

St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Albuquerque, NM
Sermon, 12/19/2021, Advent 4C
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Readings at https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearC_RCL/Advent/CAdv4_RCL.html

St. Mark's Advent Book Study: All Creation Waits

According to the author of this book, animals have something vitally important, something HOLY & lifegiving to teach our souls about the variety of faithful responses to encroaching darkness... The author writes that the creatures of the earth can be for us "a book about God...a word of God."

Some of the teachings of the creatures in this book are beautiful, comforting, recognizably "churchy":

Muskrat, in his mounded winter shelter "allows others to join him—even non-kin—for the precious extra heat of a group huddle."

Little brown bat: "Males and females, young and old, some of different species—the many melts into one heat-sharing body. When cold threatens, they remember the place of their communion, and return."

Cottontail: The furry, long eared mystic, the contemplative cousin of Richard Rohr "Utterly still, she is utterly alert. In her stillness is her leap."

Wood Frog: like a little amphibian John Chrysostom proclaiming an Easter Homily as he emerges from his winter freeze, his once frozen blood beginning to flow once more, and he joins with "dozens of other wood frogs...[to] send up a thrilling chorus: *Death, we've robbed you of your ruin, we've taken you in!*"

Some of the teachings of the creatures in this book are a little less churchy, decidedly more "earthy"

Painted Turtle says: *Take a deep breath*

Black Bear: *Eat, eat more. Then Let go. Go limp.*

Whitetail Deer: *Trust your instincts, obey your body's urgent call to connect, to create*

Some of the teachings make me a little uncomfortable. Some of them make me VERY uncomfortable. And some of them downright terrify me.

Loon, who flies nonstop for 800 miles, then when they reach their destination lose all their flight feathers, all at once, and for a season cannot fly at all.

Honey Bee, who huddles and shivers in the dark of her hive, doing her part to keep her queen warm, and dies never having seen the light of day.

Turtle, buried in frozen stillness beneath the weight of winter pond, her skeleton literally dissolving: "Beneath it all she waits. It is her one work, and it is not easy."

Some of these lessons sound like the wisdom I long for.
But some of these lessons I don't want to learn.

And so, it is with all TRUE spiritual teachers.
They offer us some lessons we may not want to learn.

That's one way we know that a prophet's from God.
God's Prophets always show us the path that leads to LIFE...
but it isn't always—if ever—the path we'd prefer.

Just as the wild winter songs of the animals might
make our hearts leap with hope and longing,
and at the same time make us recoil slightly with discomfort or fear
So, too, the radical radiant song of the Virgin Mother in today's Gospel
Might evoke in many of us a conflicted, ambivalent response.

If it seems crazy for us—relatively wealthy, well-educated 21st Century Americans—to look
for spiritual guidance from a woodchuck or a loon,
It is perhaps crazier still for us to seek spiritual wisdom from an unmarried, pregnant girl
in the ancient Middle East.

If we are slaves to the Wisdom and Powers of this World, we will—at the very least—be wary
of these Messengers and their Messages. Wild animals. Hormonal women. Really. What's
next? A baby?

If we take time to listen, these Messengers and their Messages, *will* make us
uncomfortable. They might even terrify us. And they might, at the same time, become the
heralds of salvation.

One night this fall, when my family gathered around the dinner table for our nightly “highs
and lows” my 12-year-old, Johanna, announced seemingly out of the blue. “You know, it's
really not fair. I mean, I'm glad God is filling the hungry with good things, but sending the
rich away empty isn't fair at all. I mean, even the rich need something to eat!” It only took
me a FEW seconds to realize what she was talking about.

Johanna was working with her voice teacher, Jacque, to learn a musical setting of the
Magnificat to sing for this year's Christmas pageant. The Magnificat, or Song of Mary, is the
brilliant prophetic jewel that glows at the heart of today's Gospel. And, like the precious
spiritual wisdom of our animal friends, Mary's Song is at once radiant with hope and
beauty, and it is also deeply unsettling.

*He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,*

And the rich he has sent away empty.

If the inversion of power and privilege in Mary's Song is startling in English, it's even more startling in ASL! (One of the highlights of Advent for me this year was meeting with St. Mark's member Lin Marksbury to work out ASL interpretations of Advent Canticles for this year's Pageant...)

*He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;*

**[ASL: Important People, High Up–Throw Out
Humble People, Lift up]**

*he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.*

**[ASL: HUNGRY PEOPLE– BECOME FULL
MONEY PILE UP PEOPLE–REJECT]**

We might agree with Johanna, that the radical inversion of power and privilege in Mary's Song is not fair. And we can almost certainly agree that, whether or not this radical inversion of power is FAIR, it's definitely not COMFORTABLE

But if our Advent animal friends have taught me anything, it is that the temporary discomfort of the individual is sometimes the necessary price of survival for the whole. That the rhythms of change and struggle and discomfort and deprivation are essential elements in the song of LIFE.

Perhaps a season of relinquishing our *own* power and privilege is necessary if we truly wish to see that beautiful springtime future foretold by the Prophet Isaiah when...

Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low...
and **all flesh** shall see the salvation of God."

Here's what I've been wondering: I've been wondering if maybe God HAD to render Elizabeth's husband mute for the duration of her pregnancy, so that she could finally get a word in edgewise and today's Gospel could be proclaimed. So that WE could hear her. So that HE could hear her. Perhaps the priest needed to relinquish the power and privilege of his own voice for a season, so that in the wake of his silence, he could HEAR anew the living, life-giving Word of God speaking through the mighty prophets in his very own house–Mary, the pregnant teenager and Elizabeth, the pregnant crone.

And I've also been wondering: what power and privilege might WE need to relinquish for a season, so that we might hear God's Good News more clearly? What mighty prophets might

already be among us—unheard and unheeded by a world longing for salvation, a world just waiting for us to get quiet enough that together we ALL might hear and heed their word of life?

In these final days of Advent, we anticipate our annual celebration of the Great Mystery of the Incarnation—The Great Mystery of the Word made Flesh—The Great Mystery that in the fullness of time the Power that birthed the Universe took shape in a woman's Body and a woman's Song.

In these final days of Advent, may we dare to trust in the Mystery that, even now, as in ages past, and as in ages yet to come, Divine Wisdom is being woven by the Hand of God into creation. Into our souls, our bodies, our earth.

But if we truly wish to behold it, we may need to embrace a season of humble curiosity, like the author of "All Creation Waits".

If we wish to hear it, we may need to embrace a season of humble Silence, like the husband of Elizabeth in Luke's Gospel.

We may need to slow down. We may need to shut up. In order to more humbly and bravely face the deepest longings of our souls, and the most confounding questions of our hearts, and the deepest wounds of our world, and the most honest truth of our lives. We need to let ourselves be uncomfortable. We need to let ourselves be afraid. And then, in the still, quiet, uncertain darkness: Perhaps we can begin to hear again the Word of Life that God is speaking to us from within the depths of Creation. Perhaps we can let ourselves begin to learn from the unexpected teachers God has sent to proclaim that Word of Life to us, anew.

In these final days of Advent, may we empty ourselves
and wait in winter's aching darkness for a Savior,
May we hear the Spirit calling us to heed
the unlikely prophets, our teachers:
Non-human "people" --plant people, animal people, water people
May we heed the Spirit calling us to Hear anew
the Song of the Wind, and the stars, and the rocks that cry out
The deep, dark of night and our
Mother, the Earth

In these final days of Advent, as we empty ourselves
and wait in winter's aching darkness for a Savior,
May we hear the Spirit calling us to heed
the unlikely prophets, our teachers:
Queer people, poor people, indigenous people, black people, people with disabilities,
people much younger—and much older—than we are
May we heed the Spirit calling us us to Hear anew
the Song of Mary & Elizabeth, the unconventional women

The Cold, stinking shepherds
And the newborn child

May we allow Mary, Elizabeth, our animal friends,
And all these unexpected teachers
To be for us, a book about God, a Word of God
to direct our minds to wisdom,
to direct our lives to justice
And to direct our hearts to praise.
Amen.