

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Advent 4-A; 22 December 2019
St. Thomas', Glassboro – Todd Foster
(rev. 201912211052)

Advent: God comes in Majesty

In nomine...

I. Beginning: History, Mystery, and Majesty

The first couple Sundays of Advent we spoke about what Advent means, and how we are living into the reality that in Advent God is coming to us in history, in mystery, and in majesty.

On Advent 1 we spoke of God coming in history, both in the Nativity of Jesus Christ, and in the second coming that we anticipate someday in the future. God comes also into our own histories, into the realities and all the messy details of our own lives. God is not *just* a historical figure and God is not *just* a religious or theological figure. God is present and active in your life and mine, right in the midst of everything pedestrian, ugly, heart-breaking and embarrassing. In Advent God comes in history.

On Advent 2 we spoke of God coming in mystery. The mystery is the contrast we find between the Bible's promise of a peaceable kingdom, of a paradise in which God reigns, and the harsh realities of life in the meantime. We talked about how God, for God's own reasons, often doesn't seem to just "fix" things the way we would like God to do. Evil still exists, we still hurt, we still witness tragedy and wrong-doing all around us. We live in a miasma of war, corporations more powerful than elected governments, lies and fake news. God chooses, as God comes in mystery, not to "fix" everything but instead to be present with us in the mystery of suffering and death, even death on a cross. And so as Christians we gather to worship specifically to encounter God in the midst of our challenging lives and to acknowledge and actively receive God's presence with us.

Here at Advent 4 I want to talk about God coming in majesty. God's majesty is surprising because it is different from every other idea we've had about majesty. It's a majesty we weren't looking for. And it's all the more powerful, more majestic, because of it.

II. Middle: Tension: destabilizing

In our first reading, King Ahaz is trembling before the threatened onslaught of two other kings who are planning to attack him. Ahaz has given up looking for God to save him. Instead, Ahaz has reached out to the king of Assyria to be his ally (and Ahaz thereby committed himself to serving that king). All the ugliness of international politics, driven by the egos of men, is on display. So God sends a messenger, the prophet Isaiah, to say to Ahaz, "Forget about Assyria: God has your back." But Ahaz isn't looking for God. Ahaz is not ready to encounter God. Instead Ahaz has already committed to this *new* alliance he is forging with a *new* lord. So Ahaz hides his real motives behind traditional religious piety, trying to put off God's promise by refusing to ask for a sign.

In our Gospel reading, we have a story with some similar themes. This time Jerusalem is not just being threatened, but has already been conquered by a foreign nation. God comes to offer a kind of salvation the people aren't even looking for. It's something that transcends, is bigger than, mere international politics. God came to Mary in the Annunciation, the announcement that she would be the mother of Jesus. You may remember that Mary wasn't actually looking to get pregnant while engaged to another man. She pushed back at first, not recognizing this crazy new thing God was doing in her life. Today we read that Joseph wasn't really looking for a pregnant fiancé that *he* hadn't had sex with. He pushes back. Both Mary and Joseph were looking for God, but were so shocked by the way God approached them that they did not recognize God at first.

For Ahaz, Joseph, and Mary, all three, the sign of God's coming was the birth of a vulnerable little baby. *This* was God's revelation in majesty. In popular culture, we think of the voice of God as a booming, disembodied voice, always male, coming from the sky. But for Ahaz, Mary, and Joseph, the coming of God in majesty was known in a little baby with dirty diapers, spitting up, and possibly colic. We can spend a whole season, like Advent, preparing ourselves for the coming of God, and the question still remains: will we recognize God when God comes?

III. End: Now / not yet; Because God... therefore...

In Vestry this week, we were discussing the words of Jesus at the last supper where he says, “I am the vine and you are the branches.” We talked about staying rooted in Jesus, and how that rootedness will inevitably bear fruit through us, ready or not. Kind of like Mary.

One of the hardest things for me to remember about life as a Christian is that it’s not something I can accomplish on my own. As Ahaz, Mary, and Joseph show me, God’s coming in majesty and doing something life-changing is often going to be something that I have great difficulty recognizing or even imagining. God is that much bigger than me, and God’s ways are that much higher than mine!

That’s why the work we do in church, the attention we pay to our private devotional practices outside of church, are not about appealing to God or trying to earn God’s favor. Jesus died on a cross 2000 years ago in a permanent, irrevocable proclamation of God’s grace for you. Instead, we do our religious thing in an effort to be ready to *recognize* God’s coming in majesty. We gather together and encourage one another and point one another to the little hints and foreshadowings, the beginnings of recognition of God coming in majesty. We worship and proclaim and hear Holy Scripture in an effort to acclimate ourselves to the ways of God, to begin to grasp in the deepest places of our hearts the patterns of God’s activity so that maybe, just maybe, when God comes in majesty in your life or mine, we might not wholly reject God like Ahaz did but be ready to say with Mary, “Let it be unto me as you have said.” Or like Joseph, to ignore the scandal and the outrage of our neighbors who just don’t understand why we would live according to a pattern so foreign to what is natural to us, and to show love to that which the world would scorn as an unfaithful lover but God sees as the *theotokos*, the very bearer of God.

In Advent, God comes in history, mystery, and majesty. The coming of God in majesty in our lives is no simple or easy thing. I dare say it is not something most of us are likely even to recognize at first glance. God is other, and the things we get so wrapped up in, politics or culture or religion, are unlikely to be the things that matter to God in the least – except in how those things help us to convey our love and concern for one another and for the dignity of every human being. We are powerless to receive God on our own. Thanks be to God, God doesn’t require a bassinet with Consumer Product Safety Commission-regulation bedding: any old feeding trough will do. God comes in majesty, in ways that we weren’t looking for, in ways that

we weren't really ready for, in ways far more powerful than we are even capable of imagining. But even as we open our hands and our hearts in the Eucharist today, God comes in majesty, and to the degree that we can manage not to reject God outright, our lives are being forever changed. FIN