



**A Sermon for The Fourth Sunday of Advent  
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[Fourth Sunday of Advent – The Episcopal Church](#)**

Since December 1 we've been entering more deeply into a period of anticipation, longing, waiting, hearing, hoping! We are in a season of preparing. These last three weeks and again today we have heard the words of the coming of a Messiah, and with his arrival the hope and realization for change, from the Old Testament prophets of Jeremiah, Baruch, Zephaniah, and Micah – all a foreshadowing of the Magnificat. We've also heard the weekly Gospel readings of St. Luke about preparing the way of the Lord at his first coming, and reading the signs of the times about his future second coming. Our ancestors waited for centuries for the first advent of the long-awaited Messiah. And as we remember that first advent and first coming of the Christ child we now anticipate his second advent, his second coming one day, this time as the Son of Man.

Today, we hear a little more about Mary and two miracles occurring: the anticipated birth of Jesus and the anticipated birth of his cousin John, in the aged womb of Elizabeth. It is John who recognizes from the womb the Christ child within the womb of Mary. It is interesting to me and maybe to you that Mary probably would have repeatedly heard the words of these ancient prophets along with being very aware of the hopes and dreams of her family and the people of her time and place.

Imagine this scenario for a moment – one recently proposed by a few cultural bible scholars – a young girl, most likely mid-teens, living and growing up in and around Nazareth in Galilee. She engages in typical play for a girl her age, she has chores to do around the house, she helps Anna and Joachim as much as she's able. Maybe she goes to the temple/synagogue area where women are allowed to pray and sing and hear the words of the prophets and the Psalms. Maybe she is used to singing and chanting prayers and songs with the others, even if in a whisper. Maybe she sang as part of a children's choir. Maybe she already knew of other canticles hearing ones already familiar to her. We really don't know what her religious upbringing was like or her spiritual life, but I'm sure there was one! She obviously had enough faith to believe an angel that appeared to her! She is very aware of the world she is experiencing and living in – the poverty, the oppression, the burden of living under Roman occupation. She has her own hopes and dreams; she's heard about the long hoped for arrival of the Messiah yet to come who will deliver his people from their plight. Her story is a story of belonging – and we also belong to the story! It's our story even now as we await the coming of the Messiah once again.

Then the most unexpected thing happens! An unexpected visitor, an angel of light, Gabriel himself, appears before the young teen alone in her room in her modest little home announcing that she's the one! *The Annunciation!* Wait! What? Me? **Fear not.** Yes, you! You are the chosen vessel, the one specially chosen to bear this divine child – the Messiah she has heard about all her life. Heart pounding; confusion. "How can

this be since I have not known man?" It's a miracle of the Holy Spirit. **Be not afraid.** Once comforted and reassured, she really didn't hesitate all that much; she gave her "fiat", her yes, her permission to allow herself to be God's vessel, a tabernacle in and of herself to carry the long-awaited Emmanuel. Wow! What faith! We can't even imagine! Especially for a scared yet willing teenage girl even amidst the cultural atmosphere that could have made this very dangerous for her.

We've heard more of the story at different times – how Joseph doubts and wants a quiet divorce out of respect to Mary; he doesn't want her to get hurt; God speaks to him in a dream and is told to "**not be afraid**", take Mary as your wife and call the child Jesus. Notice the ongoing theme here to **not be afraid**? Mary eventually hears about Elizabeth and just has to go see her! She goes, as we hear in today's Gospel, to a small Judean town to the house of Zechariah and Elizabeth, the Visitation! And we hear that Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit, which prompts her to exclaim to Mary, "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me...And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." And now we see that Mary cannot help but sing! She sings her canticle! She magnifies the Lord, she recognizes her lowliness and how blessed she is, and that the Mighty One has done great things for her! Then she goes on to proclaim the social justice attributes of God that she has heard about and waited for: (this is her story and ours) God's mercy, strength, he scatters the proud, he brings down the powerful from their thrones, he lifts up the lowly, he fills the hungry, he sends the rich away empty, he helps Israel, he keeps his promises to her ancestors, Abraham, and his descendants forever! Mary is pointing to real issues and hopes within her society and ours. Look, here I am, a lowly maiden; here is who God is, and this is what he can and will do! He promised! What faith! God himself enters into all of this! Her world has just changed, in fact, the entire world is to be changed. The centuries-long anticipation of that first coming is finally here! The Nativity. This may sound familiar if you read the beginning of 1 Sam 2:1-5 when Hannah sings a similar canticle. Maybe Mary was aware of Hannah's song. Hannah was once barren but then later conceived a child (Read: 1 Sam 2:1-5). We see another example in Exodus 15:1-20 when Moses and Miriam sing a similar and familiar Canticle as their people cross the Red Sea (Read: Exodus 15: 1, 2, and 6). Maybe Mary was aware of this song, too.

But Mary, as a loving mother of the Christ-child, will endure her own pain as her son, now a baby, grows into his role as the long-awaited Messiah and who will suffer his own hardships in the years of his ministry up to and including his passion and death on the cross at which time Mary will suffer the piercing of her own soul as the priest Simeon prophesied at Jesus's presentation at the Temple. The Presentation. How hard it must be for a young mother to be able to run to the aid of a young son and help him when he falls or is there for him when he is sick, but then such a time comes when

you can no longer protect your child and you have to watch him suffer. What a helpless feeling that must be. But Mary in all her wisdom gathered during the life of Jesus now knows that this is the way it must be, for it is the *fulfillment* of the whole plan of God beginning with that first visit from Archangel Gabriel to the young Mary in that little house in Nazareth.

Yes, we are taking this time of preparation during Advent to remember and celebrate the first coming of Jesus the Messiah as part of our cyclical liturgical calendar, but there is more to it. It's the beginning of the fulfillment of God's promises. However, now, we also are in that next phase of anticipation, waiting, and hoping for his second coming as the adult son of God who was born, lived, ministered, was arrested and sentenced, crucified, died, and was buried, then was resurrected and ascended to the Father until that time when the complete fulfillment of his coming will be accomplished. We are in a time of the now, but not yet. The Gospel today reveals to us how Mary prays and intercedes in faith. The Magnificat is not only Mary's song, but it is the song of the Church, the song of the new people of God, and the song of the poor whose hope is met by the fulfillment of the promises made to our ancestors. So, in the meantime maybe we can sing our own canticle of how we experience God in our lives and remember what he has done for us while acknowledging what he will do. May we honor what remains of this Advent season with a spirit of continued anticipation and hope and carry those aspirations throughout our days year-round as we await the second coming of Jesus our Lord. AMEN.