

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

December 20, 2020

IV Advent, Luke 1:26-38

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. *Amen.*

Early on a Sunday morning fourteen years ago, I stood outside the Operating Room doors at Women’s and Children’s Hospital in Lafayette, Louisiana. Dressed in blue, paper scrubs, I looked down at my feet, toed the line made by the floor’s tiling, and waited. Nervous, I focused on simple actions: breathing, and shifting my weight from one foot to the other.

The night before, Missy and I splurged on a babysitterⁱ to take advantage of a gift card we had received for a favorite restaurant. After supper, I felt that happiest sort of full – eating more than I should have, but managing to set down my fork before feeling ill – and we headed home with leftovers that would make for one of planet earth’s great lunches.

After paying the sitter, we checked on our sleeping toddler and readied for bed. Then the contractions started.

“I think they’re just Braxton Hicks,” Missy supposed, referring to the second- and third-trimester events that do not indicate imminent birth. “I feel too good for this to be labor,” she explained.

“Maybe it was the crawfish etouffee,”ⁱⁱ we laughed.

Nonetheless, we decided I would time the contractions, and, to our surprise, they arrived steadily every three minutes, almost down to the second. Debating what to do but still not suspecting anything dramatic, we compromised on my calling the Labor and Delivery hotline while Missy brushed her teeth. I described to the charge nurse our evening and what was happening, probably lingering too long on my descriptions of supper.

“Mr. Allen, is your wife available?” the nurse asked me.

“Of course,” I replied, and handed the corded phone to Missy.

“Mrs. Allen?” I could hear the nurse’s voice on the receiver.

“This is she,” Missy replied.

“Mrs. Allen, I believe you are having a baby. I’m going to need you to pack a bag and come see me at the hospital.”

In the first chapter, the Gospel of Luke establishes its setting “In the days of King Herod,” and, before all else, tells of Zechariah and Elizabeth. This couple was “righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children ... and both were getting on in years.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Following this introduction, Zechariah encounters an angel while serving the temple in his role as a priest. “When Zechariah saw [the angel,] he was terrified, and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid ... 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 ... even before birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit.’”^{iv}

When Zechariah’s fear turns to incredulity, the angel responds: “I am Gabriel ... I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, you will become mute ... until the day these things occur,” and, indeed, when Zechariah left the temple he could not speak.^v

Yet, as promised, “After those days ... Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, ‘This is what the Lord has done for me.’”^{vi}

Then, as this morning’s lesson begins, in the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, the angel Gabriel visits Elizabeth’s cousin, Mary, announcing, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”^{vii} And sensing Mary’s anxiety, Gabriel reassures the young woman, as he had reassured Zechariah: “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.”^{viii}

As the angel had promised of John’s “spirit and power,” Gabriel promises that Mary’s son, “will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.”^{ix}

Mary wonders how this might be for her and her betrothed, and the angel explains: “The Holy Spirit[,] the power of the Most High[,] will overshadow you; [and,] therefore[,] the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God ... for nothing will be impossible with God.”^x

Despite the mystery of Gabriel’s promises, Mary faithfully consents, “Here am I the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”^{xi}

Back in Lafayette, the Saint Barnabas Senior Warden lived around the corner from the rectory, and I called her as Missy tidied the bag she had readied for this moment. Ringing as I was at 10:30 on a Saturday night with Missy nearly eight months pregnant, I still remember the happy, hopeful, curious tone of her “Hello?!” when she recognized our number.

“Well, I think this is it!” I exclaimed, and, without a blink of hesitation, Mary Catherine came to stay with Michael while we hurried to the hospital.

Despite my usual preparedness, I arrived to the Labor and Delivery ward wearing a faded pair of Umbros I bought before summer camp in 1991; a stained t-shirt I'd long used to work on my car; and worn-out, slip-on house shoes. I did not have socks, much less a toothbrush. I carried my cell phone, wallet, and car keys in the back pocket of the elastic shorts, and they weighed my britches cattywampusly underneath the hospital clothes.

I could see into the hallway of the O.R. through square windows in the doors, and I watched doctors and nurses and staff cross back-and-forth and back again, in and out of the room where I knew my wife was waiting for me, waiting on a child we had not yet met.

Waiting on this child had come and gone so quickly, it seemed to me. The first months took forever, but the last weeks were gone before I knew it. Feeling philosophical about such oddities of time, I had leaned over to Missy on the ride to the hospital and said, "You know, this pregnancy has gone so fast – don't you think?" Missy, holding with both hands the basketball underneath her inflatable shirt, looked at me and quickly clarified: "No."

And after an excited and sleepless night, at 6:49 a.m, doctors set a six-pound, seven-ounce, baby girl into my arms, and I wept. She cried, too. Nurses weighed and washed her, and I carried her to the nursery. As the nurse and I set Mary Virginia Allen into her warming bed, my dad, who had driven in from where he was working in Indiana, knocked wildly on the nursery window – just above the sign that announced in bold, red letters "Do Not Knock On Nursery Window." Even the nurse was gracious, and she smiled at him with me.

And so, Lord, have mercy, arrived Ginna – Sweet G, Super G, the Ginna-rator – the little one now so nearly grown.

Traditionally, Advent has focused Christians on Lenten-like themes of penance and preparation: as Lent prepared us for Easter and the empty tomb, Advent prepared us for Christmas and a contrite welcome of the Incarnation. Keeping this season in that spirit, the first three Sunday Gospels directed us to consider the *eschaton* – the second coming of Jesus – and our readying for time's fulfillment.

In recent generations, however, the focus of the season has turned to the fidelity of Mary, with her pregnancy, rather than the *eschaton*, shaping our prayers. To mark these emerging devotions, the colors of Advent have also changed, from the bruises of Lent's purple, to the heavens of Mary's blue, drawing our attention to the sky where the star will soon guide shepherds to an infant's humble bedside.

As we now reach the fourth and final week of Advent, this Sunday's Gospel presents pregnancy as our trajectory, in metaphor and in fact. And, though we – righteously – tell this story to emphasize hope and expectancy, love and constancy, the characters in the pregnancy narratives first experience fear, *even terror*, before they experience joy.^{xii}

Of course, the sudden appearance of Gabriel might have startled Zechariah, but, ultimately, the *angel* does not frighten the priest. For Zechariah, Gabriel's *promise* terrifies him – quite literally, terrifies him beyond words. Not that the angel brought bad news: as Gabriel references,

Zechariah and Elizabeth had continued to pray for a child long after that seemed possible, much less likely. No, Zechariah understood that before Gabriel's promise would be good, it would be soul-testing, for, wise as he was, he realized the prospect imperiled his heart, rekindling in such a full and vulnerable way his deepest, most intimate hope. He would be left *exposed*, and should Gabriel's promise prove empty, he knew that he would face nothing less than desolation.

Missy and I had been married some years before Michael was born, and we had known, in our modest way, the longing of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Those griefs left enduring marks on us, ensuring we would not approach any pregnancy blithely. Even so, on the day of Ginna's birth I remained neither as wise nor as ready as the high priest, for the utter vulnerability commanded by a love so great overwhelmed me. Though I had experienced that vulnerability before when her brother was born two years earlier, some self-protective vein in my soul had shielded my heart from the memory of its terrifying force and intensity, the complete exposure that this hope's fulfillment would necessarily uncover in me for that moment, and in every moment – waking and sleeping – since.

Let us not, then, underestimate Mary's fidelity: while she had not endured the years of waiting that her cousin had suffered ... and while she had not accrued the wisdom to reckon completely what consent would require of her ... the "expectancy" with which we define Advent was not for her the cuddly, idealized experience packaged in maternity gift subscriptions. Beyond the scandal and the loss of that life with Joseph she may have dreamt, this pregnancy dared her deepest hopes and commanded all the love in her heart ... *Mary's pregnancy dared her deepest hopes and commanded all the love in her heart.* And once she opened herself to its possibility, every cell in her body would change, and no nook of her soul would be spared by the child God was calling her to carry and deliver, to raise and, when the time came, give to the world. Despite these gravest perils, Mary gives herself to God's hope and trusts in God's love.

This year has been so long. And we are so weary of it all: the sickness and the worry, the fears and the constraints, the loneliness and the loss. So many times we have hoped, only to have our hopes dashed by a new strain, a new surge, a new horror. To guard our hearts, we have stopped expecting altogether, and we have given ourselves to empty waiting – waiting for a vaccine, waiting for some normalcy to return – before we again expose our hearts to hope.

In this Advent, the stories of Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, powerfully acknowledge our fear, and ask us to hope as they hoped and to love as they loved – to understand the risks, and to hope that daringly, to love that deeply ... trusting that as God was with them, so, too, God will be with us.

Daring such hope and love with you,
I pray in the name of the coming infant King
and Mary, his mother;
Amen.

ⁱ Members of the Saint Barnabas, Camille and her family lived two doors down from the parish's rectory. Camille's mom was a neonatal nurse, and, as a team, they were among the great gifts of those years for Missy, Michael, Ginna (once arrived), and me. A long time and many miles have now passed since then, but she and they remain some of our most treasured humans!

ⁱⁱ Served over three blackened catfish filets, all on a bed of rice, with two pistolettes to sop up the grizzle. Lord, have mercy.

ⁱⁱⁱ Luke 1:5-7.

^{iv} Luke 1:12-15.

^v Luke 1:19-20.

^{vi} Luke 1:24-25.

^{vii} Luke 1:28.

^{viii} Luke 1:29-31.

^{ix} Luke 1:17,32.

^x Luke 1:35,37.

^{xi} Luke 1:38.

^{xii} The Church's offering of pregnancy as a biblical narrative, a seasonal theme, or a sermon illustration delivers difficult pastoral challenges. In the American Church, pregnancy and children can conjure heteronormative images of "the nuclear family" that have been weaponized to wound any who would defy the "normalcy" that the powerful self-interestedly define. Lifting pregnancy in our worship can also surface tendernesses around gender, sexual orientation, race, age, and class, and, for any who have experienced fertility difficulties, the loss of a child in pregnancy, or the death of a child at any age, these narratives, themes, and illustrations, can lay grief, upon grief, upon grief.

God does not set child-bearing as the standard or ultimate expression of faithful living. Yet, in no small measure, the culture subjecting Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, and Joseph did. Thus, in those days and in those places, a miraculous or unexpected pregnancy could express the depth of God's love and the scope of God's agency with especially poignant, motivating power. As inheritors – and, too often, uncritical ambassadors – of those injurious assumptions, liturgical leaders must endeavor care and dig beneath any conveniently simple value of "expectancy." No single sermon can meaningfully address all these complexities, and, yet, every sermon must meaningfully address the fact of them. As one such text, I intended to point us toward the imperiling love beneath the biblical events and the story of my daughter's birth, assuming none of the three pregnancies as normative or idealized.