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Good morning,

Welcome to this second Sunday of Advent. Right in the middle of our time of waiting. Our time of anticipation, and candles, and watchfulness. I don't know about all of you but for me this time of watchfulness feels a lot more like a flurry of rushing to events, celebrations, baking, gift shopping & wrapping, and up until this year a caffeinated induced panic of studying and essay writing. Waiting and Watchfulness were not characteristics that described my race to the Christmas season. I don't think I'm alone, I'm curious to know if there are people out there that find this period to be filled with the space of watchfulness. My guess is there would be few, though if you are among them know I would welcome some tips.

Growing up I didn't really understand how the way people talked about advent connects with my lived experience of it. Whenever I asked for further explanation the answers seemed to bring the concept of advent even further from reality rather than allowing me in: Images of calm watchfulness, and gazing out at what is yet to come. I could relate to none of this. And still in this dissonance caused by the busyness of our consumer society the peace of advent always manage to slip into the holiday season despite our contrary rhythms. The moment taken to watch the advent candle being lit, or the 5 seconds spent pausing to smell cookies baking in the oven, or listening to our favourite Christmas tune being sung after having rushed to get a seat at one of the many concerts that week. We get these little moments gifted to us from our senses that invite us into the spirit of Advent, that mark with joy the lead up to Christmas, right in the midst of the life we find ourselves living.

In today's gospel text we are given the story of Mary's response to a messenger she encounters in the midst of the life she finds herself in. Luke has a distinct narrative of God's work taking place among ordinary people. So it fits the theme that a messenger would be sent to Mary, a young girl engaged to an average-joe carpenter in an insignificant town within the oppressive rule of the Roman Empire. And then in the midst of these standard, ordinary circumstances of life - God enters. Not as an answer to fervent prayer or plea for guidance, but simply because Mary created space in her life for God's presence.

God has a real knack for entering into the things that make up our daily life and giving us new eyes to see the world. And as far as scripture is concerned, Angels are an excellent way of accomplishing just this. These messenger's draw our attention back to God and unfold for us the story of Salvation, for all humanity. They are sent into the particularity of life and invite us to enter the universal story. With the appearance of an angel, a new view of reality enters into the text that leads to a new lived experience of reality. As our understanding changes, our world changes and our engagement with life is transformed.

The accounts of Angels demand a consideration that the natural, unquestioned, default perception of reality is simply relative to the limitations of our own understanding. The lifting up of real or perceived boundaries is intertwined with the appearing of an angel. Gabriel greets Mary with assurances of favour from God, and then proceeds to shatter everything she thought she knew about her future. According to ancient customs, her marriage would have been arranged by her father, she would live at home for a year after the engagement was decided, and then from there Mary would go to the groom's home and have a week of wedding celebration. She was not in a time of waiting for God's leading, she was right in the middle of living out a perfectly acceptable plan. Many of you have probably heard the quote "If you want to make God laugh, tell him about your plans"

If you want to throw a wrench in a plan, a surprise baby is a sure fire way to do it. Nothing says a shift in reality quite like entering into parenthood. But more than that, the staggering announcement is that this baby will be the son of God, born of the Holy Spirit. Mary is told that she is chosen, but what a strange honour. Mary's blessing is to have a child - out of wedlock - who will be executed as a criminal. This kind of cautionary tale would cause anyone to strike 'God's blessing' off of our Christmas lists this holiday season. No thanks, a new book will do just fin.

This Blessing highlights for us that during advent the church is confronted with the reality that this time is not simply the waiting for sweet little baby Jesus, it's a reminder that this baby comes with a sweet little eviction notice from our old, comfortable, sinful ways of this life. God's blessing brings with it hope and the fullness of change, joy, peace, and righteousness. And in embracing that life we have to untie ourselves from our old one.

Today we assume that those who are 'blessed' will receive the things we equate with a good life. But this story has brought with it none of the ideals or goals that so consume our daily striving. This Messenger makes clear that social-acceptance, prosperity, and comfort have never been at the essence of God's Blessing. And yet even so, Mary choses to trust, and to fully step into participating in God's vision for this world. Even with the fear of the unknown. The anticipation of the full expression of God's reign was enough to risk everything, to lean in to an existence filled with the anticipation of advent and the already here but not yet of this kingdom

The favour Mary receives is not for her only, but for the benefit of all people. With an angel God intervenes through individual contacts, partnering to transform the life of humanity as a whole. The presence of the Messenger is a sign that this work involves the life of the faith community - God reaches out to the individual because of God's deep love for all.

What God has begun is a communal project expressed in the body of believers. An invitation presented to all of us. Mary has been chosen in God's plan, but it is still an invitation and not a command. Mary's response is to accept this invitation, responding to this call even at great risk to self and an abandonment of the certainties she previously held secure.

It is easy to overlook another dimension that the advent season brings, that is a season of anticipation or sometimes apprehension for the coming of Christ, the Judge, the one who will set straight the wrong's of this world and bring glory and justice to all. Advent prepares us for the first coming, and sets the stage for the second.

It is with this image that we try to comprehend the message of Malachi. Malachi also speaks of a coming messenger of God. This messenger "is like refiner's fire and like fuller's soap ... he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness." This passage speaks of a coming messenger of God who will accomplish the purification of God's people through judgement.

I think sometimes judgement is too quickly understood as condemnation. But that is not what's highlighted here. Instead Malachi tells how the people of God will be re-shaped into the image that God intends for them, and in doing so equips them in participating in the great joy of the coming reality. The messenger that comes will consume the impurities that plague a person, allowing them to exist free of hinderances of sin. In our surrender we can melt into the intentions and will of God. Allowing this peace to flow across our being like tongues of flame, and readying us for what lies ahead.

To share in God's grace, and align ourselves with the ways of the divine does not set us up for the many 'blessings' that are counted on the ladder of success.

Without eyes to see it can appear to be more of a hinderance than an aid to our daily strivings. And still these messengers bring tidings of blessings, an alternative way of looking at the world, and a way to return back to the heart of God. The greatest blessing is bound up in the fellowship God shares with us, it is not a reward separate from that fellowship. The Messenger of God anticipates experiences of self and reality that are currently inaccessible, but that will come to be.

The future is not an escape, but a completion of what has already begun. Gabriel tells Mary of her cousin's pregnancy as a reassurance of what God can do and what has already been started. It is a reminder to us as the readers that the present is a time for God's activity in this world came long before us, and that we can trust God will bring their mission to fulfillment. These advent texts gain significance because their timing provides a period to reflect on God's activity among us and the invitation given out to the Christian community.

There is an announcement of hope for humankind and participation in that hope. This is a hope firmly based on what God has done in the past and a conviction that God will follow through. It is that trust allows us to respond as Mary did "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." In advent there is a terrible, hopeful, newness about life: terrible because it promises to burn away the old, comfortable, sinful ways, and hopeful still for the very same reasons. In the middle of our perfectly acceptable plans we are invited to respond to God with anticipation of full surrender into God's vision for us and for this world. Today's scripture texts cast a light on the in between days in which we find ourselves, running from one thing to the next, waiting for the coming of Christ. Amen.