

Luke 1:68-79

⁶⁸“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. ⁶⁹He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, ⁷⁰as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, ⁷¹that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. ⁷²Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, ⁷³the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us ⁷⁴that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. ⁷⁶And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, ⁷⁷to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. ⁷⁸By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, ⁷⁹to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

Advent is my favorite time of year—at least my favorite season of the Christian year, and possibly my favorite time of year, period. One of the things that makes Advent so meaningful to me is the way the natural world mirrors our journey toward Christmas. Yes, I know that Jesus probably wasn’t born in December. Yes, I know that Christianity coopted the holiday and many of our traditions from paganism. And still, each year in late fall as the solstice approaches, it feels to me like watching the waning moments of daylight helps me know something about the longing for light to break in—the light of day and the light of God. Each year, as I reflect on the places where the absence of light is felt, I think of the night sky. We can’t always see the sky very well in the city, but I grew up in the country. And when I go there, it is so dark and so quiet and so still. It feels like you can see every star in the sky. You can hear the rhythm of your own breathing and the crunch of your footsteps in completely new ways. You notice things you can’t notice in the light and noise polluted city. It always takes until about this time of year for me to start really noticing the shortened days, even though this has been

going on since June. I know this is a uniquely northern hemisphere reality, more starkly felt the farther north you go. But this is time when the turning of the season starts to wear on many of us, when the cold begins to set in in earnest, when the beauty of the changing leaves has given way to bare limbs that creak and click against each other in the wind, when the short days and long nights make us want to hibernate. So Advent coincides with the longest nights of our year, the waiting and watching and squinting for any sign of light—the last moments of sun on the horizon, the stars in the sky, the twinkle lights that hang on trees and in windows. It is a time when we get to immerse ourselves in the countercultural practice of waiting, watching. Gestating.

One of the most useful gifts of our Advent theme of midwifery is that it puts us in a different position to experience the waiting of advent and the glory of what Christmas might mean. Carols put us with shepherds or magi or even some random kid with a drum. We are often invited to experience the birth or rebirth of Christ as surprised onlookers who get the birth announcement afterward and wander our way to find and gawk at the holy family. The Christmas story is too often saccharine and sterile and not at all in keeping with the rest of what we know about Jesus. And I totally do it, too--I often think of Jesus asleep in the hay and imagine that sweet fresh scent of newly scattered hay on a barn floor and the sweet scent of a baby's clean little head. I don't think of the sights and sounds and smells of the real, hard reality of giving birth. To be a midwife to the Christ child is to journey with the holy family, to know ahead of time what could and will happen, to be already present to the labor pains and the blood and water not in a sterile hospital room but in the muddy dank shelter of a stable. Today's Gospel text is a prophecy spoken by Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, at his

son's naming ceremony. Zechariah was married to Elizabeth, the cousin of Mary the mother of Jesus. Based on the way the text is laid out, this is after Mary had come to stay with Elizabeth and Zechariah but before Mary and Joseph set out for Bethlehem to be registered. Which is to say that, for our Advent purposes, we get to stand with a pregnant Mary who has likely borne witness to Elizabeth's pregnancy and delivery, who is probably completely wide-eyed and terrified to imagine what is about to happen to her. We get to notice the pageantry and promise that preceded Jesus' birth while contrasting it with what we know is coming—the teenage mother-to-be journeying on a donkey, the no vacancy signs, the new parents making do with a feeding trough and strips of cloth.

This position means that we can straddle the already and not-yet of Advent. Prophecy is all about that already and not yet. It's not looking into a crystal ball; it's reading the signs of the times. The Hebrew Prophets stood in the town square and said, this is what I see happening, here's what needs to change, and here is where I see God calling us. We know how the story of Advent ends—the birth, and even the death, and the rebirth of Jesus that mirrors all the wonder of his birth. So Jesus will be born again as he has been so many times, and we will remember his coming, the inbreaking of God's light for a people who were struggling at the hands of an empire. But because we are midwives, we get to both be ready to receive the ancient story and we get to pay attention to what is gestating now, in these chaotic times. We get to be prophetic together. We get to say to each other, here's the thing that doesn't feel quite right to me. What do you see?

This season reflects the longing and anxiety of a people under regime, the hope of a child born to a family and community. Luke is writing at the end of the first century, among a generation of people who are at least two generations removed from the people who actually knew Jesus. In the early days following Jesus's death, the people expected his triumphant return any day. By a couple of generations later, it was clear that they might need to get comfortable with waiting. We, too, live in a culture defined by the impatience of empire, not unlike the Roman empire in which the Jesus movement was born. Our culture is impatient for material success, for social climbing, for all the trappings of capitalism and empire, even as the empire uses the Christian tradition of colonialism to keep people oppressed and prop up the powerful. German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was arrested and killed by the Third Reich for plotting to assassinate Hitler, says this about waiting: "Not everyone can wait: neither the sated nor the satisfied nor those without respect can wait. The only ones who can wait are people who carry restlessness around with them." In the face of the impatient empire, the people of the early Jesus movement were being blamed for the destruction of Jerusalem, who were seen as potential political insurgents and certain political outsiders. No doubt they were restless for the return of Jesus, the restoration of God's justice—and probably it was a bit of a downer to imagine they were the ones they were waiting for. I think we can relate; many of us are impatient, too, or more to the point, we are restless—we can wait, but we can't sit still while we do. We long for a day when leaders can be trusted to have the peoples' best interests at heart, when migrant families are treated with dignity, when we don't have to worry about our safety in schools/places of worship/movie theaters/malls/the grocery store, and when we don't have to worry about whether those who are entrusted to serve and protect will actually serve and protect. And we long for

that day so fervently, so passionately, that we align every molecule of our bodies to look for signs of that dawn breaking, to usher in the dawn of justice, the in-breaking of beloved community.

Over and over again Jesus is set up in the early chapters of Luke as a prophet among prophets, the fulfillment of everything the Hebrew prophets anticipated. Luke is the only gospel with this much detail about the events preceding Jesus' birth, so we can hold that maybe all this happened and maybe it didn't. What is true is that Luke uses the literary device of prophetic songs, in the style of the psalms, to help his readers see the continuity between Hebrew prophetic literature and the miracle of Jesus' coming, and seeing Luke use of prophecy and imagination helps us develop our own prophetic imaginations. John's father Zechariah was a priest, rendered mute by an angel earlier in the gospel. In fact, in the verses just before this passage, he had to write his child's name on a tablet when asked by the priest what John's name would be. Then, suddenly, when he regains his voice, prophecy flows from him like breathing. Adam Hearlson, a worship professor and theologian, suggests there is something here about how his time spent unable to speak made Zechariah's prophecy possible, that maybe when he was silent he was able to listen more, to notice more. Maybe while his son was gestating in the womb, God's words were gestating in his heart. He was able to nurture and refine and call forth his prophetic vision not despite his inability to speak but *because* of it. I can imagine it was a word of comfort for Mary, to have someone say, I see what God is doing in you and through you. I can imagine it was a word of hope for the people bearing witness, the Jewish people living under the persecution of Rome and for Luke's audience, who were experiencing a new wave of persecution as followers of Jesus.

Last week, Laura Ruth mentioned that midwives historically have been raised up from within a community to serve that community. Today's scene sets Zechariah, a prophetic midwife in his own right, firmly inside a family and faith community. Like midwifery, prophecy necessarily requires community. I think part of the gift of Advent is its call to slow down and notice and wait--not in a passive way but in an active way--for what God is doing. Can we practice being still and attuned to the movement of Spirit in our lives, to see what is gestating in us and to bring forth whatever that new thing is? I am asking this on both a personal and collective level. After the election of 2016, when many of us were so afraid, we came together to say, what next? We had a meeting in the parlor in which we took turns saying what our fears were, what we were noticing, and what we'd like to do both as individuals and as a congregation. From that initial gathering, our interest in the possibility of being part of the sanctuary movement arose. Months later, after lots of work across lots of communities, we received a guest. He stayed with us, separated from his family and his work and the life he had created in this country, for fourteen months. And then, in November, the day before the midterm election, he was able to return to his family. There was so much impatience, so much fear, about the election—and so much impatience and fear all along the process—but in the faithfulness of waiting and working, little by little, our words and actions were prophetic. Each time we showed up for a shift, each time we donated to the cause, each time we prayed together for justice and righteousness to be made real for a man and his family, we participated in the prophetic process of midwifing the kin-dom. Bonhoeffer says, “Those who do not know how it feels to struggle anxiously with the deepest questions of

life, of their life, and to patiently look forward with anticipation until the truth is revealed, cannot even dream of the splendor of the moment in which clarity is illuminated for them.” This is the reality of the prophetic work of Advent. This is the reason being midwives of God’s kin-dom is so important.

We sit at the intersection of tradition and prophecy, what has been, what is, and what could be. For those who believed Jesus to be the messiah, the answer to prophecy, their people had waited thousands of years to see that dream realized. For Luke’s community, they had been waiting decades for something they thought would have happened decades ago. So they told and retold the story of how God’s promise broke through in ways no one would have expected. For us, many of us who belong to communities who have experienced marginalization, we have waited decades and centuries for the needle to move, for the hope of liberation to be realized, and in many of our cases, that hope is still not fully realized. But in none of these cases were people sitting idly by, twiddling their thumbs. They were watching, preparing, working to set the conditions in which something new could be born. Each year, I find inside myself is some amount of foreboding and fear that the coming of Christmas won’t do anything. I find myself worried that the days will never get any longer, that the light will not return. I also find moments of willingness, when my heart is content to wait and trust that God is moving and making new ways out of no ways, trusting that the rhythms that have held over time will continue to hold, that the earth will continue to spin. Can we wait even when we are impatient, because sometimes God’s timing is better than our own? Can we notice and name God’s movement in our midst? There are natural rhythms that we

can trust, like the rhythms of gestation and the rhythms of the seasons, like the rhythms of prophetic work no matter how long it takes. This is what we long for, what we work for, the sure knowledge that whether it's a tiny star in the darkest midnight or the blinding winter sun (which is somehow most blinding during rush hour, am I right?!), what is true in nature's rhythms is true in sacred rhythms, too. The light always returns, the darkness never overcomes it. There is always a new thing coming, and our job is to wait, to trust, to hope, and to call forth the love that is born and reborn again and again.