

HAPPY CHRISTMAS!
FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT – YEAR A
SERVICE OF ADVENT LESSONS & CAROLS
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This particular service of Advent Lessons and Carols is unique;
unique to this parish, this little corner of God's world.

In this service, we look the story of the Nativity in a huge sweep of time;
we begin with a peek into God's heart at the beginning of Creation;
we recall, as people have for thousands of years, the thundering promises of the prophets;
we hear those words of yearning, sighed and sung and shouted
by so many people of different times and places

Christians often frame these lessons as being about who's right and who's wrong.

Of course, I would be both a fool and a liar if I were to stand up here and say
that Christianity isn't good and right. But CHRISTIANS? Well, maybe not so much.

Christians disagree deeply not only about matters of dogma and doctrine,
but now about politics and impeachment of the President.

Who's right? who's wrong?

We each can dig in about how right we are and how wrong the others are,
about religion, politics, and the ridiculous names that college bowl games have now;
the Chick-fil-A Peach Bowl? That sounds like a truly spectacular recipe fail,
not a sporting event.

I said last year that I had been wrong in thinking how our national family feud,
with its polarization and vicious rhetoric, couldn't get worse;
I'm deeply grieved that my reluctant assumption for this year,
that it could indeed keep on getting worse, has been right.

It's times like this when I remember that whether I'm right or wrong,

I'm not the one in charge of deciding how the universe is ordered. God is.

God loves whom I love, but God does not join me in my dislikes.

As the years roll on, no matter how hot our mess, God keeps sustaining us all,
saints and sinners alike - day after day inviting people of all faiths and none
to join in the divine project of healing creation.

And billions of folks accept the invitation, even if they don't realize it come from God.

How? As Fred Rogers, Mr. Rogers, said: In a disaster, look for the helpers.

For every mass shooting, there are countless caregivers who serve out of love;
for every heartless layoff to improve the corporate bottom line,
there are millions of random acts of kindness and senseless beauty,

Here in this parish, we intentionally accept God's invitation to heal creation.

Every day, we aspire to live in a world where all creation thrives in God's love,
and to become who God reacted us be by worshipping joyfully,
respecting all, sharing generously, and nurturing every spirit.

For every selfish act in the news, just look around here and we'll find
a dozen people from Good Shepherd who give of their time, talent and treasure
to make a positive difference in Kenya, the Dominican Republic,
in our community, and right here in our church family.

Our service today has a series of lessons showing God at work ordering Creation, sometimes acting directly, but more often by empowering ordinary people – people not so different from us – to do the right thing.

After each reading, I'll give a short reflection, and then we'll sing the carol.

LESSON ONE: PROVERBS 8:22–31

The Lord created me at the beginning of his way, before his deeds long in the past. I was formed in ancient times, at the beginning, before the earth was. When there were no watery depths, I was brought forth, when there were no springs flowing with water. Before the mountains were settled, before the hills, I was brought forth; before God made the earth and the fields or the first of the dry land.

I was there when he established the heavens, when he marked out the horizon on the deep sea, when he thickened the clouds above, when he secured the fountains of the deep, when he set a limit for the sea, so the water couldn't go beyond his command, when he marked out the earth's foundations.

I was beside him as a master of crafts. I was having fun, smiling before him all the time, frolicking with his inhabited earth and delighting in the human race.

The “me” in this lesson is divine Wisdom – another name for God.

It is this wisdom, divine Wisdom, that is bringing the universe into order.

Remember, one of the verses in *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*

pleads, *O come, thou Wisdom from on high, who orderest all things mightily...*

However the mechanics of Creation work, what this reading from Proverbs teaches us

is that the physical universe was and is the direct expression of who God is, the first day AND today.

The marvelous truth is that God is creating us this very instant;

the earth and all its creatures are the creations of a master artist.

and God rejoices in the inhabited earth and delights in the human race,

God loves to frolic amongst us!

The Feast of the Incarnation isn't only about God taking flesh,

it's about all of Creation being an incarnation of God:

God's very wisdom takes tangible form in every physical entity,

from galaxies to earthworms to each one of us.

What if we begin each day convinced that God paints every sunrise,

orchestrates every creature's migration, sculpts all the rock formations,

and molds all humans, even the people we fear and distrust,

and who calls us to join in the holy frolicking of God?

Carol: Praise the Spirit in Creation

LESSON TWO: Isaiah 7:10–15

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz: “Ask a sign from the Lord your God. Make it as deep as the grave or as high as heaven.”

But Ahaz said, “I won't ask; I won't test the Lord.”

Then Isaiah said, “Listen, house of David! Isn't it enough for you to be tiresome for people that you are also tiresome before my God? Therefore, the Lord will give you a sign. The young woman is pregnant and is about to give birth to a son, and she will name him Immanuel. He will eat butter and honey, and learn to reject evil and choose good.

A child is born to us, a son is given to us, and authority will be on his shoulders. He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be vast authority and endless peace for David's throne and for his kingdom, establishing and sustaining it with justice and righteousness now and forever.

Immanuel means “God with us” in Hebrew.

At Christmas, we celebrate the birth of Jesus, God with skin on.

The temptation is to think that, before the first Christmas,

God wasn't here; God was out somewhere else.

But God has been inside everything, every part of every atom, since the first day.

With each new baby, each new creative, generative event,

God is expressing the gallimaufry of ways that divine existence takes shape.

This reading says that in the birth of this particular child,

God's Immanuel-ness, God's with-us-ness, here on this earth, has a particular purpose:

to heal creation until the day comes when all babies live in safety and peace. –

babies in Kenya, in the DR, in our cities, ALL babies.

“Butter and honey” are foods children eat when pastures are full of contended cows and frisky goats, and busy bees have lots of growing plants to buzz around.

That's what God intends for, yes, that Immanuel born nearly 3,000 years ago,

the one who was born in Bethlehem, and also all who are born.

We, like Ahaz, can say that God's way of ordering Creation is none of our business,

or we can, like Isaiah, proclaim it and join God in making it so.

Carol: Praise We the Lord this Day

LESSON THREE: Micah 5:2-5a

As for you, Bethlehem of Ephrathah, though you are the least significant of Judah's forces, one who is to be a ruler in Israel on my behalf will come out from you. His origin is from remote times, from ancient days.

Therefore, he will give them up until the time when she who is in labor gives birth. The rest of his kin will return to the people of Israel. He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. They will dwell secure, because he will surely become great throughout the earth; he will become one of peace.

We expect great things from great people and cities. God has no respect for our expectations.

God shows up in unlikely men and women, in odd locations,

in the mentally ill and the homeless and in the children,

and in people from cultures that frighten us, speaking languages we don't understand.

This new Emmanuel, the baby in whom the hopes and fears of all the years met,

was born into a peasant family that knew homelessness and oppression;

he was very, very little – physically, socially, politically:

Jesus did not look at all like the mighty gods that human imaginations tend to create. Jesus wasn't Thor.

He certainly wasn't a winner in this world; in fact he was utterly defeated by it,

or at least by the privileged religious and political elite that run it.

But, as he said to Pontious Pilate, *My kingdom is not of this world.*

If it were, my servants would fight . . . My kingdom is from another place.

Jesus' kingdom is not of this world, but it is most definitely in it!

In Jesus' kingdom, the strongest power on heaven and earth is life, not death,

In Jesus' kingdom, success is when enemies reconcile, not fight;

and being right is nowhere near as valued as being kind.

In Jesus' kingdom, the most important people, the true saints,

are motivated by selfless love, not by personal ambition.

As we live here on this earth, do we seek to be the strongest,

most successful and important people of this world, or in Jesus' kingdom?

Carol: O Little Town of Bethlehem

LESSON FOUR: Luke 1:5-20, 23-24a

During the rule of King Herod of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah. His wife Elizabeth was a descendant of Aaron. They were both righteous before God, blameless in their observance of all the Lord's commandments and regulations. They had no children because Elizabeth was unable to become pregnant and they both were very old. One day Zechariah was serving as a priest before God because his priestly division was on duty. Following the customs of priestly service, he was chosen by lottery to go into the Lord's sanctuary and burn incense. All the people who gathered to worship were praying outside during this hour of incense offering. An angel from the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw the angel, he was startled and overcome with fear.

The angel said, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayers have been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will give birth to your son and you must name him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many people will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the Lord's eyes. He must not drink wine and liquor. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before his birth. He will bring many Israelites back to the Lord their God. He will go forth before the Lord, equipped with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will turn the hearts of fathers[a] back to their children, and he will turn the disobedient to righteous patterns of thinking. He will make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Zechariah said to the angel, "How can I be sure of this? My wife and I are very old."

The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in God's presence. I was sent to speak to you and to bring this good news to you. Know this: What I have spoken will come true at the proper time. But because you didn't believe, you will remain silent, unable to speak until the day when these things happen." When he completed the days of his priestly service, he returned home. Afterward, his wife Elizabeth became pregnant. She kept to herself for five months.

God laid out a vision, a promise, to Zechariah: a child, a son! at last!

What does Zechariah do? He argues. With an ANGEL!

Zechariah knows what the angel promises is impossible. So, he wants to stay with the status quo. Don't we do that, too? We SAY we want justice and peace, but we know it's impossible, so, we stay with the status quo.

We can't seem to believe that God can make justice and peace happen, and we give up before we even start.

Note that Zechariah and Elizabeth, probably feeling like old fools, went home and . . . frolicked; they did what needed to be done to have a son. Imagine THAT date night!

In our world today, striving for justice, peace and dignity for all is foolish.

Let's do it anyway. It's the right thing to do, and empowering humans to act, to do the impossible, appears to be God's favorite way of transforming the world for the better.

Carol: Blessed be the God of Israel

LESSON FIVE: Matthew 1:18-24

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. When Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly.

As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." Now all of this took place so that what the Lord had spoken through the prophet would be fulfilled: Look! A virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they will call him, Emmanuel. (Emmanuel means "God with us.")

When Joseph woke up, he did just as an angel from God commanded and took Mary as his wife.

Joseph is worse than a fool. He is a loser. In the judgmental eyes of his neighbors,
Joseph is either marrying a woman who's been unfaithful to him,
or Joseph and Mary have been messing around. What a scandal!

Remember the days when premarital relations were utterly taboo?
Joseph was going to lose his good reputation.

However, because Joseph was a kind and good man, a righteous man,
he didn't want to hurt Mary. He was just going to quietly let her go. It was the right thing to do.
BUT, THIS wasn't what God wanted, so God sent an angel to talk sense into Joseph.

The angel honed into the heart of things right away: Joseph's fear – fear of losing his good name.
The angel told Joseph not to be afraid; fear makes us timid and powerless;
when we aren't afraid, we can do things we never dreamed.

Joseph had the good sense to listen to the angel.

No longer afraid, Joseph goes from doing the right thing to doing an even righter thing:
marrying a woman who needed him,¹ and in doing so trading his good reputation for a bad one.

He made another big trade: personal prestige to be part of global transformation.

People who believe in God's dream of a healed creation can join in the plan,
doing astonishing things that transform the world
when they don't worry about what the neighbors think.

Carol: Come Now and Praise the Humble Saint

LESSON SIX: Luke 1:39-45

Mary got up and hurried to a city in the Judean highlands. She entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. With a loud voice she blurted out, "God has blessed you above all women, and he has blessed the child you carry. Why do I have this honor, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her."

Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her!

This is true for two women: Elizabeth, who already has evidence that God fulfills promises,
and then, of course, Mary, who just believes and accepts God's remarkable invitation to her
to be part of the plan to save the world.

God promises Mary that her son will have the throne of Israel's greatest king, David.

This sounds like a promise that she would be a real winner,
the mother of a great king in a cushy palace like King David had.

So, her song should be something along the lines of *Santa Baby*,
with a future full of convertibles, yachts, platinum mines and diamond rings.

But Mary is clearly very aware that the prophets of Israel, her people,
spoke of things much greater things than personal enrichment.

After Elizabeth greets her, Mary sings a song that echoes
the ancient prophets' promises that God is working to bring about a new order
where all hearts are healed, where God gives good things to good people,
and also gives good things to the unworthy, ungrateful, and unlovable,
because God loves all of creation: all nations, all God's children.

The best thing about God's promise to Mary is that it's a promise to all humanity.

It isn't just for the people who end up being proven right. It's for all people, even those who are wrong.

The happiness that Mary had from believing that God will fulfill God's promises
is the Christmas gift we, too, are offered, and that we, too, can give to others.

¹ Quinn G. Caldwell, *All I Really Want*. Abingdon Press, 2014, p. 86

We receive that gift of happiness by putting belief into action in doing the right thing
in how we order our own lives.

We give that gift of happiness as we do the even righter things,
embodying the promises of heaven by bringing
healing, freedom, security, love, peace to others, daring to be joyful.

As we receive and give these world-transforming gifts from our creating, delighted, frolicking God,
I join my English forbears in their tradition and bid you: a HAPPY CHRISTMAS to all!

Carol: My Soul Cries Out