

**“Responding to the Season” – Rev. Jennifer Adams**  
**Advent 4C – December 20, 2009**

Three weeks ago now we started the season of Advent with a reading from the gospel of Luke that said this, “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars and on the earth distress among nations . . . People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken!” Remember that? We heard at that point that when Christ comes again, life as we know it will be upset completely, changed forever, upturned, rearranged, shaken up, and unsettled. And so I said that makes Advent the most courageous season of the year and I asked you if you really wanted to go through with it, if you really wanted to keep lighting candles and counting down until Christmas. And when I asked you that question, you congregation said “Yes! We want to prepare for the coming Christ! . . . Yes we want Jesus to come among us!” Now granted you responded in that subtle Episcopal way that involved at the very most a barely noticeable nod of your head; or you assured me on your way out after the service that you were feeling courageous, brave and up to the challenge that is Advent. But even though your responses were subtle, I can assure you through my pastorally intuitive poll, that an overwhelming majority of you said, “Yes to Advent! Let’s move forward!” And so, here we are, congregation; it’s Advent, week four. And how interesting to see where this season has taken us.

We started with stars shifting and nations distressing; then we spent two weeks with a slightly edgy Baptist out in the wilderness who was shouting about the need for repentance, and now we’re sitting here with Mary who is visiting her cousin, Elizabeth, out in the hill country. BUT instead of guiding us gently toward Christmas Eve as you might expect at this point, Mary is singing about God turning the world upside down! Just listen to her words:

God has looked with favor on his lowly servant and she is blessed. God has shown strength with his arm; and scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

That’s pretty radical stuff, when you listen to what Mary’s really saying. This is not exactly a song of the meek and mild. And so now I’m thinking that all of that YES to Advent was OK a few Sundays ago when we had *weeks* to prepare, but now there’s only *a few days left* and I’m having a little trouble seeing how all of this is going to lead us into a silent night, a holy night when all is calm and all is bright? How is this going to work exactly? Does anyone else have any questions? (You can nod noticeably this time.) Questions? Anyone?

Well, I can assure you that Mary had questions too. And that’s part of what I love about this story. When the angel Gabriel first told Mary what was going to happen, she wondered if he was sure that God had the right person. “Mary was perplexed,” the story says. And then she asked Gabriel how any of this could be? And then she went off (with haste the story says) to visit her cousin Elizabeth probably in an attempt to do some sorting out of all of this good news.

And so part of what I love about this story is that there are questions that float around within it. It is a very holy story, but it's a very human story too. They didn't know either how all of this was going to get them to Christmas. Zechariah, Elizabeth's husband had questions. When he was told by Gabriel that his wife would become pregnant he asked how that could be since they were both so old and Elizabeth was believed to be barren. And if we listen back far enough we hear that many of the prophets had questions too and "Are you sure you have the right person, God?" was one of the most common. And then eventually the prophets usually asked God something along the lines of "How exactly are you going to pull this off?"

The questions about how any of this leads to peace, how any of this will get us to the presence of God aren't new ones. In fact the questions themselves are part of the story, part of the season, part of the adventure that is Advent. If a silent and holy night seems hard to imagine as you look around your life and as you look around the world know that you're not alone in that. A silent night wasn't the only vision running through Mary's head. She had wedding plans to manage, baby things to gather, a growing body to care for and a family to convince of her story. Odds are good that Zechariah hoped for a night when all was calm and all was bright but in the meantime he had two pregnant women living in his home, and a congregation that needed his care. And the prophets, they visioned holy nights and holy days when the world would live in peace but on the way to that place they shouted a lot about how they weren't here yet.

But here's the thing: Despite the questions these people had and despite the reality of their realities, they kept moving forward, their Yes held firm all the way through. "Here am I," Mary said to God, "I don't get it, but let it be with me according to your word." And the prophets too: "I have no idea how you are going to make this work," they admitted, "But, here I am, send me!" From the very beginning of this story, God's coming wasn't something that could be understood or manufactured. Incarnation wasn't something that made sense in their lives or that followed an ordered set of plans. Silent and holy and calm and bright seemed a long shot for everyone involved. But God invited their participation and asked for their trust and promised that eventually all would be well, because nothing is impossible with God. And they believed that promise. And they kept moving forward into the peace that would come as gift.

And so now it's our turn. Can you hear the angel today? "Greetings, favored ones," he says to us. "The Lord is with you. . . Now here's what's going to happen: The Holy Spirit will come upon you and you will bear the Christ."

"How can this be," we ask the angel?

"Doesn't matter. Just trust it," the angel responds. "Are you sure you mean us?" we wonder. The angel then double checks his list of addresses and assures us, "Yes. No doubt about it. . . The Lord is with you."

So, like Mary and Elizabeth and the prophets before them, may we respond to this season right to the end with participation and with trust that all shall be well. May we be alert and watchful as the world is turned upside down and the Prince of Peace comes among us. Comes among us as gift.