

## Advent – Pregnant Pause before the Birth of New Life

St Paul's Episcopal Church  
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Let us Pray

Open our hearts, our ears, our eyes, our minds, our hands, to your guidance, wisdom, spirit and direction so that we may hear and heed your call to us. This we ask in the name of your son our Lord, Jesus, Christ.

*Amen*

Much of this morning's presentation is a personal witness of faith – an unusual and strange place for me to put myself in as an Episcopalian, especially one who is English – I share what I think is a general tendency for English Episcopalians – to be rather reticent about how I experience the presence of God in my life.

I am reminded of a friend who purchased a cross that I made. She told me she felt uncomfortable wearing it out in the open and proceeded to tuck it under the sweater she was wearing. Like her, I tend to keep my religious beliefs quite hidden, under my sweater, but this morning I find I have gotten myself in a position where I will have to wear my religious beliefs out in the open, or some of them anyway!

While I enjoy talking about and sharing my work I am also rather afraid of talking too much about it. Especially I am afraid of telling people what I see in it or what I think I have put into it, what it means because I want the viewer or the wearer to take from it whatever meaning they see in it. Hearing what other people see in my work is one of the most rewarding parts of creating it so I hope that my talking about the hangings and vestments that were created for St. Paul's will not prevent you from seeing them and experiencing them in your own special way. So I will begin with a brief showing of the paraments and vestments, accompanied with selected bible readings, then I will talk about Advent and its meaning to me compared to lent and follow that with a description of the processes and inspiration I went through in their creation. I hope there will be time at the end for some feed back and discussion.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made. In Him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in the darkness and the darkness comprehended it not. There was a man sent from God whose name was John. The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light that all men through him might believe. He was not that light but was sent to bear witness to that light. That was the true light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world

Oh come house of Jacob let us walk in the light of the Lord.

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end." And Mary said to the angel, "How shall this be, since I have no husband?" And the angel said to her: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold, your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible." And Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her .

I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.

The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled and every mountain shall be brought low and the crooked shall be made straight and the rough ways shall be made smooth and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

The story of the annunciation is one that most of us are familiar with and it has been the subject of many works of art. But it only appears in the Sunday lectionary once every 3 years, on the fourth Sunday in Advent. In the lectionary of the book of Common Prayer that I grew up with it doesn't appear on Sundays at all. So its familiarity is rather surprising. I now realize that I became familiar with it from hearing it read in the King's College festival of lessons and carols on Christmas Eve. Listening to that service on the wireless was an important ritual in the house I grew up in – and remains one for me. And then, no more than a week later we celebrate the birth. Sometimes it is only one day later! A pretty short pregnancy!

The story also appears in the lectionary for the feast of the Annunciation on March 25, which most of us ignore! March 25 is usually in the middle of Lent and who is thinking of the Annunciation at that point? Personally I would rather have the

annunciation story read at the beginning of Advent as that seems to fit better with the sense of expectant preparation for a long awaited event that I associate with Advent.

Mary accepts her blessing with equanimity – even joy. But she did not know what she was getting into when she said “Let it be to me according to your word” “Finding favor with God” did not lead to an easy life. It led to a life full of what would seem to be suffering – the birth of an illegitimate child, a child who is not the progeny of her betrothed. A son who rejected his family, stirred up trouble with the authorities and was crucified and was not referred to as the Son of the Most High in his lifetime nor did it seem he was given the throne of David.

But I have come to realize that this story means a lot to me because, it seems to describe in metaphorical or symbolic terms the creative process that I go through. It is not that I am a virgin, nor do I claim to give birth (even in metaphorical terms) to the Son of God, or even that I have heard the voice of the angel Gabriel, or suffered the kinds of losses and pain that must have been Mary's lot as the mother of Jesus. But despite the differences there are parallels. I do hear a call. I do get inspired. I often feel as if someone other than me has a hand in the work that I do. I have to let go of my preconceived notions of what I am trying to produce. I am often surprised by the discoveries I find in the work that I had a hand in making. And recognizing those parallels helps give meaning to the work I do.

We are told it only took one angel to get God's message to Mary, and it was far more significant than any message I have ever gotten but it almost always takes more than one angel to get the message to me.

The first message, that led to the advent paraments and vestments came in the form of a question from a friend who is a parishioner at the Church of the Holy Comforter. She asked when I was going to make another chasuble. She knew that I have made chasubles in the past because the Rector at the Church of the Holy Comforter is a good friend of ours and wears two of the four chasuble's I have ever made. I told her that making another one would probably only happen if I were asked to do it. Later I realized that that was a cop out - I was not likely to be asked as not many people knew that I have made vestments in the past.

The next message came from Bob Hetherington in a sermon during Advent last year. In that sermon he urged the congregation not to miss the gift that the coming Christmas would bring to each one of us. Then at Forum that same Sunday Ben Campbell prefaced his presentation on a totally different subject by asking if we had purple paraments and vestments in the church. On learning that we did he suggested that blue was more appropriate. As St. Paul's had just dedicated a new set of gorgeous purple hangings that the Altar Guild was very proud of that remark was a little disconcerting. Ben went on to mention that blue was more appropriate because advent was so different from lent and use of a different color helps to make that differentiation. It was the first time I had heard that anyone was using blue for Advent and I was intrigued.

Before I had time to think about what I might be getting myself in to I had written a note to Bob offering to create and donate to the church a set of paraments and vestments for use at St. Paul's during Advent. He accepted the offer, without really knowing what he was getting himself in to either!

So how is Lent different from Advent. Well if you came to St. Paul's during this past week and then came again at Lent there is clearly one big difference. There are far fewer people here and it is much quieter in Advent! The atmosphere during Lent is not one of solemn penitential contemplation, but of noise, bustle and good cheer! It is also not one of fasting, a traditional Lenten discipline! But underlying the noise in Lent there is a sacrifice going on. A large number of people are giving a lot of their time and talent and gifts to the work of the church – to “proclaiming Christ in the Heart of the City” Entirely appropriate to Lent! Lent is a split season in the church. It starts off being a remembrance of the 40 days Jesus spent in the desert after his baptism in preparation for his ministry. The time schedule is off a little as it is 46 days long and so is the only season we celebrate in the church where the time in the biblical tradition is shorter than the time we use to remember the occasion. (Lent is actually only 40 days long as the Sundays are technically not included as they are celebrations of Christ's resurrection and as such were not counted when the penitential season of Lent was created).

But then Lent changes, and becomes a time of penitence preparing for the crucifixion and Passion. But the lessons in the lectionary throughout Lent are clear. It is a time when we are expected to repent of sins and seek forgiveness. To put on sackcloth and ashes. But the prophesies of a future event at the end of this time are veiled in mystery and obfuscation. We know that Easter is coming but that knowledge was denied to the disciples and Mary. And for us to understand the power of Good Friday and the dark of that Saturday and the surprise of Easter Sunday we have to forget the promise of that future. Not so with Advent. Mary has been pregnant since March 25 She knows when the baby is expected and can make preparations for it. We read in the lessons of the old and new testament prophesies of the coming Messiah. Like Mary and Joseph we think we know what we are expecting – the birth of the Son of God. For Mary and Joseph it was the literal birth of a baby. For us it is a metaphorical birth, a gift of new life. But what we get may be quite different from what is promised just as Jesus' life was not what the angel had implied in its message to Mary.

After meeting with Bob and the Altar Guild chairs to talk about the project and get basic acceptance of the idea, I came in to this room and saw the banner above the stage. At that moment the main theme seemed obvious - the presence of St. Paul's as a downtown congregation. The church's mission is Proclaiming Christ in the heart of the city. So a representation of a city skyline with St. Paul's in the heart would be the main theme.

Not long after that I was sitting in the place where I start most of my days. I try to write in my journal, record my dreams and read the lectionary every day but sometimes distractions are too strong! And sometimes the distraction that takes me away turns out to be something significant! An Angel with a message. As it was that morning. I looked out of the window and saw a wonderful soft yellow/orange light on the oak trees outside, lit by the rising sun. Getting up and looking towards the East I saw a wonderful pink and orange dawn between the houses across the street. At that moment I knew what the basic theme for the hangings had to be. But like Mary I didn't really know what I was getting in to. (It sounds like hubris to say that but on a completely different level there really is a parallel - something (God/Spirit) is inspiring me and the product that emerges after some period of labor will be somewhat different from my preconceived notions. As if the creation that comes is a virgin birth – not my work only but God's too – it is often as if what I want to produce will not emerge – I just have to let my ideas go. Handel is quoted as saying that he did not write the Messiah, God did. But Handel had a hand in it and without Handel it wouldn't have been written and we wouldn't have its blessing). Dawn is the presage of the coming of the sun and advent is the time leading up to the time when the son is born. Many of the lessons in Advent refer to the coming light. Dawn showing behind the city skyline was the vision.

The next question was how to do it. How do I represent dawn in fabric. I am not a needle point person, and in any case I knew enough to know that needlepoint on that much of fabric was certainly not an option. I didn't see how the varying colors could be achieved with piecing. But then I had the idea of creating the image by dyeing the fabric myself. I could have found someone to do it for me but I am never good at describing my visions. It is as if the visionary in me can only work through my hands and cannot give me a picture to describe. I knew enough to be dangerous. Enough to know that if I were going to dye the fabric myself it would have to be cotton or silk. Cotton did not seem good enough, so silk it would be. So I followed a path I have followed before. Find a book that tells you how to do it and that contains a list of supplies and suppliers. Read the book, order supplies and then start to make mistakes. But one learns from those mistakes and practice. I found I could get the right color for the sky and after several trials achieved roughly what I wanted. Getting a deep enough color to satisfy me for the foreground proved to be more than I could manage. So I set out to find and purchase that fabric, deciding that staying with silk was the right way to go.

Before selecting the colors of the fabrics to be used to represent the buildings in the city I noticed that blue is a recurrent color in the windows of the building and in the mosaic above the altar. From my usual place in the 9 o'clock circle I see the window with an image of Jesus as Shepherd standing in front of a horizon of blue hills. The intensity of the blues in it is amazing and I wanted to try to match that intensity if I could. I wanted also to pick up the blues in the mosaic above the altar. Then just last Sunday I noticed that the crosses in the altar rail have a blue background!

Then I cut out and pieced together the foreground pieces and sewed them on to the background. These slides show some details of the high altar frontal.

Learning how to do a decent drawing of St. Paul's in fabric dye was the next challenge. Fabric dye, is like watercolor and has a terrible tendency to spread when applied – very useful if the image of dawn is being represented but not so good for a building! One has to get it right the first time – one cannot use an eraser or wipe it off. My usual way around that is to do it lots of times and hope that one of them is OK. So it was with the image of St. Paul's. Even so, close inspection of the image shows up its true character!

With the High Altar frontal laid out it was time to turn to the free standing altar. When I decorated the Christmas tree at home growing up the last item to go on was the star at the top. The star that stopped over Bethlehem. The star that the wise men used as a guide. We need a guide to help us find our way to the Christ child and the gift that Christmas will bring to us. The star seemed a suitable symbol to place over the city. This star is clearly over the center of the city as the points are in front of some buildings and behind others. In the center of the star if you look closely it turns out there is a cross – not something I intended about something that was pointed out to me. Perhaps it foreshadows the future trouble. And as we approach this star it brings us to the altar where the eucharistic bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ are blessed and found. Where at the 9 o'clock service we form ourselves into a circle that for me represents the body of Christ.

On the other side of the free standing altar we find a representation of the Annunciation. Not only because that episode is the Gospel reading used in the fourth Sunday of Advent but also to remind us of all the other prophets whose words we hear during Advent. I used images from the windows at St. Paul's in my representation of the scene – the angel Gabriel in white, otherworldly floating just above the hills. But Mary is often pictured with head bowed as if afraid. But for me Mary has a strength that has been betrayed by the church. She ponders the prophecy in her heart but the only question she voices is a practical one. "How can this be as I have no husband?" Or as the King James version has it "Since I know not a man" Then she seems to accept her call with strength. The strength she will need to face her life as Jesus' Mother, as the Mother of God. I found that Mary in a window on the other side of the church, in the image of the women seeing the resurrected Jesus. Looking up and facing her fate, wearing blue as many images show her. In a way she shows herself as an equal with the angel, a partner with God in this creative work, fulfilling God's purpose.

Next came the pulpit and lectern frontals. In a previous life I was a mathematician. Mathematicians use letters from the Greek alphabet as symbols. The book of Revelation refers to God as Alpha and Omega, beginning and end and they are on the pulpit and lectern frontals, like book ends on either side of the chancel. Like the Christ candle on the Advent, wreath they are white, color of light and purity.

The chasuble, and one of the stoles, was inspired by the passage in Isaiah, quoted by John the Baptist in all four gospels! “In the wilderness prepare the way of the lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain and hill laid low. The uneven ground shall become level and the rough places plain.” The back being the crooked path that winds its way up and down hill. The front showing the path made straight as the prophet exhorts us to do. It becomes particularly significant at the 7:45 service, as I found out last week. The priest consecrates the bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ, standing at the high altar with her back to us the congregation. Then once the prayers have been said in which we repent of our sins, remember the pain and suffering, the crooked path that we wish were easier and that Christ can make easier for us, he turns and shows the participants the consecrated elements, exposing the path made straight, and invites us to partake of that sacrament – “The gifts of God, for the people of God”.

A year ago I heard a message. “Don’t miss the gift that this Christmas has for you” This year has been one of expectant preparation and the due date was last Sunday. It was like Christmas for me as I gave the fruit of gifts that I received from God to the church.

Thank you.