

## Sermon: Preparation / Rose Sunday

Third Sunday in Advent, Dec. 16, 2018

Susan Clinkenbeard

Luke 3:7-18

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages." As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Today is Rose Sunday, the third Sunday in Advent, also known as "Gaudete" Sunday. And Gaudete is the Latin word for rejoice. So happy Joy Sunday.

I would like to share the words of John Paul Lederach, Mennonite theologian and peace-builder, about Advent. He says:

I just hope that today, I am awake enough to notice God breaking unexpectedly within, between, and around us. Being awake is an Advent thing: To notice the mystery that keeps us human, grounded, grateful, and grace filled. In this minute. In this conversation. In this day. In this century.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Taken from "Advent Manifesto: Does My Soul Still Sing?" by John Paul Lederach, *The On Being Project*, December 11, 2018. <https://onbeing.org/blog/advent-manifesto-does-my-soul-still-sing/>

Please will you pray with me: may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts together, be acceptable in your sight, O God, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

This Advent we have been teasing out the theme of midwifing, of learning how to be the ones present and assisting at the birth of something new: in us, in our congregation, in our world. We stand ready as midwives for the birthing of whatever new life and new calling arrives. But it's all a bit mysterious. I don't know about you, but I can feel this sense of looming tension, the feeling of a great gyre turning, a sense of expectation but not knowing what to expect.

Luckily the Nativity story comes around each year, so we get to practice waiting and preparing again. Our scripture is full of parables and warnings about being ready and awaiting the bridegroom, about not falling asleep or being caught off guard. You don't want to be one of those foolish virgins who runs out of lamp oil right at the moment it matters – you want to be one of the wise virgins with her lamp trimmed and burning, but what does that look like? How shall we prepare? How will we know what to do? And will we be up to the task when it comes?

When the baby's coming, we all hope we're going to be in the right place and have the right skills to catch her! I want to propose that we will know how, because the one who gives birth is not doing this alone, and neither are we. We have the tradition, the scripture, the history of women down through the ages who have given birth, and the ancestors. And we have God, so we are never doing this alone.

You know how we fill in the Nativity picture? There is a picture of the Nativity that we know from carols and Christmas cards and now tv specials where the holy family is surrounded by animals, and there is some random kid with a drum, and another child wonders what she can give the Christ Child so she gives a lamb, and all of these details make up a beautiful picture that we attach to the Christmas story. And then you look it up, and none of that stuff is in the Bible. Not even the animals specifically. We know the shepherds came to adore the child, and there were angels, and then later, presumably, the magi. But we presumed to fill in those other details because they seemed reasonable or because someone had to think up a new carol that

would be a best-seller that year. Technically, we don't know if there were the oxen and the ass. Or how many wise men there were. There was no Donkey named Bo.

And now I am going to presume to fill in a detail that, based on what we know of the way the culture was then, I think is reasonable and maybe obvious. I'm going to say that Mary was not alone when she gave birth. Now I know we all assume that Joseph was there helping out, and there were angels hovering around and giving directions and singing, but I think there may very likely have been a local midwife, or various neighbor women, or perhaps an innkeeper's wife.

And I say this because even though Mary and Joseph were travelling far from home, they also lived in community. And it wouldn't have been likely, with all those folks going to be registered and filling the inn, that someone wouldn't have done something to help a woman in labor. Mary, as a young woman living in a rural close-to-the earth community, probably attended every birth of her close female relatives and neighbors as soon as she was old enough to help. Go boil water. Fetch some towels. And so she would have had some idea of what to expect, and she could have expected to be attended when it was her time.

Human beings have always had this wisdom. As much as we have been taught in our own culture to deny our connection with our bodies' sacred wisdom, the truth is that human beings have been giving birth for as long as any of us have been around, when you think about it. The knowledge and skill it takes to birth a child has been passed down from mother, aunt, grandmother to daughter, from parent to child, from midwife to birth-giver. People have known what to do when it was time to assist the birth. These are skills we can learn. We are not alone in this.

If we turn to our scripture today, we see that John the Baptist is a kind of midwife, preparing the way for Jesus' ministry. He is there to urge the people to get ready, to tell them that the messiah is coming. And not surprisingly, they find this mysterious, perhaps exciting, perhaps scary, and they ask him: what should we do?

The crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" Shall we sharpen our weapons for this new savior that is going to deliver us from Empire? Should we beat our pruning hooks into spears, our ploughshares into swords? Should I send the kids to to pee wee league Gladiator School? And John says no. Here's what you do. If you have an extra coat and someone else doesn't have a coat, you give them that coat. And if you have enough food and someone else doesn't have enough food, you share your food with them. Oh. I can do that.

And then the tax collectors, "even the tax collectors" it says, come to John. The tax collectors who are shunned and reviled as the economic colluders with Empire. It's great that you finally had a good harvest this year after struggling so long, because I'm going to take a third of that. Good luck this winter. And the tax collectors came to John and said, teacher, what shall we do. Do we have to make a public apology, cover ourselves in sackcloth and ashes, crawl up the steps of the temple? John says, here's what you do: collect no more than the amount prescribed for you. Oh, I can do that. You see? We have skills, we have practices. Sometimes our preparation is doing the obvious.

The soldiers came to John, the ones feared by the community for being the brutal business end of Empire, and they asked, "and we, what should we do?" And he instructed them: Don't extort people, or threaten them, or make false accusations. And be content with your wages. Get right with yourselves, and your community, and with God. It's do-able. You can do this. You'll notice that John's instructions are all about people's relationships with each other, in community. John was a midwife for the coming of Christ, and this is how he prepared people.

When John Paul Lederach considers that "in the midst of human conflict we have many prophets who speak and few who listen,"<sup>2</sup> he says:

Prophetic listening emerges when people feel held with such a quality of care and patience that as they speak it becomes possible for them to hear

---

<sup>2</sup> Elise Boulding [American Quaker sociologist, mother of the field of Peace and Conflict studies]

themselves, to tap a deeper understanding, to sense how God may be trying to break into their life.

Beloved, obviously I don't know the details of what each of us is called upon to do to birth this new reality into being. I only know that God wouldn't call us without giving us the skills and the spiritual resources to do it. And one of those resources is one another. Mary didn't give birth alone. She had us. And now we are here many years later to call her blessed.

Women give birth all the time, no matter what happens. In times of war, when oppression is at the door, in slavery and bondage, during famine and hunger, at the side of the road, in the back seat of a Greyhound bus rolling down Highway 41. When the time comes, nothing is going to stop that baby. Even though it is inevitable and we cannot say the time or the hour, it is anything but passive. I have a friend who is an elite athlete, and when she delivered her first baby, I asked her, "Maggie, what was childbirth really like?" She said she felt the most powerful she had ever felt in her life. It takes work to bring that child into the world. Likewise, it takes work to make peace. It will take us as much work to make peace as we have spent studying war.

Sometimes I worry about being ready for the moment when I am called upon to midwife the coming of the Kingdom of God. And (if you're like me), the big obvious thing I keep coming back to, the Big Duh, is that God is always present. God is always present right there in the middle, the origin of all that is, our pains, our triumphs, what we're trying to be, what we don't even have to try to be, what we are trying to do, and what we do even without trying. God is the

origin of all this that moves in us, and the end goal at the same time. God is present in the birth of Jesus. God started the whole thing. It was God's idea. God was present at our births and at our mothers' births, and present in our mothers as they birthed us. God is present with the mother who gives birth in the detention camp, and in the hospital down the street. God has been here the whole time. We're never doing this alone. God will be present as we step up to our jobs as midwives, whatever that will be. We are doing it now. We're boiling the water and gathering towels, learning the old wisdom passed down from midwife to midwife and parent to child so that we'll know when the time comes, and we'll recognize it when we see it. Except that the time is now. The time is always now. Because God is always with us, birthing this new moment in **us**. Christ is coming. Christ is with us now. Christ will come again. Christ will keep on coming. Time to catch the baby. Hosanna in the highest, and the lowest, and in the middle, simultaneously. Alleluia. Amen.