

*The Fourth Sunday of Advent
Year B, RCL Lectionary*

December 21st, 2008

*Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California*

*Ready or Not
The Rev. Richard E. Helmer*

As we prepare to cross the threshold from the end of Advent and into Christmastide, we are faced with the juxtaposition of our anxious preparations – our restive waiting – with the great and ancient beauty of today’s readings and carols.

It’s a handful of days to Christmas, and are you ready? Sure, the shopping – such as it might be this year – is done or almost done, the home nearly prepared, but there are still the family dynamics that might be coming to town – or that you’re traveling to meet. There are still the internal struggles with the perennial anxieties and old hurts. Contrasted with these mixed feelings in our hearts are the joyous messages we hear this day. Ready or not, Christmas is coming.

We are left open and vulnerable this time of year, ready or not, just like Mary in today’s Gospel reading. We are confronted by angels we sing about who tell us we will carry, if we agree, God’s new life for the world. And those of us who dare to say yes as Mary did, might do it with more than a little fear and trembling – especially at this time when so much around us seems to be in peril. Mary, like us, must have felt conflicted at some level. Her world, like ours, was radically and unpredictably altered. . . for good.

Any of us who are parents or who have been near them as they welcome new human life into their home – these little ones – whether by birth or adoption we call our flesh and blood, our children, though they are truly not our own. . . any of us who welcome them with all of their fragility and vulnerability remember that at that moment, the whole wide world disappears, and so do so many of our ambitions, treasured conflicts, and selfish desires.

In talking with two families this week preparing for baptism, I was reminded of the powerful connection between parents and newborns. The world – even the universe – becomes focused on this precious new life. Or as our deacon, Betsy, said in her sermon last week, there is an undeniable sense that the universe becomes this little child. The anxieties of this world and are cut down to size. And one mother put it this way to me this week: despite all the uncertainties of the future, her child is a “Perspective Bringer.” He is the constant reminder of all that truly matters in a world along with our lives and futures on edge.

This, it seems to me, is what we need in a Savior right now – along with all the other accolades: “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, . . . Prince of Peace.” We need a “Perspective Bringer” –

One who reminds us who we truly are and where we are truly headed, far beyond the fears and occupations of what the world calls our lives. Much more than those, I would say. In the story we tell each year and sing carols about is the universe – all of creation – gathered up together in this fragile child promised to a peasant in ancient Nazareth, born in a manger far from the beaten tracks of civilized and powerful company.

The Christian reverence for Mary might be explained in the powerful way her humanity relates with ours as she is graced with a divine mission to carry New Life. And this New Life is not only for herself or her family, not even only for her people. . . but for the whole world. And she accepts that grace knowing, as all parents-to-be know, that her life will never again be her own.

Joseph must accept the same reality from a different place, as his honor is laid open to the gossips and rumor-mills of Nazareth. Mary conceives without his help – more than enough to justify, in his culture, breaking off the engagement. But then, like all good husbands in the truest sense of the word, he agrees to stand by and support the new life that is about to unfold and upend the world. Joseph, while living in an avowedly patriarchal society, sets aside his claims as patriarch, as center of the household. He must accept that he is not even mentioned when Gabriel visits Mary. Ready or not, the perspective bringer is coming. And, in Luke's Gospel at least, he and Zechariah are both moved into the background as Elizabeth and Mary and John and Jesus become the focus of the God's Advent in their midst – the center of the Holy Family.

This is the new perspective the Christ child is bringing to us in these final days of Advent and as we turn our eyes to the promised light of Christmas. It is one where, like new parents, we discover even our most carefully managed plans are unraveled, and all the great anxieties we have borne through Advent fall away with our plans. We are emptied, each of us, to make room for Christ at once fragile and tiny as a baby and great and cosmic as our widest imaginings.

If we think truly about what a new baby means, we might begin to understand this profound theological truth even in our twenty-first century terms. The new life knit together in the womb is the culmination of a great cosmic dance over billions of years, of DNA made of star dust, the coming together of genetic heritage dating back countless generations. The promise the angel brings to Mary is that God has entered this cosmic reality and changed it forever, has penetrated human life and each of our lives right down to the cellular level and transformed its destiny, has become the trajectory of the human family. The hopeless have hope. The voiceless have voices. The powerless are empowered.

It's at this time of year as we circle the seasons that we come back to this kernel of our faith and the radical message and new perspective it brings us. No matter how bad the economy gets, no matter what challenges the transient world will throw our way, no matter what family dynamics play out this year, no matter where our steps and missteps have taken us, we belong to God now. In the water and the bread and the wine, we become part of this great family forming in the wombs of Elizabeth and Mary, in the households watched over with awe by Zechariah and Joseph. And we belong to one another because we belong to Christ and eternity. Ready or not, we are the holy family, recounting our shared ancestral story, and through it carrying the new life of the Spirit to all who await it.