

Advent 4 Study December 18, 2022

Today, the fourth Sunday of Advent, marks the end of the Advent season. Through this time, we have been reading some of the poetry of Ann Weems and hopefully have been given new insights into how we might journey towards Bethlehem. In Study One, Ann invited us to go with her to Bethlehem and there find our kneeling places; in Study Two, she wrote of the God of surprises who was both unpredictable and yet at the same time consistently faithful; in Study Three, Ann took us by the hand and heart and led us from the crowded malls and overstuffed trees to simply stand before the simplest of scenes and to then let God be God with his Gift of gifts, Jesus.

In this, the last of the Advent Studies, Ann takes us “home”:
ANGEL – FILLED ADVENT

Wouldn't it be wonderful
if Advent came filled with angels and alleluias?
Wouldn't it be perfect
if we were greeted on these December mornings
with a hovering of heavenly hosts, tuning their harps and brushing
up on their fa-la-las? Wouldn't it be incredible
if their music filled our waking hours
with a promise of peace on earth and if each Advent night we
dreamed of nothing but goodwill?
Wouldn't we be ecstatic if we could take those angels shopping,
or trim the tree or have them hold our hands and dance through our
houses decorating? And, oh how glorious it would be
to sit in church next to an angel and sing our hark-the heralds!
What an Advent that would be!
What Christmas spirit we could have!
An angel-filled Advent with so many possibilities!

But in lieu of that,
perhaps we can give thanks
for the good earthly joys we have been given and for the earthly
“angels” that we know and who do such a good job of filling
our Advent with Alleluias!

(from *Kneeling in Bethlehem* Westminster Press 1980)

We had left the desert and were on our way into the Galilee. After the disaster in Bethlehem where all my imaginings of the sanctity of the birthing-place of the Light of the world were shattered by the crass commercialism of the town of the Church of the Nativity, I was less than enthusiastic about going to another urban centre – it would, I thought, probably be just m. o.t.s. (more of the same).

Arriving in Nazareth, we were greeted by nuns from Quebec who entertained us with stories of life in the town of the Annunciation and we amused them with the dreadfulness of our French. They spoke of the nature of the villagers – how Moslems and Jews and Christians had each other’s back by watching over their neighbours’ stores when each had their holy day of the week and wanted to observe their rituals without closing down their businesses. This cooperation among the three faith groups was incredibly rare in that day and in those times, but the nuns said that this had been an ongoing sharing for longer than any of them could remember.

After lunch, they took us downstairs to see their “basement” but that’s another story...leaving the good sisters, we walked down the hill to the Church of the Annunciation where tradition tells us Miriam, the fourteen year old daughter of Anne and Joachim, met an angel while filling a water jug at the local well and who said YES to the invitation from the Creator to be the channel for God’s entry into the human condition. Standing in the grotto beneath the

very impressive and new (by Middle East standards!) church, I began to imagine her story.....

For many of us, there are moments we remember when a decision we made altered or cemented the path in life by which we walk. For me, it was a double decision in 1976 when I accepted an invitation to be ordained and decided that it was a very very goodly thing to marry Sharon. Neither of these has been a disappointment and both have made me a better person.

In the gospel for today, we hear of one such moment when a decision (actually two) was made that changed the life of the one choosing the way offered. That not only changed the person, but set the world on a new trajectory, a new path. I would like to tell you the story of decisions made...

Bernard Miles, a BBC Radio personality in the Sixties described her as “a wee slip of a lass”. Born into obscurity in an obscure village in the back water of the Roman Empire, from the moment of her birth her entire life was set out by her father and her culture. As a woman, there were three expectations of her: first, that she would marry; second, that she would maintain a peaceful and well-managed household for her husband and third, that she would perpetuate the bloodline by birthing many children. This was the lot, the fate of the women of her world and there was nothing that could be done to alter it! Her early years were spent at her mother’s side, learning all the tricks of her trade as caretaker, cook, cleaner and servant of her father and brothers. When she was thirteen, she fulfilled the second expectation by becoming engaged to an honourable man of her village. He was older than she, respected by all, a member of the synagogue establishment and a well-reputed carpenter. He would make a fine husband and give her a life which, while not exciting, would be peace-filled.

One day, a day like any other, she was fulfilling one of her daily tasks – she went to the village well to draw the water needed at home. She loved this work, for at the well she would meet other young women (and some older ones!) and as they filled their jars, they would laugh and cry and sing and gossip and dream and be a community. And so it was with great excitement that she turned the corner, wanting to share with her friends all the wedding plans and ask the important questions of those who were married. But there was no one there – was she early? Late? Puzzled, she knew that she could not sit and wait for the others to arrive, for if she was overly long in returning, her father would send one of her brothers to find her and embarrass her in front of her friends. And so she drew the water and when finished, sat on the edge of the well to get the strength needed to carry the two jars home. As she sat, she thought she heard a sound...”Miriam”... Looking around, she saw no one and thought that it was just the wind. ...”Miriam”, a second time it came and it was then that she remembered a story she had overheard her father and brothers discussing about one of their ancestors named Samuel who had had an experience like the one she was in the midst of. Of how Samuel had answered and how his life had been changed. So, she whispered as Samuel had done so long ago, “Here I am, Lord; your servant is listening.”

“Miriam”, the Voice said, “you are blessed by the Lord and are the chosen one. I bring you wondrous good news of such joy – you will bear a son who will be the Redeemer of the world and you shall name him Jesus.”

“How can this be?” she asked, “I hardly know my fiancée Joseph, especially in THAT way. How can this be?”

The Voice replied, “Do not be afraid daughter of God, for with God all things are possible.”

Miriam was stunned into silence and in that void-time, she thought and thought. “If I say Yes to all this, my life will be completely unhinged. Because I am not married, I will be seen as a town harlot and be ostracized by all in the village; my parents will be shamed before the community and the loss of face and reputation will destroy my whole family. I could even be sent into the desert to die alone among the jackals. And what would happen to Joseph should all this come to pass?...And yet, if it is God’s desire, who am I to wrestle with the Almighty? I’ve always believed that Yahweh is a loving God and have been told over and over again that He is present everywhere and at all times. Surely, He will protect me.”

Trembling, Miriam bowed her head and whispered, “Let it be as it will be Lord. I am your servant.”

Returning home, she told no one of her encounter at the well but soon it became apparent that she was with child and somehow her family rallied around her against all comers.

Meanwhile, Joseph had a similar encounter in which he was told that his Miriam was pregnant and would give birth to a boy who would be blessed by God and be a blessing to all. Like Miriam, he protested that this was impossible as he barely knew her and not in THAT way. He was told to take her into his heart and home and that all would be well. Like Miriam, Joseph sat in stunned silence and weighed his options: IF he did what God wanted him to do, the consequences would be disastrous – he would be disowned by his family, he would lose all his customers; he would probably have to leave town and find a new home far, far away from the scandal; he would probably be thrown out of the synagogue and would be labelled a pariah. And yet, like Miriam, he knew that God did not give tasks which were uncopeable...did he trust God enough? After

an agonizing time, he bowed his head and whispered, “Here I am, your servant, Lord. Let it be as it will be.”

And thus were two decisions made so so long ago that would change the history not only of Joseph and Miriam, but of the world. They said YES to God, even knowing that such a decision could have disastrous consequences for both of them. And yet, they said YES and both fell into the embrace of God’s compassion and love when they said, “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour; for He has looked with favour on His servant.”

It is this response of Mary and Joseph to the call of God to become such vessels for love and hope and joy; it is because they lay aside their human fears and took angels’ hands so they might walk the highway of our God (as Isaiah speaks of) and it their example of submission to love that Ann Weems describes as GODBURST
When the Holy Child is born into our hearts

there is a rain of stars, a rushing of angels,
a blaze of candles and this Godburst into our lives. Love is running through the streets.

(from *Kneeling in Bethlehem* Westminster Press 1980)

May we be open to the calling of God in our lives and know that our loving Creator would not ask of us anything that with Him we cannot accomplish. May we remember Joseph and Mary and continually thank God that they said YES....AMEN.