

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
The Reverend Barbara Hutchinson  
Advent 4 Year B

We have spoken before about Advent being a threshold time, an in between time, one might say, a pregnant time, one in which we look backwards to the birth of a baby in the manger, a very incarnational time when heaven and earth met in a brand new way, and we live forward into the life of the risen Christ.

This threshold time is never more truly represented in our scriptures than in today's readings. I want to talk with you this morning about how, we are drawn even further back into the story of God and yet, through Luke's message, we are propelled forward into something brand new.

Which leads me to the other piece I want to draw into our conversation this morning. Advent, as the root to the word adventure, that which the nature of our journey with God is really all about.

So let's begin talking about our reading from Samuel. This is one of the most important passages in the Hebrew Bible and is very carefully paired with the gospel story for a number of reasons.

It's an advent reading because it takes us backwards to the original covenantal promise of God to Sarah and Abraham, of a land where they and their followers can settle in peace. This passage shows us how that promise is fulfilled now during King David's reign, as God directs Nathan to tell David that God will appoint a land for the Israelites so that they may have their own place and be disturbed no more. And then immediately the text draws us to look forward to the house and a throne established forever promised to David by God, which we believe is fulfilled by Jesus, through Luke's references to Mary's son, as one given the throne of David by God. Samuel's words give us the context of the messiah prophecy. Luke tells us how it is fulfilled through the baby Mary is asked to bear.

We are drawn backward to see the larger context, and then propelled forward to comprehend how it is that we are to live into the prophecy fulfilled by that baby in the manger, whose birthday we celebrate this week.

Even though the texts are linked, King David and Mary offer different responses to God from which we learn a lot. Interestingly enough, we learn a great deal from King's David's response in the passage of Samuel. Perhaps even with the best intentions, he made several major mistakes in his response to what God had offered him in his life. He had been given a great deal by God and after he saw the discrepancy between his palace made of cedar and stone and the tent, which to him, contained the presence of God in the Ark of the Covenant, David decided to build a big beautiful palace to contain God. David thought God deserved something as grand as he had and wanted to build God an enormous and

glorious temple. But God pretty quickly rejected this idea. God had traveled alongside the Israelites through all their trials, content to be where they were, where the winds blew, where in the desert the sands flew in their faces, God was there in the tent beside them. This tent living allowed God and the Israelites to be free to pick up and move the stakes of that tent at any time, to move where God's people moved, free to live in that vulnerable place with them, day after day. Being with God's people was far more important to God than being placed in some impermeable temple made of stone. God's temple was within and among the people. David just didn't understand that.

We see this show up sometimes, don't we, In our world today. When declining parishes, in our diocese or larger church, which spend most of their money on the upkeep of enormous buildings, built in the 60's while attendance dwindles to 25 people and mission evaporates, and the passion is around maintaining the house of God, rather than being the mission of God.

The other mistake David made was that he thought he could decide for God what God would want. I think we all can understand that response. We all want God, from time to time, to want what we want, to make happen what we envision is best for us, we often want God's will to be aligned with our will, rather than the other way around. We often pray this way, with our laundry lists of what we want, rather than truly praying into God's will for us. You probably have all heard the wise saying, "if God is your co-pilot, then change seats". This response of David just exemplifies what can be a natural tendency in all our lives deciding for God what God wants.

But the joy of the failings of King David in this passage, I believe, for all of us, is that we realize that even in our times of unknowing unfaithfulness, God is still with us and using us, and giving us a role in God's everlasting kingdom. This speaks volumes of God's faithfulness, in the face of our unfaithfulness. What a gift that is!

So we move from our Old Testament reading where we see King David's reign being connected to God's original covenantal promise to God's people, and how it was fulfilled during David's reign, but how he sort of missed the mark in terms of responding to what God was asking of him in the moment ~ to Mary's story.

The authors set up huge differences between Mary and David: David was a hero, a leader, a wealthy person with status and power; while Mary was unmarried, young, and having no status in a very non-descript and out of the way town. Had this event not happened to her, she may never have even been known or really recognized even in her own community. They also had a different view of the power associated with being among God's chosen: David used his power to harm others, as we know from his unfolding story. Mary saw her favor from God as an opportunity to give power to the oppressed, to prepare the world to turn, and to live as God intended us to live.

Two of the most striking differences between David and Mary though were Mary's understanding of what constituted a temple for God, and how through that comprehension, God's new kingdom was born.

David wanted to build God a temple of cedar and stone. David wanted to contain God in a place that was "other" than in the hearts of the people, where people could visit and pay homage to, but escape drawing God into the very core of their lives to really make a difference in how they lived.

However, Mary seemed to immediately comprehend that by the Holy Spirit God would inhabit her very being, and usher into the whole world, the capacity for God to inhabit everyone's very being. God would not be set apart in a building, but rather God would inhabit the souls of each person, that place that God alone has access, where heaven and earth meet, yet the place that humankind is invited to live out of, and into the world. Mary understood her body was the temple for God, not made of stone and cedar, but made of heart and love.

In Morning Prayer, we pray to the God in whom we live and move and have our being. This is the radical news Mary understood In Gabriel's message. God is beyond us, but also within us.

Unlike David, Mary also understood who was the leader and who is the follower in her relationship with God, through Gabriel, invited Mary into something brand new. It was not an opportunity she could have created on her own. It was not a possibility that she could have conceived of. It was not an outcome that she could have understood the importance of. God did that work. She said yes. And in her "yes" she set the word Advent as the root of the word Adventure.

I can't believe there is no one else in history who has ever been more amazed at what God has asked of them than Mary; although I also believe each of us is asked something from God which would amaze and delight and scare us a bit.

Mary was given something exceptional to do, a unique role to play in our salvation story ~ and yet to hold her as an exception, as someone asked of something we could never be asked to do, is to put God back into that temple, which is outside ourselves. Each of us is asked to say yes to God in a very specific and unique way to us.

It's interesting to me - for to me, this is what stewardship is all about. It's about realizing God is always out there, ahead of us, planning our part of God's history with God's people, inviting us, prodding us, diverting us from distractions, and offering all love and grace. All that is asked of us is to respond as Mary did - with a simple "yes". Not because it's our duty, or because we think we can earn our own salvation, but because it's our joy: to respond to the God of love, with love.

Our reality is that the God is always ahead of us – is always a God of surprises.

As Luke Timothy Johnson, a New Testament scholar writes, “If faith responds to a living God, then faith is an open ended enterprise, We spend our lives catching up with the work of a God who acts before we do and most often catches us by surprise.

So if we believe, that God is indeed, a living God, in the everyday circumstances of our lives, and God is ahead of us and preparing surprises for us, then how to we prepare our lives to accommodate to be surprised?

It’s a very good Advent question. How are we prepared for God’s surprises that are ahead of us? What time do we set aside to listen for God’s whisper of the unexpected showing up? What readings do we do regularly? What times of reflection do we enter into? What prayers do we say? Some of our practice is in looking backwards to what has happened in the past to see how we are invited, to live into the risen Christ now.

So take a moment to reflect. I’d love for you think about the surprises in your life this past year. Where have there been unexpected joys? What passions and interests have suddenly consumed your life and it’s been good? What urges toward reconciliation have your heart experienced? Who were the new people who just seemed to appear into your lives and forever changed you? What new ideas have you been exploring that you know will make a difference? Where has your heart stretched to be open to say “yes” which you would never have imagined before? All of those are times when God has invited you into new grace through surprise. Just as God did to Mary.

I could easily name many surprises in our parish life this past year, which could only have been under the direction of God, when some things, which I don’t think any of us could have imagined the joy and the comfort or the new possibilities that were opened. and yet they appeared. How have we been ready to embrace them?

Advent.

Adventure.

Adventure with God.

That’s actually what it’s about.

Saying yes, as Mary did to something that God is moving us forward toward.

As we learned from the linkage of our passage from Samuel and Luke today, all things are connected. God’s story is a long one. It includes every part of who we have been, who we are today, and who we are yet to come. It’s one long story. Not separate stories, but one story, with interconnected parts. One that is not over yet.

In both our Old Testament and gospel readings today we hear the phrase, “The Lord is with you”. First, Nathan, the prophet says these reassuring words to King David. Then the

angel Gabriel says these same words to Mary. According to biblical scholarship, this phrase meant in both situations that God is working out God's divine purpose in and through their lives. It's interesting, isn't it, that we begin both parts of our liturgy, the liturgy of the Word and then the liturgy of the Table (or our Eucharistic prayer) with this phrase. The Celebrant says, "The Lord be with you" and the people respond, "And also with you." We are saying to one another, "May God work God's divine purpose in and through your life". This is a powerful statement. It means we are saying to one another, may we be open to hear, may we be open to receive, may we be open to follow, may we be open to live out God's will may we be open to respond to God's purpose in our lives with Mary's words, Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word. Amen.