

December 9, 2018
Second Sunday of Advent, Year C, RCL
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Baruch 5:1-9
Canticle 16
Philippians 1:3-11
Luke 3:1-6

Today is the second of the four Sundays of Advent. One simple definition of Advent is this: “The first season of the church year, beginning with the fourth Sunday before Christmas and continuing through the day before Christmas. The name is derived from a Latin word for ‘coming.’ The season is a time of *preparation* and *expectation* for the coming celebration of our Lord’s nativity, and for the final coming of Christ ‘in power and glory (emphasis added).”¹

The December days of my childhood were spent in preparation and expectation: not for the coming of Jesus, but rather for the coming of Santa Claus. My anticipatory excitement was heightened by the arrival of the annual *Sears Wish Book*. The *Wish Book*, the special Sears Christmas catalog, brimmed with every toy imaginable. To develop my Christmas list for Santa, I would intently examine page after page, carefully considering the options. Eventually I would make a handful of selections, circle each one with a ballpoint pen, and turn down the top corner of its page.

For three of my childhood Christmases, my deepest desire was a cowboy outfit. I believe this was when I was five, six, and seven years old. Every time, Santa generously came through. Recently I went online and found a photograph of the page from the 1968 *Wish Book* featuring the very cowboy outfit Santa brought my six-year-old self that year.² It included black pants and a red western shirt with a black yoke, both with fancy white piping.

Unlike other of my Christmas requests, those cowboy outfits didn’t sit abandoned in the closet; I often wore them. When I did, I was transformed: I felt more capable and confident and daring. The truth is, back then, I *needed* to feel more capable and confident and daring. Sometimes I still do.

Every year, I try to do one sermon during Advent that particularly evokes the season. Every year, I find it to be one of the hardest sermons of the year to prepare. As I worked on this one, I pondered why that might be true. First, I decided it’s because I so love Advent that I want to do it justice. But then I had to ponder that, too. And so there you have it: Advent is the season for pondering.

Permission to ponder is reason enough to love Advent, but for me there’s a whole lot more. For one thing, my being an Episcopalian is all bound up with Advent. I first walked into an Episcopal Church shortly before Advent in the year 2000. The previous twelve months had been a time of tremendous upheaval for me. I was still putting my life back together, and I was still feeling vulnerable and tender. I had grown up Roman Catholic but had absolutely no knowledge of the liturgical year. Newly returned to a liturgical church, I experienced my first *real* Advent. As a result, I experienced my first *real* Christmas.

That takes us back to the question of why one might love Advent. Yes, a real Advent sets the stage for a real Christmas, just as the experience of darkness helps us to truly appreciate light. I want to be careful here to not minimize or romanticize the concept of darkness. One should never try to minimize or justify true suffering or oppression as the necessary means to some dubious gain. But we can seek out and learn from Christianity's perspective on suffering and oppression. Our culture has blended Christmas into a holiday concoction that makes the period from Thanksgiving to Christmas poisonous for a lot of people. This is something to which the church offers an alternative and even an antidote. It's probably human nature to feel vulnerable this time of year. The darkest and coldest days are yet to come. On the tree of life, we're not so very far from the squirrels that are still scurrying to prepare for them. While consumer culture capitalizes on those impulses, the church takes a different approach, beginning with a very universal activity: preparation for the birth of a child.

This year is lectionary year C, during which we will hear primarily from the Gospel of Luke. Luke actually begins with preparation for the birth of *two* children: first John the Baptist, and then Jesus. The lectionary assigns readings for Advent and Christmas in a confusing way, because it bounces us back and forth in time. Today, in place of a Psalm, we heard a bit of poetry from the New Testament, the Song of Zechariah, from the first chapter of Luke. Hearing the Song of Zechariah today makes sense, because the speaker is talking about John the Baptist, the subject of our subsequent Gospel reading. Zechariah is actually the first character introduced in Luke's gospel. We don't hear that part of the story during worship, so I'm going to read it to you now. Beginning at chapter 1, verse 6, it goes this way:

[Zechariah and Elizabeth] were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

Once when [Zechariah] was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur."

Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived ...

I'll summarize the next part. The angel Gabriel visited Mary, and Mary became pregnant. The pregnant Mary visited the pregnant Elizabeth, who said to Mary, "For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy." Mary's reply is the passage we call the Magnificat. Then comes this:

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, "No; he is to be called John." They said to her, "None of your relatives has this name." Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, "What then will this child become?" For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

That takes us to Canticle 16, the Song of Zechariah. Zechariah, once silenced, now speaks. I'd like us to say his words together, so please turn to page 5 of your service bulletin.

Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel;
he has come to his people and set them free.

He has raised up for us a mighty savior,
born of the house of his servant David.

Through his holy prophets he promised of old,
that he would save us from our enemies,
from the hands of all who hate us.

He promised to show mercy to our fathers
and to remember his holy covenant.

This was the oath he swore to our father Abraham,
to set us free from the hands of our enemies,

Free to worship him without fear,
holy and righteous in his sight
all the days of our life.

You, my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High,
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way,

To give his people knowledge of salvation
by the forgiveness of their sins.

In the tender compassion of our God
the dawn from on high shall break upon us,

To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death,
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

My initial inclination was to think it would “cheating” to read so much scripture during a sermon. On further pondering, I decided that I’m just yielding to the Source. Silenced then singing, Zechariah demonstrated that Advent is a good time to yield to the Source. When we do, we might discover a *Wish Book* of another kind.

Our collect for last Sunday, the first Sunday of Advent, is one of the most beautiful of the church year. It begins with this: “Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light.” During Advent, we strip down, so that we can put on. You probably won’t be donning a cowboy outfit. But maybe the clothes you put on will help you feel more capable and confident and daring. Maybe they will help you feel more generous and compassionate and loving. God is reaching out to you; may God give you the grace to reach back. Take out your *Wish Book*, and look for your armor of light.

Notes

¹ “Advent,” *An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church, A User Friendly Reference for Episcopalians*, Don S. Armentrout and Robert Boak Slocum, editors, Church Publishing, New York.

² Photograph of page 244 of the 1968 Sears *Wish Book*, posted on the website Pinterest at <http://www.pinterest.com/pin/116882552801381566/> (accessed December 8, 2018).