

# Sermon for the 4th Sunday in Advent, 2020

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Last week, John's sermon gave us a poignant picture of faith as home, linked in his case with the 'honorary aunt' who led him to faith. As he ended by linking faith with peace, I recalled WB Yeats' lines, written in the busyness of London after seeing a water fountain in a shop window. He longed for home and "the peace that comes dropping slow". Coming back to home or our best beloved or finally understanding something, or turning intentionally to God: with all these happenings, we experience peace and can rest.

But our Old Testament lesson this morning reminds us of its opposite. When King David wanted to build a temple of cedar wood, God spoke of Godself as one who moves and roves about and often God calls people to leave home and what is familiar. The rich complexity of life is reflected in the Biblical narrative as here. God resists and then concedes this wish of David for a Temple. But later it is destroyed and the leaders are taken into exile. Despite the destruction of this outward symbol of their hope, people persisted in hope in God. Then it took shape in the hope of a messiah, a new king David, even through the bleakest times. Small wonder people begin to speak of God's reality and presence as hidden.

This is the basic meaning in our word "mystery," something hidden. Our brief epistle reading refers to this. Paul reminds the Christians in Rome that God is able to strengthen them: "according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed". This is usually understood to refer to the coming of our Lord. But it also has another aspect to it - namely that with God's coming, with the coming of our Lord, the powers of this world are revealed for what they truly are, enemies of God. It is significant and revealing that the most oppressive powers attack people of faith; they cannot tolerate the acknowledgement of a power higher than theirs. So the critical issue in the persecution of the early Christians was, would they burn incense to the emperor? God's Kingship is the link between the Gospel and the reading from the Book of Samuel and it is part of the angel's message to Mary. It is less about power and more about rule. The challenge of the angel's message was to allow God's wish to shape and rule Mary's life. This is why it matters how we respond to God and God's Word. Contrast Mary's response with that of John the Baptist's father, Zechariah. He had responded to God's promise

with disbelief and lost his own power of speech until he affirmed that his son was to be called John, a departure from the tradition of using family names. Mary's exemplary response is an example we are encouraged to follow. However, many women theologians and activists have reminded us, in recent decades, of how this insight has been misused to limit what women can or may do, and often focussed on 'keeping quiet'. Scraping away these social and cultural accretions has revealed 'something hidden'- this misuse that has distorted the teaching and evaded its true meaning.

When I wondered if I could present Mary as the model of faithful obedience, I received encouragement to do so from a surprising source, when I browsed a book about the great German theologian, Karl Barth. Not that he was talking about Mary. But he was talking of being faithful disciples of God. Barth is famous for his emphasis on scripture as revelation but he stresses that it is heard and understood within the Church community. 'the moral character of the Christian is formed as she or he hears and responds to God's command. Our ability to do this is itself formed by our growing understanding ... of the story of God's covenant of grace with humankind'. This story shaped Mary's understanding. Given the way the teaching has been used selectively to keep women quiet, it is important to note that, in contrast to others God calls in the Old Testament, she has the last word. Which puts a different slant on those famous words of acceptance: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord: let it be with me according to your word." These words are powerful because it was this faithful, obedient acceptance that led to the growth inside her of the Word of God.

Listening to these stories, of the covenant of grace between God and humankind, nurtures our own understanding of the ways of God. And so the image of the Christ child grows in us and our own capacity to respond grows too. The ancient icon of the sign, showing the roundel of the Christ child within Mary's heart, shows Mary praying, with her head covered and her hands extended, an image of the Church at prayer. But it also shows Christ praying within her. So the Church too becomes a sign as Christ prays in us. Longing, we may guess, for us to say Yes too, yes to the gentle nudges and whispers God, speaking within the silence of our own hearts and minds. And then we notice that Mary's eyes are open. She is looking, at us, at the world, with, we may also guess, without illusion or self-protection, at its pain, delight, hunger grief, hope, to see the world truthfully. At her heart the true source of love and energy for the world.

