

“Pregnant Faith”  
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky  
I Advent – 1 & 2 December 2018  
Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36

Is it just me, or do you find that Gospel reading strange, too? Here we are at the start of Advent, and we hear a story about the end of time, just like we did two weeks ago. We’re ready to prepare for the birth of Jesus, his first arrival on Earth, not his second coming. We want to enjoy the thrill of anticipation, the excitement of celebrating Mary’s pregnancy, not “faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world.” Honestly, why can’t this apocalyptic stuff wait? Warnings of dreadful celestial omens would fit in much better with Lent, if you ask me.

I want to hear about the angel Gabriel’s visit with Mary and about Elizabeth’s pregnancy with the boy who would become John the Baptist. I want to hear about how angels came to Joseph in dreams to keep him faithful to Mary despite the dubious circumstances. And we’ll get to those, but in the meantime, this is what we have from our three-year cycle of Sabbath readings. That cycle disciplines us to deal with words we might rather avoid, especially when they feel untimely, out of season. It makes us seek connections that might otherwise remain hidden, and what we discover in this case is that Advent does double-duty.

It’s primarily designed to prepare for us for the birth of Jesus at Christmas. To that end, we need to do what we can to stay in suspense, to share in Mary and Joseph’s journey, pretending that we don’t know how it will end. That’s tough, because this does happen every year, but how many people here have watched a movie more than once? Already knowing the end often helps us notice things in the buildup that we missed the first time, or even the tenth

time we watched it. And if it's a really great story, we might shed a tear at the ending every time we watch it.

But staying in this suspenseful space, where we try to ignore as best we can what we already know, is made doubly tough because in our culture Jesus' birth – to the extent he's even relevant to Christmas anymore – happens sometime between Halloween and Black Friday. Christmas doesn't start on December 25<sup>th</sup>. It ends there, an event that's almost anticlimactic. We need to resist getting swept up in that. We need to honor Advent, and this work of patience offers a witness of hope for a world in desperate need of it.

Advent also serves a second purpose, to awaken and alert us to the fact that little baby Jesus born in the barn is just the first installment in the fulfillment of God's promises. There's much more to come, and it arrives daily through the blessings we receive. When by God's grace our courage overcomes our fear, that's part of the promise being fulfilled, and when our fear overcomes our courage, and we get up the next day to wrestle with our fears again, that's part of the promise, too. When God transforms our anger at injustice and cruelty, and turns that anger into love and merciful action, that's part of the promise being fulfilled. When our faith shakes but holds, and when our faith breaks and is restored, that's part of God's promise, God's purpose, being fulfilled in the here and now.

Yet even in the midst of blessings beyond count, we wait for the fullness of God, the completion of His promise to “execute justice and righteousness in the land.” The blessings we receive prepare and strengthen us for the return of Jesus, the decisive day when the defenseless babe in the manger comes again with “power and great glory.” Only a self-righteous fool or a genuine saint would feel no fear at the prospect of Christ's appearing. Yet for the faithful, there is hope and keen anticipation and at least a twinge of joy.

So Advent is a multi-tasker, handling two things at once, two separate arrivals. We experience those events very differently, but they are more alike than we might imagine. The birth of Jesus and his final return could be viewed as fraternal twins, different yet each from the same womb, both of them the result of a single pregnancy – the firstborn, Jesus, the cause of Christmas along with much else; the second to come will emerge into the world when God pleases. In fact, if we were forced to choose a single image, a single metaphor for Advent in both of its meanings, I cannot think of anything better than pregnancy.

Now, obviously, there are many people here much more expert on pregnancy than me. I cannot begin to fathom what it is like to have a human being growing inside your body. My kidneys have been kicked only from the outside, my lungs and liver squished only by eating too much. But from what I've been told, it seems that the practice of Advent, the practice of faith itself resembles pregnancy more than anything else.

First, being pregnant with an Advent faith is a sacred experience. To have life growing inside you, waiting to enter the world, I literally have no clue, but spiritually, Jesus lives in the hearts of women and men willing to accept his presence, and nurture it, and be nurtured by it. But when Jesus takes up residence, be prepared for some discomfort, because being pregnant with an Advent faith means change. The effects of faith pregnancy, like flesh-and-blood pregnancy, are often double-sided, with both wonder and burden sometimes wrapped up in the same package. Being kicked in the kidney can't be much fun, but your baby is kicking!

Side-effects of faith may include craving the bread and wine of Holy Communion, a strong desire to read the Bible and pray, realignment of our priorities, a hankering to serve others without expectation of return, a tendency to view the world in a new way, to see our sin and need for forgiveness more clearly than before, a proclivity to take risks for the sake of the Gospel that

we would have probably rejected in the past, a generosity that crosses the line into real sacrifice, a powerful urge to show mercy, and a peace that passes all understanding and will lead you deeper into the mystery of God, where you will be totally out of control.

Second, being faith pregnant means giving birth. Again, from a literal standpoint, I have no idea what that's like, and I'm totally OK with that. But from what I've been told, there is fear and joy, and it takes pain to bring new life into the world. Maybe that's why the world will become such a miserable place right before Jesus returns. Maybe it's a natural, necessary precondition for the emergence of new life.

We need to prepare and be ready for that. Being a Christian isn't all sweetness and light. If it was, everybody would do it. Birthing Jesus takes time, can be scary and sometimes cause pain. Yet birthing Jesus also brings great joy, and the worthiness of that hard work is beyond dispute when we look at the result – faith and hope and peace and love and mercy unleashed for salvation, a word that literally means “healing.”

So in this Advent time, let's not get ahead of ourselves, because when you're pregnant, you can't. Let's look at the ultrasound and see that Advent has fraternal twins, and let's love them both equally. Abide in Advent. Anticipate with joy, and be patient and eager in waiting for both the baby and the return of the King. Amen.

