

Advent 4, Yr C, 122312
All Saints Episcopal Church

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.

In the name of God, who was, and is, and is to come. Amen.

Good morning!

For about as long as I can remember, Advent has been my favorite season. I've told stories here before about what Advent was like at our house when I was a kid - lighting the candles on the Advent wreath at the dinner table, my father's wonderful voice reciting the collect for the day, no tree until just before Christmas Eve, putting out the crèches around the house. I loved arranging the figurines.

I loved best putting the figure of Mary at her designated place, watching over the manger. I always felt a kind of kinship with her - I guess because we shared the same name. Maybe it was some kind of goofy narcissism on my part to feel that way - every time we sang a hymn or Christmas Carol with her name in it, I thought about whether I was like her or not. And needless to say, the fourth Sunday of Advent -- "Mary Sunday," has always been my favorite day in Advent.

But as much as I loved all those aspects of Advent, I remember that there was also a sense of melancholy during the season. I don't know what caused it. Perhaps it was being aware of the circumstances in which the baby would come into the world: a poor teenage mother, born in a barn; or how the baby would leave the world: condemned as a criminal, executed on a cross.

But maybe it is the annual struggle between darkness and light that we experience at this time of year - the darkness grows little by little every day until one day there is more darkness than on any other. In the old, old days, people were not always sure that the light would return, and they were frightened. Lighting candles chased away gloom and any demons that were lurking in the shadows, and it brought hope and warmth.

This particular Advent season seems to have had more than its share of darkness: thousands of people in the northeast are still homeless in the aftermath of a storm so devastating it was called a superstorm; a typhoon in the Philippines that killed

over 900 people; escalating violence in Syria and other parts of the Middle East; and, of course, the tragic massacre in Newtown, CT a little more than a week ago. It is hard not to feel as if a lot of the light has gone out of the world. And to add to all that, there are the problems we have in our own lives that add to the darkness: money, relationships, family, health. How can we be happy about Christmas when we can hardly get out of bed in the morning?

In today's Gospel, we get a clue about the answer to this question. Right after the angel Gabriel delivered God's message to Mary about having a baby who would be named Jesus, and about how her cousin Elizabeth was also pregnant with John, who would be a special messenger of God's, Mary went to visit Elizabeth. The two of them spent time together, discussing what had happened to them, and taking care of each other.

They must have been scared - these were not ordinary things happening to them - angels didn't appear to just everyone, bringing messages from God. And very old women and young girls who weren't married didn't just 'get pregnant' - in fact, Mary could have been killed because of it. At the very least, Joseph could have said, "Hey, I'm not going to marry you now." And then there was the underlying fact that, as Jews, they were an occupied people - that is, the Romans were the rulers in their country, and things were not always safe for them.

But Gabriel had told both of them to not be afraid, so Elizabeth and Mary took care of each other, and comforted each other, not just because they were cousins, but also because they shared a bond that was even stronger than the bond between relatives - a bond that existed because they knew they had both been called by God to do something special. God had called them to bear new life - God's life -- to bear God's hope - to bear God's peace to the world. And they did not have to wait alone for their surprising pregnancies to unfold; instead they were able to wait together, helping each other strengthen their faith in God, for whom nothing is impossible. And so, God's most radical involvement in history came to pass in community.

I am sure that most of you have seen at least some of the news coverage of the aftermath of the horrible events in Newtown. If you have, you will have noticed that the parents and families of those who died have not had to face their sorrows alone. The churches there, the synagogue, the fire-rescue department, the whole

town has responded to them with love and support. People in cities and towns and villages across the country have responded in amazing ways.

Bishop Rob Wright, the newly consecrated Bishop of Atlanta, wrote this week about how difficult it is to talk about the joy of the approaching Christmas mystery in the face of so much death and sadness. He said, "Joy is not the absence of sorrow or death. Joy is the awareness that sorrow and death will not have the last word. Joy acknowledges the shock and blood and loss of Friday last. And, of Jesus' Friday past. But joy, waits and believes and trusts that even of this garbage God will make gold! We will walk out of this tomb. Thanks be to God."

In this season of Advent, we in the church recognize that we wait in community for God's promises to unfold in our lives. Here, in community, we hold each other up when one of us needs encouragement or support. We help each other search for meaning, we rejoice with one another, we walk alongside each other. Just as Elizabeth must have listened to Mary, and helped her prepare for what was to come, we help each other work things out. We must not be afraid. Here, indeed, is Emmanuel - God with us - for we are not meant to go through either the tough times or the wonderful times alone. Both need to be shared.

There is no amount of darkness that can overcome the light. And nothing will separate us from the love and presence of God. So let us join with Mary and let our souls magnify the Lord and our spirits rejoice in God our Savior, together. Amen.