

Sermon: Just Before the Dawn
4 Advent, Year C
Luke 1:39-55

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Today is the fourth Sunday in Advent. Some have asked why the Advent liturgical color has shifted over the years from purple to blue. I'm not sure there is just one solid answer to that question. Both colors can indicate royalty. Purple has historically been a color associated with penitence. And while many of our readings in Advent still focus on repentance or turning to God, the tone that our more recent church theologians seem intent on setting is one of **hopeful expectation**. This Advent blue is sometimes referred to as sarum blue or Marian blue (associated with Mary).

People often remark that they feel close to God when they see a beautiful sunrise. As much as many of us love a good sunrise, this blue of Advent is the color that precedes that sunrise, when there is just barely a hint of daylight. This is the color of the sky just before the dawn. But you know the light is coming. It's in that setting that we can often see Venus, a.k.a. the Morning Star. Right now we are in the time of long nights and short days, a time when we are invited to ponder the darkness. For those who struggle with seasonal depression this can be a difficult time of year. So, what are we to do while we wait for the dawn to break, wait for the coming of our Lord? How do we wait, knowing that a change is coming, that light is just over the hill, that the darkness will not last?

In today's Gospel reading from Luke we have two pregnant women waiting: Elizabeth and Mary, both unlikely people to be bearing a baby. Elizabeth was well past her child bearing years when she became pregnant with John. And Mary, well, you know about Mary, she was very young, unmarried, a virgin. What do we learn by watching them wait for their babies to be born? What does hopeful expectation look like for them? Three things come to mind. 1. They wait *together*, enjoying the *present moment*. 2. They *support* and *encourage* one another, reminding each other that God is behind this situation they are in and that something divine is about to happen. And 3. They *believe* God's promises.

They must have had their dark moments, must have had times that were very difficult as they waited. Questions were bound to arise. Perhaps Mary came to support Elizabeth knowing that bearing a baby could be very dangerous in her old age. Or maybe Mary was shunned in her own hometown for being unmarried and pregnant and it was best to get out of town for a while? They faced all kinds of social and physical difficulties. And yet there is a palpable joy in this short description of their time together. Elizabeth says to Mary, "For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." And Luke the writer has Mary breaking out into joyful, prophetic song, one of the great masterpieces of poetry, now known as the Magnificat:

"My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

And Mary proceeds to show all of the reversals, the upside down world of God's kingdom, where God's inclination is toward the poor, the least socially and politically powerful, the lowly. Mary is portrayed as deeply faithful to the God she knows and loves as she looks ahead with great expectations, rejoicing in the present moment.

Christmas is almost here! But it is not here – yet! Many of us probably remember what it felt like to be a child waiting for Christmas Day. We wanted to jump out of our skin. Might you feel a bit of that excitement now? The bright red poinsettias are just in the next room. If we hang out here we will hear Sarah practicing Christmas music. We can feel something different in the air as that special day approaches.

We don't have to be physically pregnant to be filled with the wonder of this baby Jesus, this Christ child, coming into our world. But like Elizabeth and Mary, maybe we can wait *together* by simply *supporting* and *encouraging* each other in this community of faith. Perhaps we can just enjoy this *present moment* for what it is, trusting in God's promises. Maybe we can remember that God is with us as we wait. While we sit in the darkness or the deep blue that precedes the dawn of Christmas Day, even though we can't yet quite see that the sun is *just* about to rise... a baby is about to be born and love is about to be revealed in a new way. Something good is about to happen. On this last day of Advent, the end of our liturgical season, can we imagine ourselves draped in the deep blue of hopeful expectation?

I'd like to end with lights dimmed and for us to sit in silence for the next three minutes to ponder what hopeful expectation means to us.

Amen.