

Advent IV, December 24, 2023. Faith Episcopal Church, Poulsbo WA. 2 Samuel 7:1–11, 16. Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26. Romans 16:25–27. Luke 1:26–38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

The Sermon

On Wednesday my friend Lori phoned me from Texas. After the usual back-and-forth about our kids and grandkids, she told me she was having 17 people at her home for Christmas dinner and went to the grocery store and was checking out with a bill for \$234 – mostly last-minute items! I expected she would complain about the rising cost of food. But, no. As she was checking out, a man of a race different from hers stepped in front of her up to the cash register and gave the checker his credit card. "I hope you don't mind if I buy your groceries today," he said to Lori. A sizable piece of Christmas cheer which she'll be talking about for a while. Maybe he was the equivalent of verse 19 in today's psalm, "I have set the crown upon a warrior and have exalted one chosen out of the people." He was the warrior and she was the exalted one. A good day for both of them.

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But it seems odd to me today, the morning of Christmas Eve, that our lessons are about *David* building a house for God and about kingdoms that will endure forever. David did want to build a temple worthy of his Lord, but never got to do it. His son, Solomon, did. About 500 years later, Nebuchadnezzar destroyed it. Generations later, it was rebuilt. Then destroyed again a couple generations after Jesus walked the earth (70 CE) and never rebuilt. Only the Western or “Wailing” wall of prayer remains today in Jerusalem.

Kingdoms do not last either. David’s descendants were exiled, their land laid waste. We’ve seen the fall of the Roman empire which ruled over Israel at the time of Jesus’ birth. Colonial powers, once so mighty, have seen their colonies become independent. Many feel our own democracy to be threatened by divisions and extreme partisanship.

Where do we go on Christmas Eve morning with these thoughts?

Look at a short verse in the Samuel reading, “the Lord will make you a house.” I like that because any house not blessed by the Lord will surely not stand. And rather than us making a house for the Divine, the Divine makes a house for us – a house for our souls.

In Luke’s Gospel the angelic messenger tells Mary that Jesus will be great and that **his** kingdom **will** endure. We probably remember Jesus’ words in the presence of Pontius Pilate, just before his crucifixion, “My kingdom is not of this world.” (John 18:36)

Perhaps our best understanding of houses and kingdoms is in those words. Our eternal house and kingdom are NOT of this world. In today’s Collect we prayed that Jesus “may find in **us** a mansion prepared for himself” – a mansion that the Lord builds in each of us.

Which leads me to the beautiful children’s Christmas verse,

Ah dearest Jesus, holy child Make thee a bed soft, undefiled
Within my heart that it may be A quiet chamber kept for thee.

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The picture on your bulletin insert shows the holy family surrounded by the rubble of war and destruction.

The picture represents Gaza and other places of destruction. No lights, destroyed houses, and certainly not an enduring kingdom. But what **does** endure? The Christ child. The Cosmic Christ. The one whom the Divine Creator sent to show us the way, the truth, the love, the life that endures.

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On the first Sunday of Advent, in Ramallah, a Palestinian town in the central west bank, 17 miles from Bethlehem, eight young people were confirmed. They publicly proclaimed their intentions to continue in the covenant God made with them in their baptisms. And the bishop laid hands of blessing on their heads. Their witness to the love of Jesus Christ is a sign of a living hope in a place not far from a horrible war.¹ No abiding house, no abiding kingdom, but an abiding faith!

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This month I conducted two funerals at a neighboring church with neither a priest nor an interim priest. Some of you have lost loved ones; others are worried about the health of a loved one. Others have your own health issues. Some of you are between jobs, worried about income. Some of you don't have an address. Some of your cars don't run. Some won't get home for Christmas.

In all of these situations we have no choice but to proclaim in the words of the angel Gabriel, the Holy Spirit is among you. This baby named Jesus will be the source of our enduring hope no matter what may befall us.

Father Richard Rohr puts it this way, "...when we speak of Advent or preparing for Christmas, we're not just talking about waiting for the little baby Jesus to be born. That already happened two thousand years ago. In fact, we're welcoming the Universal Christ, the Cosmic Christ, the Christ that is forever being born (incarnating) in the human soul and into history."²

"Mary is the model of the faith to which God calls all of us: *a total and unreserved yes to God's request to be present in and to the world through us.*" (Richard Rohr)

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¹ Presiding Bishop Sani Ibrahim Azar of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land confirmed eight young people at the Lutheran Church of Hope in Ramallah with Rev. Rodney Said.

² Adapted from *An Advent Meditation with Richard Rohr* (Albuquerque, NM: Center for Action and Contemplation, 2017), video. No longer available.

As people of persistent and defiant faith, we see the children of Palestine being confirmed, and we rejoice. We see the efforts of people who seek justice. We see random acts of generosity. We see planned acts of generosity. We watch our Monday volunteers care for our neighbors. We see Christmas lights in our streets. We see piles of good clothing donated to Second Season. Within our families and friendship circles we see happy gift-giving and care. We hear words of forgiveness. We hear Mary's song of love, resistance and hope whispering in our hearts. We receive Jesus into our very selves at the Eucharist. In these glimpses of God's grace, we trust the message that earthly houses and kingdoms are not our security. Our security lies in Jesus, the eternal Christ, Emmanuel, the Word of God come among us, today, tomorrow and always.

Let us find someone this day, this week, this year to come, with whom we can share this hope, these words of love and comfort. Let's be Gabriels, messengers from God with good news. Amen.