

**SERMON FOR YEAR C, ADVENT 3**  
LUKE 3:7-18  
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SAINT THOMAS' EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
DECEMBER 13, 2009  
"FUTURE"

In a world of fast facts, the following do not seem to be available:

- Amount of money spent by average American parents-to-be  
On babies that are on their way, but that have not yet been born;
- Amount of money spent by *friends and family* of average American parents-to-be  
On children that have have not yet been born;
- Number of hours in the day that doctors, nurses, midwives, and doulas spend  
Calming average American parents-to-be;
- Number of hours that average American parents-to-be spend  
Wringing their hands anyway; painting guest rooms pink, blue, or yellow;  
Laying out diapers and new clothes.

We toil and pace and spin and get dizzy at the thought of a baby on its way.  
We rush about and clean and make a space.  
We make lists of names as long as your arm and fret over them.  
We get on our game faces, make our grand plans and resolutions.  
And in the night watches, we think on how different our lives will be,  
Things about which we can only speculate and pray and hope.

The great big question these days – indeed, every year at this time – is,  
*Are you ready for Christmas?*

That's a polite question meant to imply something simple:  
*Have you finished your shopping, sent your cards,  
Brought up the decorations from the basement?*

But here is what it **could** mean:

Have you prepared yourself as much as you possibly can  
For the radical thing that God is about to do in Christ Jesus?  
Have we made a space in the collective clutter and industry of our lives?

John the Baptist, you see, stands as at his post, in his own very unique way, as a *guard*  
Over what is to come (or, more precisely, *who* is to come).  
He says, *Don't bother thinking you can get down the path to witness this thing  
Until you are ready ... until you've sweated and fretted over it,  
And taken the great surgery – the unblocking of all our spiritual arteries,  
The reconnection of our nerve endings to our brain.*  
Look at him – wild and foaming, keeping us at bay with a torch and threats.  
This isn't going to be easy.

John intends to *recondition* us, *reprogram* us – His mission:  
"Fill off the valleys and level off all the mountains.  
Make the crooked roads straight and the rough places smooth."

No indeed; this will not be easy. How will we ever pass through?

When Gabriel was born, and he was put in my arms, a sudden rush of energy left me,  
And all I could say was, "I have a son, I have a son."  
I think seeing him, my heart, now living outside my body, was stunning.  
When Annie was born, it was as though she simply showed up,  
And everything in that little room was still and reverent,  
And a life had gotten where it needed to be – outside its good home, inside its new one.  
And there went my heart again.

*That's* what John the Baptist is talking about.  
Anyone can trim a tree; this man, this servant of the Most High,  
The prophet ringing a bell and standing in a river –  
He fills the space between us and the creche,  
And he demands our *hearts* as payment to pass.

During this time of Advent, we Christians hold to an impossibility.  
We lash ourselves to it, as if our very lives depended upon it, because, finally, they do.  
The impossible thing to which we cling  
Is that "God is always future needing to be born."  
That's Meister Eckhart, by the way, not me – that "God is always future needing to be born."  
And we can be witness to it –  
To a birth, a small human moment that happens all the time, but that requires our hearts,  
And is, in fact, nothing less than God.

Next time someone asks if you're ready for Christmas, remember that.

The grant I told you about last week –  
That request for \$17,000 to the national Jubilee office for the purposes  
Of establishing a community garden –  
Well, it didn't come through; the money went to other worthy projects.

And yet. And yet.  
It was our concern for the health of the people of this neighborhood  
That gave rise to the grant-application process,  
And so I stuck my hands in my pockets and kicked at the snow a little and went on my way,  
Back to the original concern – How you show people the love of God, how you feed 'em.

Then. Yesterday I watched 449 people come into Rooke Hall for the Agape Dinner.  
I watched as they were fed turkey and ham and veggies and bread,  
A little sweet at the end and a cuppa coffee,  
And then a coat and maybe even a sweatshirt.  
I watched as 230 children got hats and mittens, books and stuffed animals,  
And got to see Santa,  
And got to go in to the nursery, which had been turned into a free toy store,  
Where, no doubt, there were some very careful negotiations taking place –  
Shall I take this one or that one? "Only one? Okay."

Then a little warm conversation, and a bag of bread or meat on the way out the door.

It was powerful and humbling.

Sisters and brothers, you showed our neighbors the love of God yesterday,

And not by thrusting rough doctrine down their throats.

You fed 'em. Fed 'em for real.

That doesn't eliminate the need for a garden – if anything it only highlights it –

But in the end, our Agape Dinner was *agape* – that old Greek word from the Bible,

One of many Greek words for love.

A contemporary theologian named Oord wrote that *agape* is

“An intentional response to promote well-being

When responding to that which has generated *ill-being*.”

That's precisely what I witnessed yesterday.

Much as we thrust our hands in our pockets and kick the snow when things don't go our way,

The fact remains that God is always future needing to be born,

And when we reach out beyond ourselves and serve,

We're midwifing that birth in our own day.

That had properly ought to stun us into silence.

There is only one Mother; there is only one Child;

But the attendants are without number, in unbroken succession throughout time.

When you go through something like that ...

When you finish up and all the dishes are clean ...

When you go home and put up your feet ...

When you go back to your life,

At some point you have a moment to check in with God,

And you find, midwife that you are,

That the price you paid John – your heart – has returned to you –

Come back, a hundredfold, into the empty space.

Not by magic, but by Advent prayer and supplication and acts of mercy.

Take these last weeks of Advent with great care, brothers and sisters,

For the repentance of John is not about how we *have* lived;

It's about how we *will* live.

Let us pray.

*Lord Christ, make us ready for Christmas.*

*Come this way.*

*We are your holy temple, and will bring you into this world.*

Amen.