

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Luke 3:1-6

Malachi 3:1-4

Canticle 4

Philippians 1:3-11

December 5, 2021

The Second Sunday of Advent

How many of you could use a good ole' nap right about now? Hopefully you need a nap, not because this service is lackluster, but because you have simply been working really hard, trying to keep up and get everything done...at work, at home, and everywhere in between. It's the kind of tired that sucks the joy right out of you. Maybe you have felt it.

For me when I am this tired, I long to go to solitary places, to sit quietly, to watch the birds and the squirrels, to have absolutely zero distractions. And, maybe, just maybe, feel one of those thin spaces that us clergy types like to ponder. The "*thin space*" is one of my favorite theological concepts...the idea that at certain moments in life, the space between us and God is very, very near. Where holiness becomes tangible. Where we can sense and feel God's presence reaching directly for us.

You can feel thin spaces when someone is dying. You can also feel them when a baby is born. But, you can also feel them in ordinary, everyday moments, if you take the time to be still and notice. Thin spaces aren't magical and they aren't uncommon. They are, however, hard to find if you are too busy or too tired to look. They are also hard to find if you don't take time to slow down and cultivate a listening and receptive heart.

This kind of thin space is where we find John in this week's Gospel. He has been in the desert, in solitude. Now, our translation for today refers to where he went as the wilderness but the Greek word can be translated either as *wilderness* or *desert*. So, whichever word we use, it simply means a place that is solitary, lonely, desolate, or uninhabited. For our purposes this morning, I am going to use *desert* for our location.

We aren't told exactly what John did in this desert but if you have ever been to a desolate place you know there isn't much happening. You might say a desert is a place of essentials. Where the things that truly matter are what you focus on...eating, drinking, sleeping, breathing. And, in this slowed down, essential way of living, John encounters one of these thin spaces. He hears the voice of God.

We are told that the word of God came to John in the wilderness and from that moment forward, John's life was changed. In fact, the next verse simply says that "He went into all the region around Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

But was that change as immediate as it sounds in the text? Where one moment John is in the desert and the next moment he is the traveling preacher of Gospel fame?

I would argue that there was nothing immediate about John's journey. Between these two verses is a much richer story of faithful preparation that we all need to consider. It's a story that enlivens all of our texts this morning and reminds us that in this season of Advent, we can't just show up, frazzled and worn out. We have to take time to set aside the distractions of each day, our stress, our commitments, and we have to slow down and rest. We have to find time to cultivate holy awareness and be willing to wait for those thin spaces to emerge.

So, what does it mean to prepare for a thin space so that we can hear God more powerfully in our lives? Well...Paul, in his letter to the church in Philippi writes this...

"⁹And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight ¹⁰to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, ¹¹having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God."

Paul is outlining a process, a process that includes growing ones knowledge and insight so that we can determine what God wants us to do. Does that sound a little like John, out in the wilderness growing in his knowledge and insight? I think so. And it is this process of preparation that Paul says cultivates a faithful heart that produces righteousness. Another way to say it is that faithfulness and righteousness grow out of our practice of listening for God.

I love that Paul puts this process in the imagery of a harvest. Because a harvest is an act that follows months of preparation and cultivation. A good harvest never happens instantaneously. It happens through attention and care month after month. It's attention and care that can't be set aside or ignored because of other stressors and obligations. It has to be the main focus of our cultivation efforts.

Paul reminds us that this is what we are called to emulate.

He also adds another element to the equation. On top of the good cultivation he encourages of us, Paul also encourages one more thing. He encourages joy. For Paul, the process of preparation is a gift. It isn't a burden or another stressor to an already busy work load. Joy is there because we have cultivated the knowledge that God is in our midst. For Paul, that is the biggest reward.

Folks, life isn't about how much we have to do. It's about what God wants us to do. That's the journey of finding our thin spaces so that we can listen and hear.

As one writer puts it, those thin spaces are when, *"for a few blissful moments I loosen my death grip on life, and can breathe again."*¹

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/11/travel/thin-places-where-we-are-jolted-out-of-old-ways-of-seeing-the-world.html>

I know you may think that the exhaustion will never cease or that the stress will never subside. But, when that is your mode of operation day in and day out, it will be very hard to develop the ability to listen and to hear and to do what God is cultivating within you.

As hard as it may be, as we wait for one of the most important thin spaces that has ever been granted to us, the birth of Jesus Christ, let us set aside holy time to eat and sleep and breathe. Do nothing but be in God's presence. Let that be enough. And, yes, take naps often and much so that your spirit is renewed and your heart is ready for the harvest. Thanks be to God. Amen.