

Joy to the world

Part 4 of a series: *Living in the Now*

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, Associate Rector,
at the eleven o'clock service, December 20, 2009: The Fourth Sunday of Advent.
Based on Luke 1:39-49*

It's still Advent for a few more days, but in a couple of ways it feels like we're getting a preview of Christmas. One is the snow outside. Congratulations to you all for making your way through it to be with us here. And the other: Behold, I bring you glad tidings of great joy: a new sound system debuts this day at St. Bartholomew's Church in the City of New York. The hopes and fears of all the years are meeting in here right now.

If you've been at St. Bart's for a while, you know our struggles with our aging sound system. After years of dreaming, months of design, weeks of construction, and days of testing, it is here. We are here. Can you hear?!

The clergy are filled with both excitement and fear. We're excited that you may actually hear what we're saying, possibly for the first time in years. Maybe this is good news to you: No more dead zones. Or maybe bad news, as in: "Oh no, now I have to listen to the whole sermon." One of the clergy, who shall remain nameless, confesses the fear that when people finally hear what s/he's been saying, they'll realize how heretical it is and run out the doors. But our collective biggest fear is forgetting to turn off our microphones. With great sound comes great responsibility: Now we all have to turn on and off our own mics—not just one but two of them. So I'd like to be upfront about this: sooner or later you may hear some under-the-breath comments from clergy who have forgotten to turn off their mics. Just brace yourselves and enjoy the journey with us!

Filled with both excitement and fear—that's something both Elizabeth and Mary know about. Old Elizabeth, long married to the priest Zechariah, is six months pregnant, and young

Mary, newly pregnant though not yet married to the carpenter Joseph, meet today in this poignant, powerful story from the Gospel writer Luke. These women are relatives, related by more than bloodlines. God has had a hand in both these pregnancies, the one unusual, the one miraculous. These mothers' lives and their children's lives are intertwined forever.

As Luke tells it, the angel Gabriel had appeared to the old priest Zechariah: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John . . . even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit." [Luke 1:5-25]

Later, the angel Gabriel appears to Mary: "Greetings, favored one! . . . Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus." Gabriel also tells Mary, "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. For nothing will be impossible with God." And Mary says "yes" to God: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." [Luke 1:26-38]

That's the background for what we hear today. Just after Gabriel's annunciation to her, we find Mary traveling with haste to visit her relative Elizabeth. When Mary sees Elizabeth, she finds her—just as the angel Gabriel had said—six months pregnant. And when Elizabeth hears Mary's greeting, the baby John leaps for joy in her womb.



As part of my training for ordination, I worked one summer as a hospital chaplain here in New York. For reasons that remain mysterious,

our supervisor assigned me, an unmarried childless woman of “mature” age, responsibility for the entire maternity and delivery floor, which included the neonatal intensive care unit.

Most of the babies in that unit had been born prematurely, some incredibly prematurely. I used to stand beside each of them with my hand on their plastic incubator box, praying silently for these tiny beings who should still have been growing inside their mothers’ wombs.

One tiny baby weighed only one pound. She slept, hardly moving, swaddled and in a tiny diaper nest the nurses had made, hooked up to more machines than seemed possible. In all the days I watched her, she didn’t respond to any activity around her. But one day I happened to be there when the baby’s mother came in. The mother came over and spoke to her daughter through the plastic incubator. As soon as the baby heard her mother’s voice, her entire tiny body rippled with urgent movement as she responded to her mother’s voice.

More recently, I talked with a glowing mother who is pregnant with their second child. She told me this story. She had been sleeping late one morning when their older child ran into the bedroom shouting exuberantly, “Good morning!” At this shouted greeting, she felt the baby in her womb leap in response to her sibling’s voice.

When Mary and Elizabeth and their unborn children all meet, there are holy fireworks! John leaps with joy in response to Mary’s voice. Elizabeth recognizes not only that Mary is pregnant, but that Mary is carrying the Messiah, the one who is the fulfillment of God’s promise, “the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and his descendents forever.” And Elizabeth’s recognitions prompt Mary’s song of praise, the one we call the *Magnificat*, “My soul magnifies the Lord ...” that we hear today so beautifully in music. [Luke 1:46-55]



Today is the fourth and last Sunday in Advent. We’ve been trying a sermon series called “Living in the Now.” I had to smile when I saw that I was assigned to preach on this particular

Gospel story from Luke. Surely pregnant women—of all people—live in the Now. Any woman carrying another life inside of her has no choice but to live in the Now. She can’t help but be intensely aware of her own body—from her body’s strange new cravings for odd foods, or complete rejection of food, to its daily changing of shape and look and feel, to feeling the new life moving within her.

By definition, a pregnant woman must also think, plan and dream for the future—her own and that of her child. But the new life within her anchors her firmly in the Present, the Now, even as she is pulled into the future.

Living in the Now, being completely in the Present, is hard for most of us. Last week, immediately after a wonderful sermon reminding us to stop, slow down, just be, do less, a friend and I were discovered in intense conversation as we vowed to schedule six weeks in advance next year. A person overhearing us said, “Hey—whatever happened to living in the Now?” Sometimes it is hard to practice what you preach.

The simple, practical act of taking a “time out,” taking several deep breaths and simply paying attention to our breathing creates some quiet space within us. We become more spacious. Even a few minutes, or one minute, or a few seconds can have life-changing, healing consequences for us—and just as important, for those around us.

When I worked in that neonatal unit, the nurses there taught me what some of the numbers on the many machines attached to each baby meant—heart rate, blood pressure, oxygen saturation level. Over time I noticed that when I prayed, or even just stood quietly and calmly, beside the plastic incubator, the baby’s numbers stayed the same, or even improved. One day I rushed into the unit frazzled and unsettled. As I stood silently beside the first incubator, the baby, who had been still, began to squirm and fret. I glanced up at the numbers. The baby’s heart rate and blood pressure were rising and the oxygen saturation level began to drop. Puzzled, I moved some distance away but kept watching, and I

saw the numbers return to their former healthier levels. I learned not to go into the neonatal unit unless I was calm and centered.

Despite the plastic barriers, tubes and machines, the membranes between lives in that neonatal unit seemed very thin, delicate and porous. The membranes between us out here in the world seem to thicken with busy-ness, responsibilities, overloaded-ness in various forms, scar tissue from the past. But I believe the membranes between us are thinner and more porous than we realize. The quality of our presences affect each other, for good or ill, as strongly as what I witnessed in that neonatal unit.

Taking time to create a calm, centered space within ourselves yields spaciousness—a spaciousness not unlike the spaciousness of pregnancy. Another word for that spaciousness is stillness. It’s been said, “Stillness is the language God speaks, and everything else is a

bad translation.”* When we are still, we become a vehicle for God to come into the world. When we are still, we make space for the Love and Peace that Mary bore into the world to enter our own hearts, and to spread into the hearts of those around us.

I invite you, not just during Advent, but every day going forward, as often as you can manage it, for a few minutes or a few seconds, to be still.

Be still and know that Presence (capital P).

That Presence, born to Mary so long ago, the Presence that caused baby John to leap for joy in Elizabeth’s womb—that Presence is still being born to us today.

Be still. Because it matters.

*Quoted in *A New Earth*, Eckhart Tolle, 2005, page 255.