

December 13, 2020
The Third Sunday of Advent—Year B
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St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11
Psalm 126
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24
Luke 1:5-25

This Gospel reading is not the one we were supposed to hear today, the third Sunday of Advent. We were supposed to hear the Gospel of *John's* version of John the Baptist in the wilderness. Last Sunday we heard the Gospel of *Mark's* version of John the Baptist in the wilderness. I don't know why the Revised Common Lectionary serves up that double-dip for Year B. Because it never quite makes sense to be, and since we're making so many churchly adjustments right now, I decided to sub in the story we heard from Luke. It's one that the lectionary never assigns, but it seems like we should hear it. Aside from a brief formal introduction, it's the beginning of the Gospel of Luke. Added to the readings for next Sunday and Christmas Eve, we get a fuller version of the events surrounding the Jesus's birth.

I should point out some things that either are not-so-obvious or become obvious a little later. Zechariah is a priest, and his wife Elizabeth comes from a line of priests. Apparently they took that family obligation seriously enough to marry within their social group. Both are "righteous" people "living blamelessly." This makes it clear that their childlessness is not a punishment from God. That's generally how childlessness was understood, and the text infers that there is speculating gossip to that effect. Zechariah and Elizabeth live in the countryside, and therefore they are not important or powerful people. At this time, Zechariah is serving temporarily at the Temple in Jerusalem. There are hundreds of priests who take turns there for several days at a time. For the honor of offering incense in the Holy of Holies, lots would be chosen among those who had never done so before. The lot would generally fall on a priest once in a lifetime.

As a self-described "old man,"¹ Zechariah has long awaited this opportunity, for which he has been preparing since childhood. It turns out to be nothing like he expected, and nothing for which he could have prepared. Expecting to be alone, he's met by an angel. This messenger from God, bringing good news for which Zechariah no longer hopes, has no patience for Zechariah's doubt. The skepticism Zechariah voices will be the last thing he says until after his baby is born. He emerges from the Holy of Holies unable even to pronounce the priestly blessing expected upon the assembly.

The story continues with a few sentences about Zechariah's wife, Elizabeth. Her *post-menopausal* surprise pregnancy hearkens back to others in the Hebrew Scriptures: remember Sarah, the wife of Abraham; and Hannah, the mother of Samuel. It's an interesting contrast to the *virginal* surprise pregnancy that will begin in a few months. Up next in Luke, and for us next Sunday, is Gabriel's angelic annunciation to Mary. That's when we learn that Elizabeth and Mary are relatives. Their stories, and the stories of their children, will be forever connected.

Let's shift gears. It was only two Sundays ago that we noted in our prayers the milestone of 250,000 COVID-19 deaths in the United States, and already later this week we'll reach the 300,000 mark. That number, already cognitively dissonant, is likely a vast under-count. We are experiencing oceanic loss—lost lives, lost health, lost livelihoods, lost security, lost connections, lost certainty. Some of us are experiencing that loss more directly than others, but still we are all feeling it.

There are at least two things that many Christians—and even many Christian pastors—say that you will never hear come from my lips—except for right now. One is, “Everything happens for a reason.” The other is, “God never gives you more than you can handle.” I just don't believe either of those things. On the surface, those words can sometimes be a comfort; but dig a little deeper, and they are almost always terribly, terribly problematic. Sometimes things just happen; sometimes people do indeed get more than they can handle.

We are currently deep in the holiday season. It could also be called the *bubbling-up* season. Stuff just bubbles up—here, there, everywhere. Even in a normal year, this is a hard time of year for so many people. Despite the many weeks of 24/7 Christmas movies on Hallmark and Lifetime, for most people the perfect Christmas gets no closer to actualization. Often the bubbling starts out being about the Christmas one never had, or the Christmas one used to have but lost. But that's never all there is to it, because the bubbling-up isn't really about *Christmas*, but about *life*.

The image of *bubbling up* reminded me of visiting Yellowstone National Park many years ago. It's most famous feature is of course the geyser Old Faithful. Old Faithful erupts on average every 98 minutes, shooting boiling water on average around 130 feet high.² You don't want to be too close to that. If you've visited, you know that seeing it is not a peaceful experience. Its eruptions are loud, something like a sustained shout, and many among the horde of onlookers react by shouting out in return and in surprise.

Old Faithful certainly gets your attention, and it's something to see. But Old Faithful is simply the most ostentatious of many geothermal features in Yellowstone. There are geysers that just whisper, and mud pots that gurgle, and hot springs that gently murmur. These are warm and *peaceful* places one could sidle up to on a cold and snowy day.

From geysers to hot springs, we all have stuff bubbling up this time of year. Sometimes it's loudly demanding, but even the more quiet voice deserves attention. I'm fortunate, in that my bubbling-up stuff tends to be less like Old Faithful and more like a mud pot. Still, it's there, and it happens whether I want it to or not, and it generally happens right on time, and that time is right about now, and I'm better off if I pay attention. I'm also fortunate that, with a little help—with support from others, with a faith practice that I can lean on, with years of past experience, with the self-gift of a time-out—I can allow myself to just sit beside that mud pot and watch for what bubbles up.

I am fortunate, but not everyone is. This time of year on a good year can be a breaking point for those who are already struggling. If you are struggling, please get help—from me, from someone else here for worship, from a 12-step meeting, from a therapist, from whomever or whatever you can. This is *not* the year to try and suck it up. Not that it ever is a year to try and suck it up. I don't think that's what the God who is love is all about.

Collectively, we're going to get some relief soon. Parishioner Denise Terry mentioned to me a few weeks ago that she read somewhere that we are experiencing the "Advent of the coronavirus vaccine." That turned out to be pretty correct, and next week, seemingly right on time, the vaccine rheostat will begin turning our darkness into light. It feels as if a miracle is in the process of being birthed. Of course, it's a miracle like most miracles: it comes through planning and strength and bravery and overall hard work. And like all births, what comes next won't necessarily be easy.

In some ways, the nativity stories from Luke and Matthew are the hardest part of the Gospels to grapple with. The two stories simply cannot be made to agree with one another. They just can't be *factual*. Letting go of fact leaves us reaching for *truth*, and that leaves us searching for *meaning*, and that's a much more difficult exercise—more difficult, perhaps, but with the potential for more reward.

Even before birth, John the Baptist was the harbinger of Jesus the Christ. On Christmas we usually think about the meaning of *Jesus's* birth. This week we have the chance to think about the meaning of John's birth. That's something to sit with by our bubbling mud pots. Remember the lifetime of preparation for a moment of completely unanticipated surprise. Remember the words of an angel and the silence of an old man. Remember the children who would grow into men whose bodies would be the location of both tragedy and glory.

I think that brings us right back to miracles. In this world in which Christ is always coming, *you* are like John the Baptist, in that *you* are a harbinger of Jesus the Christ. Therefore, it seems to me, as John's birth was a miracle, *your* birth was a miracle. Make no mistake—like other miracles, there was planning and strength and bravery and overall hard work involved—but still your birth was a *miracle*.

Believe in the miracle of *your* birth. That may very well be the most important thing you will *ever* believe.

Notes

¹ Luke 1:18 NRSV.

² "Old Faithful," from the National Park Service's official Yellowstone website, available at <https://www.nps.gov/yell/planyourvisit/exploreoldfaithful.htm> (accessed December 13, 2020).