

I. Advanced Organizer

- A. Good morning! **Welcome to our fourth and final Sunday in Advent.** We are nearing the end of this traditional season that much of the church uses to enter into a time of waiting and expectation before the celebration of Christmas. Our Christmas Eve service, when we'll fully enter the Christmas story, is drawing close.
- B. This year, **we've been calling our series, "The journey to joy"**, recognizing that the joy that is to be found at the heart of the Christmas story isn't something we arrive at overnight, particularly after the year we've had. We need to move towards it. **We need to travel a bit emotionally, mentally, spiritually.**
1. Our travels thus far have included some different steps along the way. The first Sunday, I encouraged us to **"Look Up"**, recognizing that the Advent journey often begins from the place of lament, but as we invite God into that space we enact the hope that our suffering is not in vain, but that it matters to the divine heart. **Katie invited us the next week to "Listen Out"** - listen to where Christ is proclaimed in the places of wilderness in our lives, just as he was proclaimed in his day first by John the Baptist out in the wilderness. Last Sunday, Jeanne encouraged us to **"look back"**, allowing remembrance to help us connect with joy even when much of what we are holding currently feels like despair. And this week, we take a final leg in the journey, as we draw closer to the celebration of Christ's coming.
 2. **Our lectionary texts today are both narratives: stories from two different parts of the Bible.** One of them is set centuries before the coming of Jesus, during a period that in many ways was the zenith of Israel's political life, after King David has taken the throne, vanquished Israel's enemies through military victory, established a capital city in Jerusalem, and brought the most sacred religious artifact, the ark of the covenant, representing God's own presence, to his new capital in the midst of an epic parade. The second story takes place centuries later in a very different setting, and as you'll see, is our entry point to all that advent has been leading us to. So let's hear these two stories side by side as John and Kim read our scriptures for the morning.

C. Readings by John and Kim

1. A reading from the book of 2nd Samuel, Chapter 7, beginning with verse 1:
Now when the king was settled in his house, and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him, 2 the king said to the prophet Nathan, "See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent." 3 Nathan said to the king, "Go, do all that you have in mind; for the Lord is with you."

4 But that same night the word of the Lord came to Nathan: 5 Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the Lord: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? 6 I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. 7 Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?" 8 Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the Lord of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; 9 and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. 10 And I will

appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, 11 from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.

2. And now from Luke, chapter 1, beginning with verse 26

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." 29 But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30 The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 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. 33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." 34 Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" 35 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. 36 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. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God." 38 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.

II. (Digesting the stories)

- A. So here we have two stories. The second one we may be more familiar with; it's one of the stories that begins the whole nativity narrative. Artists have famously rendered it for centuries. **The story even has a formal name: the Annunciation.** It's the moment where an angel announces to Mary that she will be Jesus' mother. It's a miraculous story.
- B. The other story is likely less familiar to us. Many of us have likely spent much less time reading and considering the book of 2nd Samuel than the gospel of Luke. **But respected theologian and Hebrew Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann has said that the 7th chapter of 2nd Samuel is "one of the most crucial texts in the Old Testament" for our Jesus-centered faith.** Why is that? And why have the lectionary creators paired these stories together for this last Sunday in advent?
- C. **The first story centers on young King David.** As I mentioned before - he's in a good space. He's been victorious in battle, he just established a capital city, he's beloved by the people - on this particular day he's the golden boy. In fact, just verses before our passage David has an argument with his wife who's become jealous watching him dance flamboyantly, perhaps even nakedly, in front of crowds while the Israelite women swooned. **David is clearly having a moment.**
- D. And in this moment, David gets an idea. As he's settling into his royal palace, his beautiful dream house, he thinks, **"Huh. I'm enjoying my new house; I should build a house for the God who brought me here, too."** He shares the idea with Nathan, the prophet who communicates on behalf of the Divine to David. At first Nathan says, "sure. Why not? Seems like a God honoring thing to do. Go for it." And then that night God gives Nathan a wake up

call. Yahweh tells the prophet to go back to David and share with him a word that boils down to effectively: **“Boy, no. Check yourself. I don’t need David, the golden boy, to build me a house.”**

- E. So why not? **What’s the problem with building a temple for Yahweh?** Isn’t that how people worship their Gods? Don’t the Israelites eventually do that anyway?
1. For Walter Breuggemann, this is a question ultimately **not of sacred worship, but of control**. You see, David in this moment is going through a transition. He’s no longer the poor unknown shepherd boy writing love songs to God in the fields; **he’s gone from being a nobody in his day to the ultimate somebody**. And now that he’s somebody, some of the wonder he used to feel toward the Divine is fading. **Faith is becoming less of a relationship to divine mystery and more of a tool, a tool he can use to secure more power**.
 - a) As every political leader knows, and we’re seeing play out on our own national stage right now, for **a political leader to really wield power, there’s a question of legitimacy**. The monarchy in Israel is new. David is only the 2nd King, after challenging King Saul for the throne. Now that he has it, how can David secure the legitimacy of his hold on the throne with the people? How can he keep his political rivals at bay? He can build a temple. It was the common tool of political supremacy in his day. It made sense. Give God a permanent home with you to let everyone know God’s on your side. God lives with you. Even more powerful, if God lives with you, you can be sure God won’t leave, right?
 2. But Yahweh is not interested in being a tool of David to build his empire. The divine is not interested in the fancy house David would build for God. Breuggemann says it this way: **“The plushness of the proposed temple contradicts Yahweh’s self-understanding. Yahweh will not be bought off, controlled, or domesticated by such luxury. Yahweh has been a free God and will continue to be. The royal apparatus is not able to make Yahweh its patron.”**
 3. And this is where we see a powerful nexus point between our two stories. **In the first story we see God reject a dwelling place that is proposed for the Divine to inhabit. In the second story, we see God choose their own earthly dwelling**. That dwelling place is not built of cedar by a golden boy in the capital of Jerusalem. That dwelling place is somewhere far more hidden, far more mysterious. **The chosen dwelling of the divine is in the depth of the body of a poor teenage girl** in the backwater country of Galilee; a girl named Mary.
- F. This brings me to the first takeaway I want to note today: **God inhabits the unexpected**.
1. It is not that God does not choose to dwell with humans. The total sweep of Scripture’s narrative has to do with God’s connection with humanity - but **the dwelling is always on God’s terms**, and it’s often in ways we wouldn’t anticipate or expect. Scripture’s grand story begins with God breathing the breath of life into the humans the Divine made out of clay and strolling through the garden with them. In Exodus, God appears in a burning bush, not something Moses was expecting to see, and leads the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt, inhabiting a pillar of smoke and cloud. Once the law is given, God is seen to be particularly present with the Ark of the covenant, a symbol which by its very nomadic nature points to a God who is mobile and may come and go as they choose. The prophet Elijah is called to encounter the Divine on a mountain top, and though he encounters a rushing wind, an earthquake, lightning, but he finds God only in the sacred whisper of a still, small voice. Even the temple that Solomon builds and the people of Israel rebuild after

the exile - this is not God's ultimate chosen dwelling place. This is not the place God's own self chooses to take up residence on earth in concrete. **God chooses something unexpected, something improbable, something no-one saw coming.**

2. As we begin to see in the story of Mary, God's chosen dwelling place is not a building at all. **God's dwelling on earth is among people.** God's dwelling place is in human relational community. When God dwells with us it gets intimate, as intimate as a child growing within a woman's womb.
3. David was operating from his understanding of the world, including his understanding of how Yahweh worked. And though he did have a legitimate relationship with Yahweh, though he may have been as Paul eventually calls him, "the man after God's own heart" he needed to remember his station. **His understanding of God was severely limited.**
 - a) In his word to David, Yahweh reminds David **Who he's talking to.** This is the one who brought David from the fields to the throne room of the King. This is the God who blessed young David's stone as he faced down a Philistine giant named Goliath. This God Has been with David every step of the way, going before him. David is invited to play his part in a sacred story, but he must respect the mystery of the Divine one who is not there to play earthly political games. The Divine has a more enduring, unexpected vision in mind.
4. There are ways in which if I'm going to be honest, **I can resonate with David at the end of this year.** Last fall we actually did a whole series on the "home we're building together", a series which featured a sacred brainstorming experience where we imagined together the various rooms in our metaphorical Haven house and spoke them out, wrote them down on sticky notes, took photos of the various words. At the beginning of 2020 our Haven vision team began to take some of those abstract pictures and think about concrete plans, excitedly organizing for a year in which we assumed some of those dreams would become clear realities.
 - a) And then the pandemic hit. **So much of what we thought we were supposed to be pursuing was stopped in its tracks.** One of the projects specifically that comes to mind is hopes for music we were going to work on and write and possibly record this year. We even found a rehearsal space to start renting in Oakland to regularly practice together and devote time to this songwriting exercise. And then overnight, only a couple of weeks after our first band session together, we were sheltering in place. And now it's been ten months since we've been able to play or sing together. We had plans; we were sure they were what God even wanted and would be honored by. And then came the unexpected.
5. The good news is that **God isn't thrown by the unexpected in the same way we are.** God works with it. God even at times seems to choose it. Just when we think we're starting to get handle on this thing we call Source, Spirit, Creator, God - watch out. The Divine often shows up in an unexpected way that pushes the limits of our narrow understanding and forces us to think differently, to consider another angle, to see another facet we've missed of the Sacred Heart.
 - a) **Jesus seemed to do this with his disciples all the time,** constantly upending their expectations and keeping them on their feet. When they think they're doing him a favor by corralling the noisy kids, he invites the children to come close. When they're celebrating Jesus's ascent in popularity and spiritual power, he talks to them of his suffering and death to come. When by cultural norms they should be serving him as a person of honor, he strips off his garments, kneels down and washes their feet. **In Jesus, God inhabits the unexpected.**

6. In our 2nd Samuel story, God may indeed be pushing back on David's assumptions for who God is and what God needs. But **the Divine is not rejecting David, far from it**. In the same way, when we miss part of who God is and find ourselves corrected or surprised this should not be a cause for shame and dejection. The Divine may need to challenge our assumptions about what God is up to, but that challenge is always leading towards something greater.
- III. And that brings me to my other takeaway for today - an insight that seems at the heart of both of our stores on this last Sunday of Advent: **God invites us to imagine new possibilities**.
- A. God's word goes beyond "boy, no". Challenging David's assumptions is part of **inviting David to imagine something beyond what he previously could have dreamed of**. David doesn't need God in an earthly temple to find security. God will make David and his legacy secure because God has chosen this humble, also unexpected songwriting shepherd boy to be a part of a grander movement that the Divine is taking on. **God will build David a house**.
 - B. There's a play on words here - two ways in the Hebrew that the word "house" could be understood. One the way that David is using it - speaking of a physical dwelling place. But the other meaning is what God is speaking of. A house can also be a family line, a dynasty, a communal legacy. This is what God intends to build through David. This is what God will bless. This is the dwelling God will inhabit with David - this is not a physical structure but **a human community intended to bless the entire human collective**.
 - C. One final important thing to note about the newness of this reality the Divine is inviting David and us to imagine. This is why Breuggemann sees this text is so central. In this passage **we see a shift beginning from a conditional relationship between the Divine and God's people - a relationship where God promises to protect them or bless them if they do x,y,z - to an unconditional favor and grace**. The promise the Divine is making is regardless of what David or any of his descendants do or don't do. They cannot lose their status before God. The kingdom God is establishing generations forward from David, God says, will be forever.
 - D. That brings us centuries later to a place far from the splendor of the royal palace in Jerusalem. In our second story of the morning we see our second divine messenger - this time not a prophet, but an angel. And the angel isn't sent to a King, but to the woman who will nurture one into being.
 1. As a Jewish woman living in the 1st century, Mary was likely aware of the promise made in 2nd Samuel 7. She was also aware of the ways it seemed to have fallen apart since then. **The exile really messed up everything**. The people of Israel had seen someone form David's line on their earthly throne for generations, until the Babylonians came and decimated their throne room, carting their Davidic king off to Babylon. In exile, the family line had waned. Though Yahweh followers were eventually permitted to return from Babylon, they did not see a return to the promise of that David legacy. Had God forgotten to secure the people? Had God forgotten the promise?
 2. When the angel approaches young Mary, Luke makes clear that this is not the case. **That promise of unconditional favor and blessing for all of humanity has lied dormant but it has not been forgotten by the Divine**. The angel is inviting Mary to imagine a new possibility, that many in her community had long since given up on. Her son "will be great," the angel says "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."

3. Mary responds with a clarifying question. “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” **It’s a question steeped in experience and expectation.** Mary understands how babies are made. According to Luke’s story, the angel’s pronouncement defies the logic of that experience.
4. But God is inviting Mary, as well as all of us who look to her story for meaning and insight into the Divine’s purposes, to imagine new possibilities. This, I believe, is what the story of the virgin birth is really about. Now let me clarify real quick what I don’t think the virgin Mary thing is about.
 - a) I don’t believe faith in Jesus is determined by whether we think his mother had sex before he was conceived.
 - b) I don’t think this story is intended to give us a scientific accounting, as we would think of it, of Jesus’ parentage.
 - c) I don’t believe we’re to take from the story of a virgin conceiving that sex is shameful or wrong, or makes a woman tarnished in any way.
 - d) I don’t believe the story is intended to diminish the sacredness of any child being conceived - it is always miraculous.
 - e) For me, **the angel’s message to Mary and to us is an invitation to imagine something new.** God transforming what we understand to be possible. Just like the divine will not be domesticated and limited to an earthly temple, **the divine need not be limited by our understandings.** We can and should expect to be surprised by movements of the Divine. We should expect the unexpected from the God who makes a way out of no way. This can mean older women past childbearing age and younger women who have not been sexually active finding themselves pregnant. For as the angel says, “Nothing will be impossible with God.”
5. As I reflect this advent on Mary and her story, there’s one other aspect of the virginal conception story I can’t help but wonder about. **In a world of patriarchy, in which a woman’s status was often reduced to her capacity to carry the children her husband deposited in her, Mary was given an agency that many young mothers did not have.** Perhaps the virgin conception has nothing to do with sex at all - it’s simply about taking Joseph out of the equation. This baby, this sacred work, this chosen dwelling place of God is for Mary and the Spirit within her alone. She has been invited to co-create with the divine - no man, golden boy or otherwise, needed. **God has invited her to imagine a new possibility for what it means for a woman to experience divine favor, to have agency, and to work with God to fulfill sacred purposes.**
- E. Friends, **we are at the end of a year that in many ways has felt impossible.** If you had told us in March where we would be in December, I’m not sure we could have endured it. At times, perhaps even now, we have found ourselves feeling stuck with no hope of change or deliverance.
 1. The challenges have likely had impacts on our connection to faith. Perhaps the practices we looked to for comfort or sacred connection have been unavailable or seem to have lost their luster. Perhaps the things we thought we knew about God have been challenged. These advent stories remind us that the disappointment and the discouragement are not the end of the line. They’re often the origin place for something new to begin.
- F. This year may not have been what anyone imagined when we dreamed of a “home we’re building together”, but as I reflect on the year we’ve had, **I can’t deny God’s presence building the kind of home the Spirit I believe intends to dwell in - a home of sacred community.** Despite the challenges of physical distance, we have comforted one another.

Though we call no physical space our own, the Spirit dwells in the words we share over zoom, in the texts we send, in the letters written by Haven pen pals to one another. Through experiences of immense pain, our collective has learned to lament together and to bear sacred witness to grief. And with the breath of the same spirit I believe who spoke through Nathan and Gabriel, God has also given us capacity to find joy together and hold one another's joys, even alongside sorrow. And who know? Perhaps those songwriting dreams are still to come, but maybe the songs we are called to write are for the other side of this unexpected 2020, as we give voice to what we've experienced and learned this year.

G. This brings me, as we end, to our final charge for this Advent journey to joy - the last invitation I invite us to engage this season. **The word I think we're invited to lean into today is Open up.**

1. **Open up to the new that God is gestating within you and around you.** Say yes to what you are invited to nurture, just as Mary herself said yes. Remember that picture I shared a few weeks ago of the Divine as a pregnant mother, always pregnant, always birthing something new. Today I invite you to consider, what is she conceiving in you? What are you, like Mary, invited to co-create with the divine mother? Whatever your gender, what might you be nurturing within you in this season which you can help bring to life in a season to come? And as we stand on the cusp of a new year and a season of transition, what is our Haven collective pregnant with? For nothing will be impossible for God.

H. I want to end this morning giving Mary the final word. Let's listen to her song of agreement at the end of Luke's first chapter. And as we hear her words, I invite you to echo them in your own way with your own song of opening to the Divine's purposes in your life this advent.

1. **And Mary said:**

"My soul glorifies the Lord

47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

48 for he has been mindful

of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me—

holy is his name.

50 His mercy extends to those who fear him,

from generation to generation.

51 He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;

he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

52 He has brought down rulers from their thrones

but has lifted up the humble.

53 He has filled the hungry with good things

but has sent the rich away empty.

54 He has helped his servant Israel,

remembering to be merciful

55 to Abraham and his descendants forever,

just as he promised our ancestors." Amen.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Where have you found God challenging your expectations this year? Where have you experienced the Divine inhabiting the unexpected?

2. What new possibilities might the Creator be inviting you to imagine and open yourself to?