

Sermon, Fourth Sunday in Advent, 12/24/2023, St. David's Luke 1:26-38; Luke 1:46-55
(Elizabeth Felicetti)

Advent four doesn't usually fall on the same day as Christmas Eve. If you came to celebrate Christmas this morning, then I'm sorry that you find yourself still in Advent—but come back at six and we will pull out most of the stops, with carols and candles, but not incense because we only do that when we have two Christmas Eve services so can offer an incense-free one. After this service this morning, we will strip away the blue and put out the white and move Mary and Joseph into the stable and pull out the baby Jesus.

But for now, we are still in Advent. The message of the church during Advent can feel out of step with the frenzy our culture stirs up. We are encouraged in church during Advent to slow down and pay attention, but that's hard to do today, the last shopping day before everything shuts down and we have to create the perfect holiday. Do you have time to be here today? Do you have enough ice and butter at home? Do you have to go to the grocery store today? Do you have all the gifts? Meanwhile here in church, we have greens instead of flowers behind the altar, Mary and Joseph have not quite arrived at their destination, and we're singing O Come O Come Emmanuel instead of O Come All Ye Faithful.

Advent is a time of expectation and anticipation. Of hope. What does hope make you think of? What are you hoping for?

We don't always realize how radical hope is. Hope is often associated with Mary, an appropriate association, considering how radical Mary was. Sometimes we may not appreciate Mary's radical ways, but we can see them when we read scripture rather than study whitewashed manger scenes or listen to songs like The Angel Gabriel that we just sang before the Gospel. I detest verse three of that hymn, with "then gentle Mary meekly bowed her head." Ew. What Mary actually did, as we can see in the reading, is first stay silent, then question.

We heard that she was perplexed by the angel's greeting when he called her "favored one." Mary was just an ordinary girl, betrothed to a nice Jewish guy named Joseph, going about her daily life when an angel showed up. Why would she be considered favored? So she didn't say anything in response to "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you"—not even an "um, hi." So, Gabriel plunged ahead, telling her a story about how she was going to have a son named Jesus who would be called the Son of the Most High and become a king whose kingdom will have no end.

So-called gentle Mary did not meekly bow her head, as the song erroneously states. Instead, she asks, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" Which is kind of like saying, "WHAT?" This is crazy stuff some angel is spewing. Famous works of art like Henry Tanner's painting of the annunciation show Mary sitting on a bed. So maybe she has been asleep and awoke to an angel in her room. Or maybe she was out planting something, since the Feast of the Annunciation is

observed on March 25. Some think she was drawing water from a well. Wherever she was or whatever she was doing, Mary's normal routine was disrupted by a strange creature telling her not to be afraid but even though she wasn't married yet, she was going to get pregnant and give birth to the king of the world. Her response of "What are you talking about? How can this be?" is appropriate. And not meek.

In the Episcopal church, we encourage questions, and we usually don't offer clear answers. Sometimes the answers change. Women didn't used to be able to serve on vestries, for example. That wasn't back in colonial times: this was in the twentieth century. That changed, and then in the late 70s the Episcopal Church finally started ordaining women. Those things happened because women, following Mary's example, questioned "How can this be?" How can it be that we can't exercise the same kind of leadership that men can?

Gabriel responded respectfully to Mary, and since we didn't read the story in church, you may not know or remember that the angel of the Lord who appeared to Zachariah wasn't as respectful when he was questioned over a similar annunciation, that time about John the Baptist: poor Zachariah was struck mute. But Mary questioned, and received more information, about how her older cousin Elizabeth, who was thought to be barren, was six months pregnant. After hearing this, Mary consented, and there's nothing about her meekly bowing her head. She said okay, I'll do it. "Here I am the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Then she hurried off to see her cousin and said to her the song we read instead of a psalm today, known as The Magnificat. Mary praised God for choosing her even though she was young and from the perspective of many in the world unimportant, and she sang about God scattering the proud, casting down the mighty, sending the rich away empty.

This is a song of hope. Hope that others who are unseen and unappreciated by society, like herself as a young woman not yet defined by who she's married to, or her cousin as an older woman who has no children—hope that others like them will be exalted, while the mighty are cast down.

Does that sound hopeful to you? Do you feel seen by others? Do you know that you are important to God? What does a fair and just world look like to you?

In Advent, we may feel out of step, but for the rest of the short time we are in this season, instead of stressing about getting everything just right for a holiday bash, think about what you are hoping for, and what God hopes for, and how you can bring that about. How can you lift up the lowly and fill the hungry with good things? What questions are you going to ask? And what will you say to the angel when God needs to ask you something?