

Advent 2C: Luke 3.1-6
December 8, 2024
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When our daughter Kate was a child, she dreaded the arrival of Christmas. You can confirm this with Ardelle. And I don't think dread is too strong a word. Not by much, at least. It could, of course, be that the presents her parents left waiting for her under the tree were so lame that the poor girl braced herself for the annual disappointments she would be obliged to unwrap and pretend to like. But that's not what it was. Kate truly preferred the expectant state of not knowing what's to come to the certainty she would possess once Christmas morning finally happened. And, mind you, this was not the cool calm of a grownup Episcopalian who might humble brag about his "comfort with ambiguity." For one six-year-old girl at least, a state of not knowing was electricity that buzzed in her little bones each December. Buzzed so wonderfully that she began to dread that moment when its source was suddenly 364 days away.

I'm pretty sure that little girl was closer to the wisdom of Advent than her father has ever been, even though now it's somehow his job to stand in a pulpit and tell all of you what Advent is all about. The Catch 22 is that it feels like my task today might be to explain that the wisdom of Advent begins in a state of unknowing. And that if you and I are to enter this season fully, like that kingdom someone said we can only ever enter as children, we may have to learn not only to let go of some of our certainties, but even to love preparing the way for the arrival of something or someone that we truly do not know.

But this Advent frame of mind is difficult to achieve in much the same way the Holy Week frame of mind is. It's hard even to pretend we don't know what it means that Christmas and Easter are coming soon.

When the word of God appears to John in the wilderness, it comes to him in the words of Isaiah. But "Every valley..." probably comes to us in the voice of a tenor singing Handel's setting of the prophecy, right? Drawing out "shall be exalted" into those ... what ... 50 or 60 beloved syllables. Why, you might just hear it played by strings over a department store intercom this time of year to enhance your shopping experience, and, presumably, your spending. It's very much to Handel's credit that The Messiah still has the power to move us so deeply at times after all these years, even though we know what's coming next in every single measure. But beloved familiarity may not be helpful if we're trying to figure out how let go of what we think we know about the messiah John was pointing to, and experience this story anew. As people who have no idea what or who might come barreling down any path we make straight for the Lord.

So, what are we to do? Well, for starters, it may be a help that our scriptures may be familiar, but they are still really weird at times. John the Baptist didn't look anything like a tenor in a tailcoat at the Met. He dug honey from the hives of wild bees, ate it with locusts for lunch, dressed in camel skins. His cousin Jesus taught in stories that confused and often offended the people who bothered to listen. He even said sometimes he made the stories strange because he didn't want us to understand them. As if a state of confusion might be a necessary

precondition to receiving ... or maybe a precondition to perceiving his good news of redeeming grace.

This may sound like bad news on its face, but it's something we know to be true, isn't it? How many times have your assumptions about what you think you're supposed to see kept you from seeing what's actually in front of you?

Here's something that actually happened early yesterday morning while I was working on this sermon. I typed that last sentence and then walked into the den for a book I love titled Human Archipelago by Teju Cole and Fazal Sheikh. I didn't turn on the lamp, because I know right where this book lives on the shelf and would recognize it's unjacketed grey spine even in the dim light. I sat back down and immediately found this: "In most of our daily activities, we choose a strategy to achieve the goal at hand. We create a program. Awareness moves differently. The program is happening around us. The world is the doer and we are the witness ... Through detached noticing, awareness allows an observed flower to reveal more of itself without our intervention. This is true of all things."

"Detached noticing." There was promising stuff in Teju Cole's prose for this sermon. Of course a photography critic could help us learn how to see. But when I went looking for Fazal Sheikh's astonishing photographs in the pages that followed, I found nothing but text. I closed the book and looked again at the spine. It was another grey jacketless book: The Creative Act, by the music producer Rick Rubin. It's a mild example, but a fresh one, of thinking I knew what I was noticing in the world, then suddenly realizing I'd been wrong and had to detach myself from the story that was growing up around what I'd seen, which was making its way toward this sermon, and eventually, to you.

"Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." Like you, I've heard the prophecy a thousand times. But today, for whatever reason, it's telling me that what makes God's path into my life so crooked and steep and rough and hard to travel is often my certainty that I already know what God is coming to tell me.

The truth is I don't want to live in a state of unknowing. I'd rather settle in cozily with the unwrapped mysteries of Christmas morning than experience the Advent uncertainty that must have thrilled the first hearers of John, who knew the source of the prophecy, but had no earthly idea how it might be coming true. Or if they did, the earthly ideas they carried were some of the very obstructions Jesus had to break down so they could actually see and hear and experience the kingdom of heaven, the realm of divine, redeeming love, that was springing into life like mustard seeds into trees, right in front of them.

Yesterday afternoon the path to Calvary was anything but straight. But about fifty people navigated marathon barriers and orange pylons to gather here with Ujijji Davis Williams and Azzurra Cox. They're the designers who will lead the development of a memorial site for a slave market that operated on our block in the 1850s.

Some of you were present in 2018 when Dorothy Wells preached in this pulpit about coming into the Episcopal Church here at Calvary while she was a student at Rhodes College. Seeds were planted in this room that changed her life. After years as a corporate lawyer, she would go to seminary of all places, become a priest, and, last summer Dorothy was elected bishop of Mississippi. But six years ago as she preached, we heard in her powerful, faltering

voice and saw in her startled and heartbroken eyes that she was still detaching from a story she thought she knew well. Still wrestling with the truth still new to her that in the shadows of this church where she had been nurtured and fed, where she'd encountered the way of Jesus in deep and powerful ways, in the shadows of a place she still loves to her core, children of God who looked like her had been bought and sold as chattel not so many generations ago. When I watch the footage of that sermon, the shattering of what Dorothy thought she knew still shatters me. But it was a starting place, not an ending. It was, I truly believe, the necessary removal of an obstruction, a mountain made a little lower and a valley beginning to fill, so that the truth we thought we knew could make way for the fuller truth God has in store.

It was to that end that yesterday our Great Hall was filled mostly with people who are not members of Calvary. Azzurra and Ujijji led a community listening workshop with all sorts of people from the Memphis community whom we need to hear from and learn from if we're to offer back to the city a space that does more than reinforce the stories we think we already know. A guiding question for the design itself is how to prepare the way in a landscape for people we do not know, events we can't yet imagine, encounters we could never arrange. Perhaps, over time, by the grace of God, space for a future that none of us can quite yet envision.

So, friends, let's return to our question for today. What certainties do you need to hold more loosely or even let go of entirely this Advent? Are there stories about yourself or about your world that you've long taken for granted, but that might not be true? Or might not be as true as you thought? Such questions can be difficult for all sorts of reasons. After all, even my wounds and my hates can become familiar and even precious to me over time.

But sometimes to not be so sure is to prepare a way. It's to make a clearing in your life into which a savior whom you couldn't have imagined or expected, a Love you didn't know to ask for or think you could be worthy of, might actually enter. Perhaps what we all need is to relearn that childlike thrill at not knowing. Not knowing what gifts might be coming our way when we let go of our precious certainties so that we can see, along with all flesh, the salvation of God, in whatever form it actually takes, when it arrives.