

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Advent December 18, 2011
 Delivered by the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas Grace Church, Amherst, MA

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16
 Canticle 15 (*Magnificat*)

Romans 16:25-27
 Luke 1:26-38

Angel in the doorway

*“Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”
 (Luke 1:38)*

I want to tell an Advent story that took place six years ago. You’ll remember that in the fall of 2005, two hurricanes, strengthened by the unusually warm waters of the Gulf, plowed into Louisiana and Mississippi. Millions of Americans were evacuated. Within a matter of hours, most of an American city lay in ruins. With characteristic generosity, a group of you from Grace Church immediately began organizing a service trip to Mississippi. In late November we would drive down a truck full of supplies, sleep in a makeshift camp, and do whatever was needed – haul debris, dig mud, or just listen and pray. I was eager to go, but then received an invitation to join a group of religious leaders who were planning to attend the upcoming U.N. climate change conference in Montreal -- the same international gathering that just met in Durban, South Africa.

The trips to Mississippi and Montreal overlapped, and I couldn’t take both. I decided to go to Montreal, so for several days in Advent I mingled with delegates of the World Council of Churches, listened to speeches, wrote editorials, and joined thousands of citizens in marching through the city’s streets. It was the most vigorous celebration of Advent I could imagine, for the placards and banners rang out the season’s urgent themes: Now is the time to wake from sleep, to clean up our act, to sort out our lives, to cast away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.

That exuberant march was one of the Advent gifts that I received, a glimpse of the burgeoning worldwide movement that draws on humanity’s deepest reserves of hope. The other gift came as a surprise, when I was alone in my hotel. By then I was steeped in the stark reality of climate change. I had studied the aerial photographs of Mount Kilimanjaro without any snow, listened to climate reports from the Arctic to Argentina, heard survivors of Katrina describe the vulnerability of the poor. As for my government, it seemed incapable of taking the issue seriously.

After a restless night, I woke up filled with anger and sorrow, needing badly to pray. I pulled a chair over to the window and let my anguish spill out before God – grief for what is irreparably lost, rage at the inertia that kills with such abandon. I felt helpless. Dear Lord, what can I do? What can anyone do? Then I heard something.

I put my trust in you.

Startled, I opened my eyes and looked around. Who said that? I had heard the sentence as clearly as if someone were standing in the room. I often say those very words to God, but now the message was addressed to *me*. Its meaning was: *Fear not. Keep going. I am with you.*

I was incredulous. Was there some mistake? How could God trust *me*? I had a choice: to accept or reject that assurance, to believe it or to blow it off. What I heard seemed as unlikely as what Mary heard from the angel: the Lord is with you; do not be afraid; by the power of the Holy Spirit you will conceive and bear a son; and he will be the savior of the world.

Absurd! Yet God's hope for the future hung on Mary's willingness to consent. Maybe it hangs on our willingness, too. Who knows how many messages God delivers daily to the countless faithful of every religion, and of none? *Trust the good, wherever you find it. I know you are afraid, but trust the truth. Trust love. Trust yourself. Above all, trust me. Let my life be born in you.* Who knows what power will be released in us when we dare to believe those unseen encounters that offer a divine word of love?

Here on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, on the brink of Christmas, there is a Love that wants to be born within us and among us, a love that knows no bounds. It begins as a whisper in the ear, a tug at the heart, a message from an angel inviting us to welcome a Divine Guest whose effect on our lives we can neither predict nor control. What will happen if we truly give ourselves to this love? What will we do? Who will we become? "Really," we may say to ourselves, "I'm kind of used to being who I am. Sure, I want God to come into my life, but let's not get carried away! There's something to be said for staying in control. It's risky to let go. I'm not sure. Let me get back to you on that."

Can you feel the pull between attraction and fear, between trust and hesitation? Like every love song, the love song between God and the soul is about longing and resistance, about desire and holding back. If we could put words to it, the conversation might go something like this. Here is a poem ("Covenant") by Margaraet Halaska, a Franciscan nun:

*The Father
knocks at my door
seeking a home for his son:*

Rent is cheap, I say.

I don't want to rent, I want to buy, says God.

*I'm not sure I want to sell,
but you might come in to look around.*

I think I will, says God.

I might let you have a room or two.

*I like it, says God. I'll take the two.
You might decide to give me more some day.
I can wait, says God.*

*I'd like to give you more,
but it's a bit difficult. I need some space for me.*

I know, says God, but I'll wait. I like what I see.

*Hmm, maybe I can let you have another room.
I really don't need that much.*

Thanks, says God. I'll take it. I like what I see.

*I'd like to give you the whole house
but I'm not sure --*

*Think on it, says God. I wouldn't put you out.
Your house would be mine and my son would live in it.
You'd have more space than you'd ever had before.*

I don't understand at all.

*I know, says God, but I can't tell you about that.
You'll have to discover it for yourself.
That can only happen if you let him have the whole house.*

A bit risky, I say.

Yes, says God, but try me.

*I'm not sure-
I'll let you know.*

I can wait, says God. I like what I see.

You will notice that God does not force or compel, because that is not the language of love. God simply longs and waits and asks to draw close. When we dare to say Yes, Christ is born again. Two thousand years ago God entered human history and became one *of* us, one *with* us. God came *then*, and God comes *now*, because God longs to join us on our journey, in our daily life and relationships, in our pain and worry and hope. Will we consent to God's birth within us? Like Mary, will we say, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word"?

Right now, can we close our eyes and silently say to the Holy Spirit, "Come. Come into my life, just as it is, and help me find my way to You. Help me step through my fear, my anxiety, my worry, my need to be in control. Help me find You in my ordinary, everyday living. I trust You more than I trust myself, and I thank you for your trust in me"?