by St. Paul at the beginning of the reading from I Thessalonians: “Rejoice always.” And how are you today? If you feel some sadness, and today your faces were not ready to smile, it’s time to change your outlook. There is a greater joy flooding our hearts. That is the central message of today, because the celebration of the birth of our Savior is very near and his light shines in the darkness. Nothing can extinguish it. So, in our liturgy this Sunday, we use a pink candle to express the joy we feel for his coming, tender and fragile as a baby. And this pink candle, together with the other candles, announces the true light of which John the Baptist spoke.

So, the readings speak beautifully of how the promised Messiah is at the door. Let’s see.

In the first reading from the book of Isaiah, the prophet describes the coming of the Lord as “the oil of gladness instead of mourning,” He continues, “I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness.” That’s right, dear siblings, we are made righteous in our Lord, and we are glad because joy comes from him. Therefore, whenever we are conscious of the salvation that our Lord gives us, joy fills our lives. And we are joyful not because of our successes or achievements for the present day, but because God’s love is greater than all the pain and suffering that surrounds us. To be Christians is to spread the perfume of joy. Others can sense it

and see it, and there is something more than ourselves filling our lives. And perhaps you have heard the famous phrase attributed to St. Francis de Sales: “A sad saint is a sorry saint.”

Thus, the Blessed Virgin Mary, in her calling to be the mother of our Lord, received this role with joy amid all the hardships she faced, which is why, in the Magnificat, we hear with joy: “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” This exultation of Mary comes from the depths of her being, and thanks to her, the redemptive work of Jesus Christ has been made possible. Now all of us venerate the Mother of God as an example of holiness, faith and joy. She gave us an example of how, amid adversity, rejection, poverty, persecution, all the tears and uncertainty she had to face while carrying her child in her womb, she resolutely embraced the special plan that God had in store for her. Her attitude was an immense joy that endures forever: “From this day all generations will call me blessed: the Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his Name.”

And we are participants in this happiness. We are blessed to know that God came to meet us as one of us, in the humblest way possible, so that absolutely no one would be excluded. Jesus is the light that illuminates all darkness. John the Baptist was aware of this, which is why he announced, “Make straight the way of the Lord.” And what is that way? That way is our minds and hearts. Let us open our own inner doors to meet with Jesus, with his presence, with his life, with the practice of his message.

And what happens next? The same thing that happened to Mary, Paul, John and many, many others, and is reported to us in today’s readings: being filled with joy. This is the most evident sign of being happy. If we let our Lord Jesus Christ into our lives, we will feel true and lasting happiness. He himself was immensely happy, and no one has been as intensely happy as he was, and we know very well how he did not have it easy. Neither do we. But still, he was satisfied with what he did on earth and completed his plan of salvation for all, which does not end; it continues to be in progress, eternally. At first it seemed to have failed miserably, but God’s plans do not go according to our human logic.

In history, we have read how many have spent their years thinking about happiness. Before Christ’s appearance on Earth, Greek philosophers wrote treatises. Aristotle, more than 300 years before the birth of our Lord, said that happiness is the goal sought by every human being, and that desire guides all human actions. And no one seems to hesitate to agree with him.

You may have heard that every year there is a survey that measures the global

happiness index. This year's result is already published, and it's up to you to look for the result. Some people want to go and live in the places ranked highly, because they would like to be happier. But there is a much simpler, more attainable, and more profound way to fill all our discontent: Invite Jesus into our lives. He is the endless source of happiness. And this *does not* rule out the difficulties that make us temporarily unhappy. But with him, we live in immense joy, in joy that elevates our lives with purpose.

Dear brothers and sisters, this is the joy we are waiting for with the Birth of the Christ Child. He is our ultimate reason for existence. When we have God at the center, everything else makes sense. We exist thanks to him, we live in him, and we will go to him. His actions in us are summed up in infinite love, which brings forth good from within us. And his love transforms everything.

Therefore, let us be joyful, because the happiness that comes from God is unquenchable and extends beyond what we can imagine, beyond our limits, beyond what we could ever believe. Let us celebrate with joy this third Sunday of Advent and wait with smiling faces for the miracle of the manger. Amen.

The Rev. Israel Alexander Portilla Gómez is a Colombian priest, and he serves as associate priest at St. Mary's Episcopal Church, Diocese of Alaska. This sermon was translated from the original Spanish written for Sermones que Iluminan.

“Let us be joyful,
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- The Rev. Israel Alexander Portilla Gómez

1. True and lasting joy can be found by inviting Jesus into our lives.
How has your faith brought joy into your life? Can you share a
specific experience or moment of joy related to your faith?

2. Where in the Magnificat do you hear Mary's joy? Is it tempered
with fear and/or resolution? Can these feelings co-exist with joy?

Fourth Sunday of Advent

COLLECT

Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

READINGS

2 SAMUEL 7:1-11, 16; CANTICLE 3 OR CANTICLE 15 OR PSALM 89:1-4, 19-26; ROMANS 16:25-27; LUKE 1:26-38

LIKE MARY

by the Rev. Joseph S. Pagano

Our Gospel lesson is wonderful and glorious and brings us to the edge of Christmas. It is the story of the Annunciation. The angel Gabriel is sent by God to the town of Nazareth, to a virgin whose name was Mary. For many of us, feathery images fill the mind's eye. The angel Gabriel bows to greet Mary, his multicolored wings still unfurled from flight. He straightens up, and with lily in left hand raises his right, indicating the momentous announcement: "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

In our Gospel, Gabriel explains: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 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." This is good news! By the power of the Holy Spirit, Mary will conceive a son, and he will be named Jesus and he will be called the Son of the Most High. An angelic message, Gabriel's announcement, the Annunciation of the birth of our Lord!

Given the peculiarities of our calendar, today we have the one-in-seven-year event of the Fourth Sunday of Advent falling on the same day as Christmas Eve. The temptation for the preacher this morning is to wrap things up with a quick amen, and an invitation to come back this evening to hear the rest of the story at our Christmas Eve services. After all, there are altar guilds waiting in the wings, eager to transform our sanctuaries from Advent austerity to Christmas

splendor in just a few short hours. And they may very well be thinking: *If the preacher has the nerve to insist that we wait to prepare the church for Christmas until the services for the Fourth Sunday of Advent are over, the least [he] could do is to keep the sermon short!*

There is, of course, wisdom here, not only in always listening to the altar guild but also about keeping sermons short. Yet, Mary's response to Gabriel has much to say about Christian faith that we ought to notice before rushing to the manger. In Luke 11:27, a woman in a crowd following Jesus shouts, "Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you." To which, Jesus responds, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and respond" (11:28). Jesus doesn't simply negate the woman's statement about Mary. She isn't altogether wrong. But he does amend what she says. The important thing about Mary isn't simply that she gave birth to Jesus, but rather that she heard the word of God and responded in faith. Mary may rightly be seen as *Theotokos*, the God-bearer, because she gave birth to Jesus. But it is her response to the word of God that makes Mary the model of Christian discipleship.

The first thing to notice is that after Gabriel delivers his message, Mary says, "How can this be?" Now, on the one hand, this is a very understandable question. We have been told Mary was not married, that she was a virgin. How, then, is she going to have a baby? Good question.

But, on the other hand, think for a moment about the Annunciation. The angel Gabriel, in all his feathery glory, appears to Mary and announces that she will conceive and bear a son. Surely, in this case, the messenger has to be considered. No less than an archangel with a direct message from God appears to Mary. If the history of art has anything to tell us, the Annunciation must have been one of the top-ten religious experiences of all time. So, perhaps, some of us would be forgiven for thinking: What more do you want? After all, who among us hasn't at some time asked the Lord for a sign? And if, in response to this request, we received an appearance from say, the archangel Gabriel, with a pretty clear message, well, who really wouldn't be satisfied with that? Truthfully, the appearance of an angel, any run-of-the-mill angel, would pretty much settle it for most of us.

Not so for Mary. Rather, Mary says, "Umm, excuse me, but how can this be? Remember, I'm not married?" To which, amazingly, the angel Gabriel does not respond by saying, "Well, excuse me missy, but let me remind you that I am an archangel. I stand in the very presence of God. So you are just going to have to take my word for it." Which is how, perhaps, some of us would respond if we stood in Gabriel's sandals. But no, Gabriel is a real angel, and so he explains to Mary how this will all take place. The Holy Spirit will come upon her and the power of the Most High will overshadow her.

That the angel Gabriel takes seriously the question of the teenaged Mary and responds tenderly is gracious. That Mary has the courage to ask the question in the first place is inspiring. It shows genuine faith. God does not overpower us with the full weight of heavenly glory to compel us to believe and to act in faith. What the angel says is not entirely clear to Mary and God honors her question. God invites Mary's assent. So, when she finally says, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word," Mary is the model of Christian faith. Blessed are those who hear the word of God and respond like Mary. With wonder and questions and faithful assent.

Also note, Gabriel sends Mary to see her kinswoman, Elizabeth, whose own extraordinary pregnancy will be a sign of the truth of his message. Again, Gabriel could have pulled archangelic rank. But instead, he invites Mary to check out the message with another flesh-and-blood human. Here again, Mary is a model of discipleship. We can't do it alone. God doesn't expect us to do it alone. Mary doesn't just talk with angels. She visits Elizabeth. She helps Jesus along with his first miracle at the wedding at Cana. She stands with the beloved disciple at the foot of the cross. She gathers with the disciples in the upper room awaiting the coming of the Holy Spirit. Mary is the model of discipleship among the disciples. God gives us families and church families to help along the way. Mary, the Mother of our Lord, was sent to her cousin to be strengthened in her understanding of God's message. Blessed are those who hear the word of God and respond like Mary.

This is the last Sunday of Advent. Tonight, this sanctuary will be transformed and we will celebrate the feast of the Incarnation. But before we sing, "O Come All Ye Faithful," let's remember the faith of Mary. Marvel again at the angelic message that Mary will bear a son and name him Jesus and he will be called the Son of the Most High. Wonder with her how this can be. See the gracious sign in a pregnant kinswoman. And hear the heavens rejoice when Mary finally says, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word." Blessed are those who hear the word of God and respond like Mary.

The Rev. Joseph S. Pagano is an Episcopal priest living in Mont Tremblant, Quebec. He is co-editor of *Common Prayer: Reflections on Episcopal Worship* and *Saving Words: 20 Redemptive Words Worth Rescuing*.

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- The Rev. Joseph S. Pagano

1. At the Annunciation, Mary responds with questions and ultimately with faith-filled assent. How do you relate to Mary's questioning and her eventual response to the angel's message? How can we learn from Mary's faith in our own moments of uncertainty or doubt?

2. Find a favorite depiction of the Annunciation and reflect on how it moves your spirit. You might consider viewing pieces by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Plautilla Nelli, Sandro Botticelli, Henry Tanner, or John Collier.

Christmas Day (I)

COLLECT

Almighty God, you have given your only-begotten Son to take our nature upon him, and to be born [this day] of a pure virgin: Grant that we, who have been born again and made your children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by your Holy Spirit; through our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom with you and the same Spirit be honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen.

READINGS

[RCL] ISAIAH 9:2-7; PSALM 96; TITUS 2:11-14; LUKE 2:1-14 (15-20)

THE ARCHANGELS

by the Rev. Dr. Amy Richter

The archangel Gabriel crouched low so he could see clearly when enough shepherds had assembled for the great announcement to be made. He was looking through a tiny hole in the firmament, smaller than a pinprick. The light emitted by Gabriel and the angelic choir behind him, although equal in human terms to a supernova, through the pinhole would have looked just like a star, at least until what Gabriel was calling “the great glad tidings.” When the time was right, the angelic host would tone down their luminescence to a level tolerable to humans, go through the opening, and announce their good news to the shepherds outside of Bethlehem.

Gabriel had been waiting nine months for this moment, ever since he had gone to visit Mary, the one chosen by God to be part of God’s plan to dwell among humans as one of them. Gabriel remembered with a smile the moment Mary had said yes to God’s plan: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord,” said the girl. “Let it be with me according to your word.”

There was great rejoicing in heaven that day, although some of the angels thought God was taking a great risk in becoming a human. God had explained the plan, and, of course in their obedience, the angels had supported it, but they were awestruck when God had shared the details. God was going to entrust God’s very self into the care of humans, and even more, God was going to begin this plan, what God called “the Incarnation,” or the taking on of

human flesh, in the very same way that humans do, that is, as a baby.

Gabriel loved babies. He thought the sound babies make, especially when they laugh, was the sweetest sound in the entire universe. And he should know, he thought. He had heard other beautiful sounds: the flutter of a myriad monarch butterfly wings as they take off en masse, whale song, the hiss of a red giant star. But a baby’s first laugh was the very best sound of all.

Gabriel also knew too well the sorrowful sound of a baby uncomforted—he had heard plenty of guardian angels’ reports to know that being a human baby was tough. Even though loving parents tried their best, babies are vulnerable, and although God never wanted any of God’s creatures to suffer, allowing free choice in the world meant danger and sorrow, especially for the smallest and weakest.

So, when God announced the plan to become incarnate, live with people and as one of them, and to begin it all as a baby, Gabriel found himself with the other archangels first a little dumbstruck and then offering their specific archangelic assistance.

“I will protect you,” said Michael, the Protector. “With my flaming sword, I will prevent anyone from harming you.”

“No,” God said, “I will go without your special protection. I will get hurt. All humans do.”

“Then,” said Raphael, the Healer, “I will tend to you and restore you instantly to health.”

“No,” God said, “I will be wounded and bruised. All humans are.”

Michael and Raphael nodded silently, obedient. Gabriel wondered if, at the Almighty One’s words, the other archangels were also thinking back to the day God had first made humans, way back when. They were the pinnacle of God’s creation and the Almighty One beamed with delight when, just before God placed them in the garden God had made for them, God showed them first to all the angels. The man and the woman appeared to be sleeping. God hadn’t opened their eyes yet so they would be protected from the glow of the heavenly court.

“Behold,” said God, “Humans. The only creature made in my image. Bow down before them in honor.”

All the angels retracted their luminescent wings and bowed.

Except one. Gabriel heard the slight thrumming of one angel's still-outstretched wings and a throaty humph of protest. Gabriel couldn't believe it, and peeked up to see who among them would rebel, who among them did not understand the love they were privileged to behold between Creator and creation.

It was Lucifer.

"Bow down," said God. "My love for them does not diminish my love for you. I love everything I have made. But you," God said, and motioned to all the angels, "were made to serve me and my creation. Honor them."

"I will never honor them." Lucifer hissed. "I will make it my purpose to destroy them." Lucifer's eyes flashed and he vanished from the heavenly court.

The remaining angels were stunned. What would God do? Cancel creation? Destroy all the wonderful, exquisite things God in love had created?

The angels watched in silence as God blessed the humans, placed them in the garden, and said to them, "Love me. Love one another. And trust that I will never stop loving you."

God had kept God's promise, never giving up, always loving and calling humans to love themselves, their neighbors, their God.

Now here they were, generations later, as God's love was taking a new form, God's plan, a new step—a magnificent, risky, wondrous step. God among humans as a baby.

"It's the only way," said God. "I need people to understand, to know how much I love them. To know that I understand them. That I'm willing to go through anything and everything because of love for them. And I will show them what true love looks like, the joy and freedom that comes from true love. And I will start as a baby so they will know there is no part of their lives love cannot touch."

Gabriel thought for a moment, then spoke, "But how will people know about your plan? Don't they need to know that's what you're doing, so they don't miss it? Babies are so small, so easy to overlook."

"Yes," God said. "They need to know."

"Then, O Great One," Gabriel said, "Let me announce your plan to all the powerful, those whose words people listen to and obey. I will alert the kings and the princes, the rulers and the magistrates, the scholars and the sages..."

God interrupted him. As the highest ranking of all the herald angels, Gabriel could go on a bit.

"You know, Gabriel," said God, "That's not how I usually work."

Gabriel was quiet. He knew. God had this thing for going to the poor, the lowly, the people on the edges. Why, even the girl God had chosen for this plan, Mary, was not of noble birth, far from it.

"No," said God. "The first people to whom you're going to announce the good news of the baby's birth are some shepherds, keeping watch over their flocks outside the town of Bethlehem of Judea. Tell them this: "To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

Ah, thought Gabriel. Brilliant. God, who was from the beginning, the source of light and life, the life of all people, becoming flesh and dwelling among them. This baby will show them that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness will never, ever, ever overcome the light.

Gabriel gave one more check through the pinhole in the firmament. The shepherds had gathered. It was time to go tell the good news of the savior's birth, and hope that the shepherds and all faithful people through the ages would choose God's love and light, seen first and most fully in this tiny child.

Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Amy Richter is an Episcopal priest, currently living in Mont-Tremblant, Quebec, Canada. She is the author and editor of several books, including *Common Prayer: Reflections on Episcopal Worship* and *Saving Words: 20 Redemptive Words Worth Rescuing*, published by Cascade.

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1. Gabriel wonders how people will know about God’s plan. How does God’s response, choosing to announce the birth of Jesus to shepherds, challenge conventional expectations? How can this choice guide our own approach to sharing the message of God’s love?

2. With someone you love, share a time when you experienced God’s love in a powerful or unexpected way. How will you keep this in mind during the joyful (and stressful!) days ahead?

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