

“God Revealed”
Genesis 16:7-13 and Luke 1:26-38

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There is a bit of difference when it comes to preparing for Christmas inside the church and outside the church. Outside of the church we tend to skip the preparation part - we dive head first into Christmas with festive sweaters, cookie exchanges, cheery songs that have been remade and reusing dozens of times.

There is something less sweet and more, well, unsettling, about the start of Advent. It is a time that is meant to be a bit jarring. We are not waiting and anticipating a family reunion or the exchange of presents. We are not preparing our hearts and committing to daily practices of prayer in anticipation of office parties and merry movies. No, we are waiting for the birth of Christ - a moment that, no matter what Christ means to you personally, changed the course of the world and forever impacted history.

Advent is our time to spiritually prepare ourselves for what we already know happened, because by doing so we are able to step into our faith and the practice of our faith as if for the first time. I always think of a metaphor with running, which doesn't work for everyone because some people really loathe running and it's just one activity that works for some people. But for me, committing to running reminds me of committing to Advent. Running is this practice that is difficult for me to stay committed to - I will find any and every excuse in the world why I shouldn't or can't put on my shoes and head outside for 45 minutes. But when I do, I never regret it. It's often one of the best parts of my week because I'm in tune with my body and my mind and my heart. I solve the world's problems when I'm running. I check in with my spirit and tend to

parts that feel tired or are hurting. And when I get home, I am more clear-eyed, energized, and open than if I had skipped it. It sets me up for the rest of the day.

This is what Advent does. It's easy to get so wrapped up in Christmas, or so wrapped up in rejecting the consumerism of Christmas, that we find excuses why we don't practice Advent or haven't practiced it in a long time. But when we do find our way into it - whether it's on Sunday mornings in worship or through a daily prayer or time of reflection - it gives us the opportunity to check in with our spirit and tend to parts that feel tired or are hurting. As we prepare for God's arrival in the world, we think about what that means, what impact that has on our life, and how we want to live. By the end of Advent, we are more clear-eyed, energized, and open. It sets us up for the rest of the year.

If Christmas out there is cheery and simple, Advent in here invites complications and hard stories. The story we tell each year is certainly not one we hear every day - angels and a virgin birth, a homeless immigrant family and smelly strangers showing up at your door to see your infant child. It is a story that we tell as if it makes the most sense in the world, but is meant to invite questions. It is meant to take a month of pondering it before we're ready to reenact it on Christmas Eve.

In fact, the story begins in such a way that begs us to stop and ask questions. An unmarried virgin girl is visited by an angel who tells her she is going to conceive a child who is God's son. I don't think we're supposed to read this and say, "Yep, sounds about right, keep going."

Last week before worship started, I came across two people having a conversation in the atrium. They invited me to stop and join them. I thought it was going to be a casual "how are you coping with the wintery weather" kind of conversation, but instead they were discussing Mary's

story and asked me, “So, did Mary consent to being impregnated?” It’s a huge theological question worthy of more than just a minute before worship. It one that deserves reflection.

The issue of Mary’s consent or virginity or the plausibility of the start of this story is one that comes up fairly often inside our heads, but we don’t often give a lot of space to wrestle with out loud - probably because even doubting a version where Mary’s pregnancy was nonconsensual makes us feel icky towards God and Christmas and our faith. In Advent, we’re called to take the time to ponder and wonder and wrestle. Having an understanding of that part of the Christmas story is kind of necessary in order to hear the rest of it.

So this Advent we are stepping into the story knowing that sometimes it is uncomfortable or that it is easier to read quickly and then skip ahead to the singing.

This year, instead of saving Mary for the end, we are starting with her story. We are not only starting with her, but we are mirroring her story with another, earlier story in Scripture. The story of Hagar. These two have been paired together by Rev. Dr. Wilda Gafney, a womanist scholar and theologian who has created a three year sequence of scripture to be used in worship that writes women back into the center of the text. This Sunday is the first in her three year sequence, and it begins with Hagar and Mary, inviting us into the story in a way that feels more whole and grounded.

The stories of Hagar and Mary are quite similar. They are two of the most complicated stories in the Bible. Both center on women who are at the margins of society. Hagar is enslaved to a higher ranking family, to Abraham and Sarah, then called Abram and Sarai. When Hagar becomes pregnant with Abram’s son, Sarai’s jealousy leads her to abuse Hagar - with Hebrew language that tells us it is both physical and sexual abuse. Hagar, fearing for her own life and the life of her unborn child, runs away. Alone in the wilderness there would have been great risks - not

just to find food and shelter but risk of further abuse by whomever found her - but she sees getting out and running away as her only option.

Hagar is visited by an angel of God who tells her to return to Sarai, her abuser. The angel tells her that the child she is pregnant with will live in opposition to the people around them and that he will rise up and be known by all of their kin. The angels tells Hagar that God has heard of her abuse. When Hagar receives this message she is so moved that Hagar gives a name to God - she is the first person the Bible to give God a name - the first to have this honor.

Reading the ending sounds nice but with my modern ears I always cringe at the idea of sending Hagar back to her abuser. It's the same kind of discomfort I get when I start to think about whether or not Mary was on board for becoming the mother of the son of God.

In Advent, as in every season, it's okay to pause in the discomfort. Our discomfort has something to teach us. Perhaps it is something about our own past experiences that are echoed when we read the story. Perhaps it is something that sounds familiar in other, more recent, stories around us. Perhaps our discomfort has something to teach us about our boundaries or where our yearning for justice is. In Advent we are asked to pay attention to the discomfort. Pause there for a moment to listen to what it is saying.

These two stories and the discomfort it raises teaches something about the options of women in their time. Hagar and Mary point out how dependent women were on their household or a marriage for protection. How often women were only seen as a vehicle for bringing children into the world. How vulnerable women were. These stories invite us to examine how far we've come from that time and how far we have to go - what are the ways we still undervalue women or only value women for their mothering? What are the messages people who have been abused are sent

about returning to the people who abused them? How does our discomfort call us to keep working for justice in our communities, to protect the most vulnerable among us?

Hagar and Mary are both uniquely given a voice, even as we recognize their vulnerability. They are given voices that are strong enough to be heard by angels of God, knowing their words will be carried to their Creator. In hearing their voices, we hear the choice they are making for their futures. We hear the options that God has laid out for them, and we hear their acceptance of that future. Mary says, “Here I am. Let it be.” Mary and Hagar have each encountered God at a time when their future was unknown and uncertain, and they leave that encounter with hope. Hope for their lives. Hope for the lives of their children. Hope that whatever they have waiting for them back at home, God will be with them.

In sitting with the initial discomfort these stories raise we see the full power of what happens when we encounter God in the world. We see how people move from being on the margins, from being discounted, from being silenced, to being given a voice, a future, and hope. An encounter with God is one that can be defined by a feeling of hope when previously we only knew despair or pain or sorrow.

In the first week of Advent, our theme is hope. This is not a surface level hope or something whimsical. This is a deep hope that is born of hardship and coming out the other side. It is a hope that is fueled by justice and takes a lifetime to cultivate. It is a hope that sits in the discomfort and asks hard questions. It is a hope that looks to see where God is revealed in the world, who God has been revealed to, and how we might be an active witness.

This year as we prepare for Christmas, I invite us into the practice of the season of Advent. Listen to the stories and ponder them anew. Ask yourself questions about what hope means to you, about where you find hope, about where your hope comes from. Make space for your faith - no

matter what that looks like - every day knowing that through practice we are transformed and strengthened. And listen for the voices, the voices like Hagar and Mary, who are longing to be heard, whose stories are complicated and hope-filled and point us toward how God is working in the world. This season, may experiencing Advent jar us out of our routines and into faith. May we be just alarmed enough that we are ready when Christmas finally does arrive. Amen.