

**Sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent**  
**RCL Lectionary, Year C**  
[Malachi 3:1-4](#) / [Canticle 16](#) / [Philippians 1:3-11](#) / [Luke 3:1-6](#)  
**December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2009**  
**The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour**  
**Mill Valley, California**

**The Threads of Advent**  
**by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer**

I imagine many of you feel at times like I do during this period of the year – a bit harried, a bit bedeviled by the countless little things that must be done before Christmas is upon us. Last-minute planning, preparing for a New Year only weeks away even though it feels as though it should be months, thinking about gifts, an exploding social calendar. We get in a real soup when we add in all the extra stresses this past year has wrought with its uncertainties and dizzying, bewildering twists and turns. Some of us are still wondering just which way is up, and even if we've figured that out, precisely how we're going to get there is still the mystery: whether it's a job, a new home, or simply paying the next bill.

Yesterday for me was a typical Advent Saturday, with not one, but two separate trips into San Francisco, and then arriving home to discover our six-year-old producing the decorations and asking that we start thinking about a tree. Even getting him a haircut proved impossible between the various appointments and family and work-related tasks when we saw the line at the barber's. Then came his pronouncement that he can't wait for the real Santa Claus is coming, and Christmas can't get here fast enough. Lots of pressure on the North Pole! I resisted saying to him that I'd prefer the coming of Christmas slow down a little bit, and dove back into barreling through the day.

I found myself where we all are at times in early December, trying to find the threads of Advent again, the threads of a holy season of reflection and preparation, rather than a weeks-long hair-raising task-list augmented by the darkness of winter and storms in the forecast. We're often looking for the threads that will get us safely to the manger, maybe a bit tired, but not all the worse for wear.

It bears repeating that this season can give some of us a case of the Christmas blues. The memories, the pressures, the darkness, the hype can all be a recipe for feeling swamped. I notice myself as well as many of us behaving a bit on the odd side, too. Cracks and fissures are starting to appear in our best behavior; the nerves are getting a bit raw. Even the most placid of personalities often barely conceals hard pedaling going on inside. Or, we mixed up the metaphors in staff meeting this week even more with a chuckle. We reflected that there's the light of Christ at the end of this tunnel, and it's the light of the Christmas train! I had a brief post-modern moment of imagining the Christ-child at the controls of that locomotive, complete in his swaddling clothes with an engineer's cap on his head!

So how do we find the threads of Advent again when the stressors do what they always do in early December – threatening to derail us or at least helping us lose track of the thin chord that we trust will see us through to the great Feast of the Nativity?

As if in reply to that question, today we get not one, but two Gospel readings. You might have noticed that instead of a psalm, we read the ancient Christian canticle, the *Benedictus*, which is the song of Zechariah from the Gospel according to Luke. Zechariah, if you recall, is John the Baptist's father. In addition to standing as Luke's archetype of a faithful, first-century, Jewish priest, he is, simply as a character in Luke's lush narrative, a reflection of us in our

bewilderment about the impending Nativity. He's an Advent character, uncertain at first about where the threads are, and even when they are revealed to him, not convinced that they are going to lead him down a track he understands.

Zechariah's story begins with a visit from the Angel Gabriel in the high holy place of the Temple – his is the *other* visitation, the one that often gets lost in the shuffle as we focus so much on Mary's visitation. Gabriel tells Zechariah, now an old man, in an echo tracing all the way to the Abraham cycle of ancient tradition, that his wife, Elizabeth, is to bear a son who will pave the way for the Messiah. Zechariah is so incredulous, even as a faithful priest of the esteemed order of Abijah, that the angel strikes him mute as a sign of God's promise.

Elizabeth, of course, conceives, and that on top of Zechariah's inability to speak gets all the neighbors tongues wagging by contrast. When at last the child is born, Zechariah must write his instance on the name Gabriel told him to use for his son: John. Which is all quite odd, as it isn't a family name, and is yet another unpredictable twist in the unfolding story, as it departs from all expectations. God is up to something. Precisely what? Wait and see.

The *Benedictus* comes at the end of Zechariah's tale, when his voice is suddenly returned to him, and, moved by the Spirit, he articulates the great plan of God in his family's life, the unfolding of history around his child who will be a great prophet, his and Elizabeth's place in the great story of salvation, and that of their son is made clear.

Odd, and in some ways a bit sad that Zechariah never appears again in Luke's narrative. But as a character, he fulfills his purpose with this poem. And he reminds us that the journey of faith is not so much about our finding the thread. Zechariah, for all his fidelity to his faith tradition, was literally dumbfounded by the plans revealed by an angel after all. In that sense, he lost the thread which he thought he held firmly. Rather, his story is an Advent story, because it reminds us that we are found by the thread of faith, and woven together by that thread, woven into the tapestry of salvation as Zechariah and Elizabeth were, never minding their doubts or fears, or the numerous tasks or bewildering twists and turns before them.

Likewise, the long lists and hectic schedules of this time of year are not as important as we think they might be. The thread of Advent is finding us. Perhaps the only task that we must attend to is to allow this to happen, to surrender to the process of Advent weaving its transformation. To stop worrying so much about our preparations and allow Advent to prepare us for Christmas. For me, this was the act of sitting in silent prayer in the midst of the ordination liturgy at Grace Cathedral yesterday afternoon, attending a lessons and carols service at San Francisco Theological Seminary yesterday evening, or just getting a bit goofy with my son for a precious few minutes.

Advent preparation is a process of grace, after all, and perhaps we only have to stop searching for its thread long enough for us to be taking up by it into God's great loom – to be woven anew, the crooked made straight, the rough places plain. Christmas is not a train coming in the tunnel, but indeed a new dawn, one that we might not only see, but be re-caste by the impending salvation of our God; and re-caste for not only a New Year, but a new life birthed from the very heart of the divine.