

The Fourth Sunday of Advent, 18 December 2022
Saint Aidan's Episcopal Church, Portland OR
The Rev'd Canon Raggs Ragan, Interim Rector

In the name of the Holy One who is always and everywhere coming into our world and into our hearts.
Amen.

I particularly like the last collect of Advent, in which we ask God 'to purify our conscience', to make us clean and ready for the birth of Christ in our hearts. Advent is of course all about getting ready for the coming of God, but very explicitly so today. We ask that our consciences be purified, cleansed both of actual guilt and of guilty feelings. Feeling guilty, feeling unworthy, keeps us from opening ourselves to the Divine. And we have been singing every week 'O Come, O Come, Emmanuel'. We have been using the ancient O antiphons in our prayers, asking God to come in all the forms and ways that make our lives possible. 'Emmanuel' means 'God with us'. That is what we are preparing for, which requires us to stand up tall with open arms, not crouch and hide in guilt and unworthiness.

We begin each Eucharist praying the Collect for Purity, a prayer which was originally said by the priests in private before the Mass, but which in Anglican usage has become a prayer for everyone. We ask God to cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that we might perfectly love God and worthily magnify God's holy name. That is the purpose of our worship each time we gather and more particularly that is the purpose of each Advent: to more perfectly love God and more worthily magnify God's Holy Name.

Advent is a time to clean the houses of our hearts, to make them mansions fit for the coming of Christ. We want to be ready for the greatest guest of all. And unlike Christmas parties, we cannot hand off the tasks of preparation to family members or house cleaners. We must do it all ourselves. This is a deeply personal preparation in the midst of all the public and corporate preparation. But intrinsic to it is the affirmation that we CAN do it, that worthiness is possible.

As we prepare our hearts and homes, we also prepare the church. We have been planning and working on bulletins and rehearsing music. After church we will all pitch in with greens and bows and polish and brooms – and we will keep preparing all week. We will work together, prepare together, rejoice together. These preparations are all important to helping everyone celebrate the coming of Christ.

But the most essential aspect of Advent happens inside each of our hearts, that internal housecleaning we ask God's help with in the collect for purity and today's collect. We work within our own deepest selves to create a clean and proper welcoming place for the Lord of Glory.

What we are cultivating in this time of preparation is sometimes called Holy Longing. There is that deep within each of us which longs for God, which desires a deep personal connection with the heart of the universe, the creative reality which brought us and everything else into being. And we know that we must clear away all manner of clutter and noise to make that connection possible.

The work of Advent, the work of making our inner selves truly ready for the divine coming in whatever way it will occur for us, is a work of cooperation and submission. We are cooperating with God, acknowledging that the real work here is divine. We are saying, like Mary, "Behold the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word." We are holding ourselves still, to allow the work of God to happen within us. So part of our clearing up, our internal housecleaning, involves letting go of all the things that drive us to constant activity and busy-ness. We must be still, as in that wonderful line from Psalm 46: 'Be still and know that I am God.'

Today's readings all remind us of the particularity of the birth of Christ. This birth is a specific baby born to a specific young woman in a particular time and place, just like all of us. We are reminded of Jesus' genealogy – that he is born into the line of David – David who did great things but also terrible things, into a lineage that famously includes specific women and men who fell far short of the accepted standards of holiness, people who suffered terrible losses, people with messy specific lives. Emmanuel 'God with us', with us in the messiness and suffering of human life. All of the readings remind us of the physical reality of Christ's coming and remind us that God's grace and peace come to us in the midst of that same complex and conflicted reality. This is not an intellectual abstraction, but divine participation in the struggle and chaos of life.

It is much easier to decorate the church or clean our own houses than to prepare for God coming into our hearts. The stories of Advent remind us that this has always been true. It was not easy for Mary or Joseph, any more

than it had been for David or Solomon, Hannah or Ruth. This year of the Lectionary has Matthew as its core Gospel and Matthew is the evangelist who gives us the most about Joseph – Joseph the descendant of King David into whose line the messiah is to be born. Joseph is the righteous and good man who espoused the young girl expecting to continue his highly respectable life, only to find his chosen wife unexpectedly pregnant. He attempted to do the honorable thing while at the same time protecting her despite her obvious transgression – only to be confronted by God’s messenger and told an impossible thing – something beyond his experience and ability to believe.

When the angel told Mary the impossible thing that was to happen to her, she asked questions, used her knowledge and her mind to try to make sense out of what was happening – and then accepted the impossible thing, with faith and hope and devotion. According to the tradition which includes many more details about Joseph’s conversation with the Angel, Joseph did more than politely question the impossible. He protested and got angry. But he too accepted in the end and did what was needed for the Messiah to be born into David’s complicated family line. Both Mary and Joseph voiced their confusion, their objections, and listened and opened themselves to the impossible thing that God was doing in their lives, for the whole human family.

That is a critical aspect of our preparation – opening ourselves to see and question and doubt and finally accept the impossible, improbable things that God will do in us and through us. In her book, *The Glorious Impossible*, Madeleine L’Engle explores the events of God’s relationship with humanity with the aid of beautiful Giotto frescoes from the Scrovegni Chapel. Each event, including the birth of Christ, is Impossible in rational human terms, but happened anyway. And each is glorious, filled with the glory of God shining for us and in us.

So, part of our preparation, our house cleaning, is clearing away any guiltiness or sense of unworthiness that keeps our doors closed to God. Part of our preparation can include objecting and questioning and wrestling, striving to understand until we come to a place of acceptance and embrace. Joseph at first did not understand and objected to what seemed to be happening – perhaps even fought with the angel, but once he was convinced he was able to accept what the divine was showing to him and asking of him. And it was more than just not sending Mary away in disgrace. Joseph was the one who received the message which sent the Holy Family off into Egypt before Herod could kill the child and Joseph was the one who later received the message that it was safe for them all to come home. Both Mary and Joseph stand as examples of how doing the work of interior preparation to welcome God into their hearts, opening themselves to what seemed impossible, made them able to understand great unexpected events and to cooperate with God in bringing the divine into all our lives.

This is the preparation we are called to: opening our hearts and minds in welcome to the surprising God who continues to do impossible things, who wants to find a home with us in the midst of all the suffering and strife, the fear and anxiety of our world.

I will conclude with a small meditation I am fond of using. It is based on that line from Psalm 46, easy to remember and repeat:

Be still and know that I am God

Be still and know that I am.

Be still and know.

Be still.

Amen.