

*The Fourth Sunday of Advent
Revised Common Lectionary, Year C*

December 24th, 2006

*Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California*

Ready Yet?

by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer, Rector

Stepping out for lunch this past Friday and walking the streets of Mill Valley, I was struck by a change of mood. Maybe it was the sunshine after several days of rain. Maybe it was the fact that at long last, finals were over for many students in town. Maybe it was the last day of work, or an extra day off right before Christmas.

Whatever it was, people seemed more cheerful. I even got a few surprising hello's. Most people in Mill Valley are naturally leery of clergy walking around in collars, but there was the young guy carrying the basketball who wished me a "Happy Holidays," or the people down at Mill Valley Market who shot me an extra smile or two. The air had changed. Christmas was just around the corner and the holiday was about to begin.

Thing is, was anybody really ready? There were others I knew about who were less excited and happy, whether it was chasing down the last few gifts, worrying about next year, or dealing with all the accumulated memories that the holidays bring – some happy, some hard. We all have those.

Things is, is anybody really ready?

I'm sure not. And here we are, December 24th. It's a little bit adding insult to injury that it falls on a Sunday this year. Advent feels cut a few days short. There are 101 things to do before this evening comes, and I feel under-prepared. Still many cards to write, the office work is behind, the Christmas sermon is barely under way. My guess is, many of you are in a similar situation. Oh, I hope you don't have Christmas sermons sitting on your desk. But I imagine there a few things that didn't get done the past several weeks, and a few regrets.

Advent was *supposed* to be about getting ready, and most of us probably didn't get down our twice-checked list before we hit today.

John the Baptist has been exhorting us the past couple of weeks to prepare the Way of the Lord, to get ready for the One with the winnowing fork who will come to sort out the grain. Weren't we supposed to be making sure all the ways were straight and all the mountains laid low and the valleys raised up?

The grace of our lives given by God is like the grace of Mary and Elizabeth. They weren't ready, either. If you remember the story, the Angel Gabriel shows up one day unexpectedly to

announce Mary will conceive and bear a most unordinary child. It might be great news to a young, first-century girl, but God had apparently neglected the simple fact that Mary was unwed, and so her untimely pregnancy would pose a pretty major problem for both her and Joseph – especially in a small town where such things cannot be hidden.

Elizabeth and Zechariah were too old to bear children, and Zechariah was simply unwilling to accept the message that they were about to bear a son. In the first chapter of Luke, the angel who brings the news responds to Zechariah's doubts by making him mute as a sign to him and all who know him, and so he remains until John's birth. Now I can't suppose Zechariah was ready for *that*.

And yet, Mary and Elizabeth are excited. Mary rushes to see her older relative, perhaps for comfort, perhaps to get away from the gossip for awhile. Elizabeth greets her with an almost uncanny greeting, proclaiming the blessing that is growing Mary's womb. They inspire each other to rejoice, and the author of Luke delivers us poetry through Mary's jubilation – verse we've dared repeat in various forms all through Advent.

Getting to the end of Advent is rather like Mary's coming to the end of her pregnancy. Not everything is ready, not everything is prepared. The birth of promise, hope, and love in our midst does not wait on our schedules. It does not make sure the house is in order or tidy before grace begins. God does not wait for the sunshine or the rain, or for us to be in a particular frame of mind before sending us Christ.

The world was still messed up when Jesus arrived. It was still messy while John the Baptist, all grown up, was calling for repentance – metanoia in the wilderness. It was still a bewildering and dangerous place when Jesus began his ministry. And it's still messy 2,000 years later as we get ready to celebrate another Christmas – somewhat or very ill-prepared at home. . . and ill-prepared abroad to be sure.

We are not ready.

God is.

And that's Good News.

So, wherever you are these last few hours of Advent is where you will be as we celebrate the birth of the Messiah and we wish each other the light, grace, and merriment of Christmas. Don't believe you need to hide what's undone. God knows it. Don't think you need to hide the anxieties, frustrations, and the hard feelings. Christmas is an opportunity to love each other through those. That's why God gives us each other.

The thing is this: preparing the way of the Lord is something we can only aspire to, but never really achieve. Elizabeth reminds us of this in today's gospel reading:

“Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

The fulfillment is not ours to make. It is God's. God has promised. We do our best to meet that promise in faith. The grace is that God meets us. . .and more than halfway. . .

With a child that inspires other children to leap in wombs. With a child fragile as we are all fragile. . . fragile, yet Divine, so we may know God's love for us in all our vulnerability. Precious and down-to-earth. As down-to-earth as a mother who can barely withhold her rejoicing. As concerned as a mother who knows not what tomorrow will bring for her family.

In the next several hours as you prepare to greet Christmas, allow yourself to reflect on what is undone, the anxieties that hang around, the mix of joy and sadness in your heart and offer all of it to God. All of it: the good, the bad, and the ugly.

For in this child that is coming is not just hope for the world, but redemption – an out-and-out embracing of everything that is human, living and dead. The cross that stands waiting for this child embraces all our light and all our darkness and draws it into God's heart for rebirth. . .resurrection. Life for a new day, and transformation that will complete the work faith has only been able to glimpse. It will turn the world. . .our world. . .upside down, shattering thrones and lifting up the lowly, emptying the rich and raising up the poor. It is Christ who will complete the leveling of the valleys and bringing down the mountains. It is Christ who will winnow us into wholeness, and set us free.

Amen.