

Year C, The Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 19, 2021
The Reverend Dr. Brent Was

“And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?”

It is almost here, Christmas. And it might be a white one here in Blue Hill. Can you feel it?

In ways it is harder this year, feeling the season building. Last year was very hard, so many unknowns. Now that vaccines are available more normality might be possible, but the surge in cases right here in Maine is challenging all assumptions. We again face different holiday complications than the usual keeping Uncle Morty out of the eggnog and the cat off of the tree. Now it’s “Who is vaccinated?” “Is it actually safe to fly?” “Walgreens is short on home test kits...” “You mean we can’t sing ‘Joy to the World’ on Christmas Eve?” (OK, I can address that one. Our Christmas Eve hymn will be “Silent Night,” candlelit as we go off into the night. It will be beautiful and just right. For “Joy to the World,” come back Sunday). And there is so much loss and grief and fear. In so many ways COVID is making it hard to get into the spirit.

In other ways, though... For instance, COVID has slowed us all down. That creates more stress for some, and some, like teachers and health care workers, it is anything but slowed down, but for a lot of us we’re home a lot more. And the days are dark and the fire is warm: winter is setting in in Maine. And so long as you are not crushed by loneliness, the quiet of home, especially this time of year, is a place for Advent to flourish. And if we flourish in Advent, that could get us well prepared for the joy of Christmas. It is like how a rigorous Lent leads to a deeper appreciation of Easter. COVID has slowed us down leading up to Christmas, and hopefully the supply chain issues are slowing down our consumption, pushing us to be more creative in expressing our care for others materially. That is good.

There is another way, too, that the state of the world may contribute to a deeper appreciation of Christmas this year. A few months ago I preached on an a prayer from an old Scottish Book of Common Prayer, A Collect in Times of Plague, which we pray every Morning Prayer... in it we petition God to, “...sanctify to us this affliction, that in our sore distress we may turn out hearts unto thee...” This is not something that we would ever seek out, calamity, but when misfortune, or strife, or pandemics strike, an opening to God can very naturally occur. There are

no atheists in fighting holes, right? Perhaps there need not be in pandemics, either. And maybe God can sanctify to us this affliction, that is make it useful for us spiritually.

How could that possibly happen, “sanctifying to us this affliction?” What would that look like? What I am talking about is how to make our faith relevant, how to make it integral to our existence, a lens through which we filter our experience of life. And that can be hard to do. But I think here, this pandemic, the actual sickness and death, all of the fear and loneliness, the disruption of society as a whole and our own lives... it is awful and we can make use of the tragedy.

In our generally privileged lives, sure we still have tragedy and loss and grief and pain, absolutely, but as a whole, most of us in this room have enjoyed comfort, we have not faced existential threat, well not since mutually assured nuclear holocaust was largely taken off the table, but that was an abstract fear. The fear we face now is not abstract. We’ve had six covid deaths in our little county in the past two weeks. We are averaging 27 cases per day in Hancock County, up 95% over the past two weeks. This is real. It is not as it was last year, if you are vaccinated you are likely going to be ok even if you do get infected. I and the vestry continue to think that it is safe *enough* to be gathering, especially since we require vaccines, and masks, and we’re barely singing and the fans are on. And if you don’t feel safe, the Zoom experience is pretty decent. But the fear is real. 800,000 fellow Americans are dead.

All of the fear and loathing, the anxiety, the stress, the virus itself... all terrible. And it is times like this that can really crack us open. We’ve all had our hearts cracked open by grief, now that opening is a common, shared experience. Our common needs are greater right now, spiritually, then they have been in generations. And if there is one thing that God in Christ is reliable for, it is being present in our need; the no atheists in fighting holes thing. We need God more right now. And as always, God, Jesus is waiting right here, waiting for us to ask.

So the needs we have right now may make it easier to seek God out, or maybe not easier, but it might occur to us sooner than in regular times. We need more answers. More reassurance. More faith. Our spiritual search, our seeking out of Jesus Christ has a sense of urgency that the fat times don’t require. That is sanctification to be sure.

Another way this affliction may be sanctified to us has to do with how we relate to God. One of the biggest challenges of the life of faith is connecting our lives, our little lives with our litter stories to the larger stories of God. For a lot of us, our work-a-day lives seem to be bereft of

spiritual meaning or import. It is just living. We are just people living our lives amongst a bunch of other people doing the same. The Bible, though, is full of all of these amazing stories. Abraham heard the voice of God and almost sacrificed his son. Sampson had that miraculous hair. Joshua had his horn. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego survived the furnace; Daniel the lions den, while Lot's wife didn't survive her backwards glance. David's lamp didn't go out. Exodus and its reed baskets, Angels of Death and parting of the Red Sea. Spectacular. For most of us, our lives, in toto, and in particular in relation to God, are generally, if not totally, un-spectacular. That can make it hard to relate to the amazing Biblical stories on a personal level.

I was watching a pretty bad military drama recently, and the wives of some soldiers were lamenting the stress of having a loved one deployed to a combat zone. One of the older, wizened spouses took a younger, angst-y wife aside, "This is human history." By that she meant that countless families have waited while a son, husband, brother were away at war. Now we count mothers and daughters, granddaughters and wives among the combatants. Worries like that have accompanied humanity throughout our existence. It is a common, tragic, yes, and tragically common experience of the human condition: waiting out war at home. Living through a plague is the same. Living through a pestilence is human history happening now, linking us to our ancestors in a very particular way. The realness of shared experience, the experience of living in extraordinary times makes it easier to relate to stories that take place in extraordinary times.

Think of Mary and Elizabeth. It wasn't a time of memorable plague, but it was a terrible time. According to the Jewish-Roman historian Josephus, somewhere near the turn to the Common Era in the town of Sepphoris, just 6 miles from Nazareth, rebels attacked a Roman barracks. The Romans responded by crucifying 2000 people from the surrounding area. They lined the roads with the crosses. Mary must have known people who were crucified. She may have seen the suffering, heard the groans, smelled the death. They were an subjugated people. It was a terrifying time. So many unknowns.

We are living in a hard time, too, a time of a lot of unknowns. And living in a hard time, maybe we can relate better to what was going through Mary's mind, Josephs, or Elizabeth's as she greeted her young cousin. What was on Peter's mind while he mended his nets? Or Paul's on his way to Damascus? Or Stephen when he preached that last time? Maybe God has a bigger place,

maybe the love of Jesus is a bit more needed, therefore a bit more sought out, a bit more noticed in time of greater need.

What strikes me, living in times of great need, at least greater than we as a whole society has known since when, the Depression maybe, is the realness of the Jesus story. The story of His birth and life and death... it is real, very real. It is so very human and it happened in a specific time (when Augustus was Emperor and Quirinius was Governor and Herod was King) in a specific place (between Nazareth and Bethlehem), to two specific people, Mary and Joseph. And they were in trouble, Mary and Joseph. Pregnant in a complicated way, on the road, no money, homeless for a bit at least. Everything about this Nativity story, especially how Luke tells it, emphasizes how real, human, how in time and history the Incarnation of God occurred.

So here's a question to ponder in these days leading up to our celebration of the incarnation of our Lord: was Mary something special before the angel came? Had she been singled out from before creation to be the *Theotokos*, the God-Bearer? Maybe. That is certainly the Roman doctrine. But maybe, maybe her soul magnified the Lord the way it did because God called her. Maybe, maybe God's Angel came to her because she was open to it because in the state that she was in, in the world, the traumatic world that she inhabited opened her to faith, to God, put those ultimate questions in the front of her thoughts, our cracked her heart open in a way that let the light of God pour in and the life of Christ pour out. And maybe that can happen to you, too. (Not miraculous pregnancies, but an opening to the call of God in Christ with the Holy Spirit).

The stories we read in Scripture are very much about ordinary people living in extraordinary times that opened them to the power and love of God.

If you have not read *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* by Barbara Robinson, you should. (For a real treat, listen to the audiobook version read by Elaine Stritch. It's a hoot, a very touching, poignant hoot). It is about a church Christmas pageant that was hijacked by seven horrendous siblings who initially came to church because they heard there were snacks. All of their hijinks and hitting, stealing and intimidation left everyone so shocked that they, the Herdmans, were the only ones to volunteer for any of the key roles: Mary, Joseph, the wisemen and the Angel of the Lord. It was going to be the Worst Christmas pageant ever. But, no spoiler here, it didn't turn out that way. The Herdmans had never heard Bible stories before, they didn't know anything about Jesus, so everything they encountered was brand new, and they brought fresh, if incorrigible eyes to the

story. They were outraged that Herod got away with everything, so they tried to change the play to end with Herod's hanging. They were horrified that the wise men brought such lousy, unhelpful gifts, so they brought the ham they had gotten in the basket from the Ladies' Charitable (and they wouldn't take it back). And Imogene, the oldest, who played Mary, she had a black eye, not an uncommon thing for a Herdman, but this one wasn't from a fist, but because she walked into a door because she was so lost in thought thinking about that poor family. (She knew about being poor). And thinking about the wonder and the mystery that happened in lives she knew a thing or two about. The narrator ends the story, saying:

But as far as I'm concerned, Mary is always going to be Imogene Herdman-sort of nervous and bewildered, but ready to clobber anyone who laid a hand on her baby. And the Wise Men are always going to be Leroy and his brothers, bearing ham.

When we came out of the church that night it was cold and clear, with crunchy snow underfoot and bright, bright stars overhead. And I thought about the Angel of the Lord-Gladys, with her skinny legs and her dirty sneakers sticking out from under her robe, yelling at all of us, everywhere:

"Hey! Unto you a child is born!"

Yes He was. And that happened in very ordinary lives, living in very extraordinary times, and we celebrate that miracle again on Saturday. I hope you are ready. It's almost here. AMEN