Advent 4—Year B
II Samuel 7:1-11, 16
Canticle 15—The Song of Mary
Luke 1:26-38

The **Fourth Sunday of Advent**. At this point, we are leaning so far into **Christmas**, that it is easy to *scoot past* this Sunday, so eager are we to get to the "main" event. But things like **the birth of God into the world** and **into our hearts** take time to **gestate**. There is still **preparation** to be done, still **space to make**.

The **Collect** prays: **Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself. II Samuel** has the **LORD coming to the prophet Nathan** with **a word** to **deliver to King David**. Whenever we hear a **"Thus says the LORD,"** we better *sit up and take notice*; **there is something that God *really* wants us to hear**, and **this Sunday**, it is this: **Thus says the LORD, I have not *lived in a house* since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been *moving about* in a *tent* and a *tabernacle*.**

God *has* not, *will* not, be **constrained** and **confined** by **our houses**, by **our limits**, by **our doctrines** and **beliefs** and **inclinations**, by **our plans**, by **our certitude**. **God *has***, and ***will***, always be characterized by ***movement***, **taking up *residence* in a *tent*** and in a ***tabernacle*** that **can *move about*** wherever the people are.

It is so easy for us to **fix our attention** on **how something ought to be**, on **what should *or* should not be**, on our **expectations**. We are in constant need of having our **conscience purified**—in fact, this has to be a **daily practice**. Our **fixations** and **distractions** have to be **consistently challenged** and **upended** to **create that space**; we have to **allow God to surprise us**, to **keep opening up that space inside of us**, to **prepare inside of us a mansion for the divinity** that is **moving in to take up residence** there.

We have to **voice our resistance**, just as **Mary** did; we have to utter our **"how can this be since I am a woman who has not *known* her betrothed in *that* way,"** our **"how can this be since I have no experience with what *you* are telling me *you* are about to birth in *and* through my being?"** We have to **voice our resistance**, and then we **pray for Mary to come alongside us to help us find the grace to yield**, **to surrender *as she did*, to allow the Holy Spirit to envelop us *as it did her*, to take the angel Gabriel at his word** and **believe**, ***even in the midst of all that feels overwhelming*** and ***intractable*** and ***resistant to anything new and creative*, to believe that NOTHING is IMPOSSIBLE with God**. And then, to **join Mary** in a deep, **"*Yes, yes*, here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."**

So, **what is it**, **this week**, **today** even, **that can carve out that space in you**? ***Sometimes***, it is **loss** and **grief** and **utter powerlessness** that **carve out that space that opens up our capacity to *yield*, that sets free the *allowing* so necessary for God**. And ***sometimes***, it is **the joy that catches us by surprise** and **takes our breath away**.

A **story came across the news** this week that just stopped me in my tracks. Amidst the **heavy**, **hard realities that we are living through**, this **one story touched a deep place inside of me**. *I don't quite know how* it connects to this **Fourth Sunday of Advent**, but **in some way** that I don't quite understand, *I think it does*. I'll trust that **the Spirit can work with you to sort out how it connects for *you***.

As the **first winter storm of the season approached Jefferson County in West Virginia this week**, the **Superintendent, Bondy Shay Gibson**, sent out this letter to her district:

Dear Jefferson County Schools Community,

For generations, families have greeted the first snow day of the year with joy. It is a time of renewed wonder at all the beautiful things that each season holds. A reminder of how fleeting a childhood can be. An opportunity to make some memories with your family that you hold on to for life.

For all of these reasons and many more, Jefferson County Schools will be completely closed for tomorrow, Dec. 16, in honor of the 1st snow day of the year. Closed for students ... closed for virtual ... closed for staff. It has been a year of seemingly endless loss and the stress of trying to make up for that loss. For just a moment, we can all let go of the worry of making up for the many things we missed by making sure this is one thing our kids won't lose this year.

So please, enjoy a day of sledding and hot chocolate and cozy fires. Take pictures of your kids in snow hats they will outgrow by next year and read books that you have wanted to lose yourself in, but haven't had the time. We will return to the serious and urgent business of growing up on Thursday, but for tomorrow…go build a snowman.

Sincerely,

Bondy Shay Gibson

Sometimes, **purifying our conscience looks like *that***. It looks like **letting our plans** and **duties** and **obligations go**, and **falling into the grace of unmerited, unexpected time** and **space** and **joy**. ***Sometimes***, **preparing a mansion** means **letting go of endless to-do lists**, and **simply being with those whom we love—family**, **friends**, **puppies**, **curled up cats**, **birds**, the **wonder** and **beauty of creation herself**. The **serious** and **urgent business of growing up** has **worn on us all too much this year**; no doubt, that's **part of what Mary felt long ago**. But ***somehow***, **she found the capacity to *surrender* to the infinite possibility of that one moment**, ***knowing it would change her forever***, and ***sensing that her "yes" would be transformative for the whole world***.

It **all starts** with **a moment of *space***, **a *yielding* to the deep "yes;"** it **all starts** with **an *allowing***. And **having leapt this once**, ***we'll know how to do it again tomorrow***, and ***the day after that***.

Sometimes, **the angel is Gabriel**, and **the greeting is a wee bit scary**, but ***sometimes***, **the angel is a school superintendent who grants us an unexpected gift**.

On this **Fourth Sunday of Advent, pay attention** to **the angels *wherever they break through your world*** and **know that it's all part of preparing a mansion to receive the One who is to come**. Amen.

The Rev. Cynthia K. R. Banks
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Boone, NC
December 20, 2020

The Collect
Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us **a mansion prepared for himself**; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

The Readings
The First Lesson—2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

When the king was settled in his house, and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, the king said to the prophet Nathan, "See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent." Nathan said to the king, "Go, do all that you have in mind; for the LORD is with you."

But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan: Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the LORD: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? **I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle.** Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?" Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the LORD of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.

The Response— **Canticle 15**
The Song of Mary *Magnificat*
Luke 1:46-55

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior; *
for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.
From this day all generations will call me blessed: *
the Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his Name.
He has mercy on those who fear him *
in every generation.
He has shown the strength of his arm, *
he has scattered the proud in their conceit.

He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, *
and has lifted up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things, *
and the rich he has sent away empty.
He has come to the help of his servant Israel, *
for he has remembered his promise of mercy,
The promise he made to our fathers, *
to Abraham and his children for ever.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit: *
as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. *Amen*.

The Gospel Reading—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.

Deacon: The Gospel of the Lord.
People: **Praise to you, Lord Christ.**

December 15, 2020

Dear Jefferson County Schools Community,

For generations, families have greeted the first snow day of the year with joy. It is a time of renewed wonder at all the beautiful things that each season holds. A reminder of how fleeting a childhood can be. An opportunity to make some memories with your family that you hold on to for life.

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Sincerely,
Bondy Shay Gibson, Ed.D.
Superintendent

The Collect

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and for ever. **Amen.**

The Readings

The First Lesson—Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.
They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.
For I the LORD love justice,
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;
I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.
Their descendants shall be known among the nations,
and their offspring among the peoples;
all who see them shall acknowledge
that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed.
I will greatly rejoice in the LORD,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.

Reader: Hear what the Spirit is saying to God's people.
People: **Thanks be to God.**

The Response—**Psalm 126**

In convertendo

1 When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, *
then were we like those who dream.

**2 Then was our mouth filled with laughter, *
and our tongue with shouts of joy.**

3 Then they said among the nations, *
"The LORD has done great things for them."

**4 The LORD has done great things for us, *
and we are glad indeed.**

5 Restore our fortunes, O LORD, *
like the watercourses of the Negev.

**6 Those who sowed with tears *
will reap with songs of joy.**

7 Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed, *
will come again with joy, shouldering their sheaves.

Then, the Deacon reads the Gospel, first saying:

Deacon: The Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Mark.

People: **Glory to you, Lord Christ**

The Gospel Reading—John 1:6-8, 19-28

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.