

4 Advent, Year B  
Luke 1:26-38

When I preached on the First Sunday of Advent on November 30th, I said that a lot of the world around us was already well into the celebration of the season — lights, music, shopping, parties, the whole nine yards.

And if that was true on November 30th, then by now what's going on could only be described as an absolute frenzy.

In fact, there are some people who have been at it so long that they are already exhausted, and they can't wait for the whole thing to be over and done with.

But that's not us.

At least I hope that's not us.

I hope all of us are perched on a threshold and waiting at the door.

I hope we're perched on the threshold and waiting to take our part in the festivities — waiting to greet the God/Child at his birth, but knowing that it's not time yet.

Today is the Fourth Sunday of Advent, the last Sunday of Advent, but today the Advent community is still saying to the

rest of the world, “We will celebrate no Christmas before its time.”

The meal may be planned, the guest list might be complete, the tree and house might be decorated, the shopping might be finished, and in an impatient culture it may seem almost impossible to see anything worthwhile in waiting, but it’s not time yet.

For the Advent community, the Feast has not begun.

And so we wait.

But ours isn’t the kind of thumb-twiddling, watch-gazing waiting that goes on in restaurant foyers and doctors’ reception rooms.

Ours is a productive kind of waiting, a kind of waiting that is meant to help prepare us for the new life and the new growth and the new beginnings that the Christ-Mass will offer.

It’s the kind of waiting that is meant to put us in the best possible place for the celebration of the Feast.

And I believe an important part of our waiting-work should be some very careful thought about where we will meet and greet the Christ, and how we will treat the Christ when he arrives.

I say that because I have a sense that a lot of the modern world has lost track of the true meaning of hospitality.

The dictionary tells us that hospitality has to do with the generous welcoming of guests, that it means being receptive and open to the strangers and guests who come into our midst.

I heard a story once about a little boy who knew something about hospitality.

I think it may have been a Paul Harvey story, and maybe it's one you know.

There was a little boy who was chosen to play the part of the innkeeper in the parish Christmas pageant.

But he had a problem with the storyline.

In rehearsal, when the director told him that his part was to tell Joseph and Mary that there wasn't any room in the inn, the little boy got very upset.

"But that isn't nice," he said.

"Mary's pregnant, and she's tired, and she needs a place to have her baby."

The director agreed, but she explained that that was the way it really had happened, so the pageant had to tell the story that way.

Well, the little boy wasn't happy, but he agreed that he could go along.

But on the night of the performance the little innkeeper couldn't help himself.

So when Mary and Joseph knocked on the door of his inn he opened the door and he said, "I'm sorry, we don't have any rooms — but would you like to come in for a drink."

There was something in that little boy that needed to reach out to those travelers.

He needed to make some sign, some gesture of reception. Unfortunately, the world we live in won't encourage that small boy to continue to make those kinds of signs and gestures.

He will be taught to be afraid of the stranger — and almost everyone will tell him not to take a chance by going out of his way.

And while the thought of the mistreatment or loss of one more child seems like too much to bear, I think that's sad.

4.

And shame on us adults.

Shame on us if we are teaching our children that there is a murderer or a molester or a kidnapper behind every stranger's face.

We need to take care, and we need to teach our children to exercise caution and good judgement, but we also need to recapture the understanding and practice of Christian hospitality.

If we're not able to do that, I'm afraid of what will happen, or what won't happen, when we are in the presence of the Christ in our midst whom we don't yet know.

I worry especially about the children, and I worry about them especially at this time of year.

From the time they're old enough to talk we're asking them, "What do you want for Christmas? What's Santa going to bring you?"

We encourage them to make lists and to write letters to the North Pole, but if we're not careful it won't be long before the child-like wonder and awe will begin to give way to a fear that worries that there won't be enough presents, or that they won't be the right ones.

5.

And I worry about the quality of the encounter between Jesus and the ones he loves the most.

I worry because thanks to the grown ups in the world most children might only want to know, “What did you bring me?”  
And I worry because I’m afraid that that’s really what most of the grown ups want to know, too, “What did you bring me?”  
There are guests and strangers in our midst.  
There is a stranger within me whom I don’t yet know.  
There is a guest sitting in the pew near you this morning.  
There are strangers walking the streets of La Jolla and San Diego.  
There are guests who will visit our homes this season.  
There are guests and strangers within us and all around us.  
And everything important in this world depends on how we treat those guests and strangers.  
Because in each encounter with one of those guests or strangers there is the possibility for the divine encounter with Jesus, the Christ.

6.

In each one of those encounters there is the chance that, like Mary, we will say, “Let it be with me according to your word,” and that Jesus will be born in us.

The waiting is almost over, but there is still work to be done.

“The glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.” Isaiah 40:5

May it happen soon, and very soon.

Lord, give us eyes to see you at your coming, and give us hearts and homes that will receive you and treat you as a most-honored guest sent from God. Amen.

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December 21, 2014  
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La Jolla, California