



Advent 4 2014: St. Stephen's Anglican Church, West Vancouver
The Rt. Rev. Melissa M. Skelton

Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "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. 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 ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" 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 holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, 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." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

On Friday, my day off this week, I took the opportunity to begin preparing my condo in downtown Vancouver for Christmas. Because of all the busy-ness of late November and December getting a jump on preparing my little abode has been hard, if not impossible to do. And because much of my time is occupied next week, I figured I would take Saturday to do some of things that I would typically do Christmas Eve. One of these things, was, of course, to put up a Christmas tree.

Now be advised that I am a real Christmas tree lover. I love the look and smell, and even the mess of a real Christmas tree in the house. But this year because I rent in a condo in a building where the association does not allow any resident to have a real tree, the entire process for getting a putting up a tree was different.

And so on Friday morning, off I went to Canadian Tire on Cambie Street where I purchased a 7 foot artificial tree that had the appropriate girth for a condo the size of mine. I took the box home, got it out of my car, took the stand and the three pieces out of the box and put it all together one piece at a time. After this, I pulled the branches down and then did something I can only describe as “fluffing” the greenery to create the thickness of a real tree. A few hours later, boxes of ornaments were out in my little living room and a few hours after this, the tree was fully decorated. It was, of course, not the big wide fresh tree that I had wanted and imagined, but in all its artificial humility, its downsized splendor, it was, shall we say, sufficient.

Preparing the house is oh, so important during Advent, isn't it? Preparing a place where something wonderful can come to visit us at Christmas, even if that wonderful Christmas presence stays around for a mere twelve days.

And so it's interesting that our first lesson this morning is all about houses. In it, we hear King David worrying about how best to house the presence of God. David, the shepherd turned king, we learn, has finally arrived and is now living in a cedar house. Why then, David muses, should God, the one who has traveled with him from shepherd to king to triumphant king, the one who has traveled with the people in the tabernacle sheltered by a tent, why should this God not at least also have a house of cedar to live in? And so David consults the prophet Nathan who initially tells him to do whatever he is moved to do about this.

But then, according to the story, God intervenes. God comes to Nathan in the night and gives him a message for David.

“Tell David this,” God says to Nathan.

“I, God, do not need a fine cedar house to dwell with you and with my people Israel. I, God, have never yearned for or asked for a fine cedar house. David, I took you from living in the pasture, from following the sheep, to be prince over the people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went. It is not your job to make a house for me to keep me with you. I, myself, am the one who chooses to dwell with you.”

Which in a sense is also what our Gospel shows us this morning: we have the familiar story of Mary, the peasant teenager, caught by surprise by an angel bearing the news that she, a seemingly unremarkable girl, will be the dwelling place, the “house” if you will, of the most high. We have the mention of her cousin Elizabeth an older woman thought to be barren and, therefore, useless, also housing another child who will play an essential part in the drama, John the Baptist, the one heralding the coming of God in Christ. And we have the song of Mary, herself, the *Magnificat*, a hymn to God's liberating favor toward the lowly.

The lowly, the tented, the barren, the downtrodden, the unprepared as the place where or with whom God chooses to dwell over and over again. David, Mary, Elizabeth, you and me. God choosing to dwell with us, not because we have created a worthy, fancy dwelling place, finished and prepared, one that meets every high standard we would set for ourselves, but because God meets us, chooses to dwell with us and with those who are not ready, who are not deemed, who have not been able to meet high standards, but who are loved by God and whom God joins in the real houses they inhabit.

In what imperfect place, in what part of your imperfect life is God trying to join you in this Advent season? And to pose the same question to you as a parish, in what raggedy and imperfect situation are you experiencing the presence of God, a presence that would not have been experienced in a more perfect situation?

I had quite an argument with myself about that artificial Christmas tree before I finally decided to get it. The argument went something like this: I do not do artificial trees! Advent and Christmas are about real trees. To have less than a real tree would mean that Christmas itself would not be real. And then I remembered something that someone said to me once when I was trying my best to do create something perfect (much like David's lovely cedar house) in a situation where I just could not do so. Seeing my frustration and disappointment, what my friend said to me was this: "Remember, Melissa, that the enemy of the good is the perfect. The enemy of the good is the perfect."

Most of us *will* prepare our houses in some way, won't we, as we wait in Advent for the coming of God once again, a coming that is now only 4 days away. We will prepare our houses in whatever way we can in the rain and the mess that is life in Vancouver this season, that is life at the end of 2014 in what has been a most messy, remarkable, challenging and surprising year—a year that most of us were not prepared for.

But know this: that after filling up our houses with wreaths and trees, miniature villages and candles, Christmas cards displayed on the mantle, lights and greenery, after filling up our houses with all these things, the way that we can most prepare for the coming of our God, the God of David, Mary, Elizabeth and Jesus is to empty ourselves, to let go not only of our desire to create a perfect place but our desire to live a perfect life, all in order to make more room in ourselves and to become a vessel waiting to be filled by the love of God. For our God is a God who chooses over and over again to be with his own in the beauty, the goodness and the lowliness of the lives that they actually live. Our God is a God who chooses to come to this messy and unprepared earth in order to be with us, his own people.