

How Will I Know?

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Luke 1:5-23

What are the sounds we associate with Christmas? Bells: jingle bells, sleigh bells, silver bells... and music, Christmas carols of all stripes...all the way from O Holy Night to Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree. But, what about Advent, the season that begins today, what are the sounds of Advent?

Advent is different; although we tend to invite the festivities of Christmas to spill into it a little early, Advent is intended to be the period before fulfillment; it marks a time of waiting. In scripture, it's the waiting of exiles to return home and the waiting of occupied people for God to send them a king.

If we think about the scriptures we hear and the words of our hymns, Advent is the silent night before the angels sing, or the many silent nights. It is the long questioning time before the joy.

Much of my life, I've lived in rural areas, and so I've driven on many dark roads in Florida, Ohio, and Indiana. (Last Saturday night in Massachusetts coming home from Grotonwood.)

There used to be a road my sister and I would drive down as teenagers on the way to one of our friend's homes, and we would pull over for a moment and turn off our headlights, just to experience what we called "total darkness." Though I grew up comfortable with these dark roads, I'm spoiled now by city lights – I don't like driving in the dark at all anymore, but the worst is driving in the dark on roads you don't know.

Advent is the spiritual story of the dark road you don't know, of the heaviness of darkness before the light dawns, when we feel that we are groping our way through with no direction.

The gospel of Luke begins with the story of Zechariah and his meeting with the angel Gabriel. Zechariah, a priest, the husband of Elizabeth, was away from home serving in the temple, and had entered the sanctuary to present an offering of incense. While he was inside, he had a vision – he saw an angel who told him that his prayers had been answered, and Elizabeth would have a long-awaited child and be free from the shame that had been put on her.

Any not just any child, but a holy child, who would grow up to be John the Baptist, ushering in the ministry of Jesus. The angel said the child would, "turn the hearts of parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous," preparing their people to respond to Jesus.

But Zechariah didn't believe it – not quite – and asked, "How can I know that this will happen?" The angel, a little surprised that this otherworldly message wasn't convincing enough, struck him with muteness, the inability to speak, until the birth of the child.

The ancient theologian Origen points out the poetic counterbalance...John will be the voice crying in the wilderness, and his father has, for the time being, lost his voice. Zechariah, in

his nearly a year of silence before the joyful birth of a child, is a good reminder for us not to forget the silence and waiting we are meant to experience in Advent.

Why, though? Why do we seek the hush of Advent before the Glorias of Christmas? And later, during the time of Lent before Easter, why do we walk again through the darkness of the crucifixion before we come to resurrection? In a world with enough waiting, enough darkness and struggle, why do we need to include it in our worship?

The realities of struggle and grief in our world are *exactly why* we need to find it here, too, reflected in the story of God's people, so that we can teach and strengthen our hearts to feel hope, even in the middle of hardship, when the road is dark and unknown.

Worship, you see, is practice for our souls; the predictable rhythms of the church year prepare us for the unpredictable moments of life. When we come to church, it meets a present need, yet it meets a future need, too, prepares us to face a challenge that hasn't yet come.

The wisdom literature of scripture – Proverbs and Ecclesiastes – and the Prophets, say what we have found to be true in our own lives: none of us can predict when something difficult will happen, when we might lose our job, or a loved one might die, or our marriage breaks down. Ecclesiastes says it very plainly, “For no one can anticipate the time of disaster.” “Time and chance happen to us all.”

If Christmas is the birth of the child, then Advent is the period of pregnancy and the pains of labor that come ahead of that new life. During Advent, we tell the stories of driving in darkness, of waiting for the coming of God's light every year, so that when, at some certain point, it is dark in our lives, and when there seems to be silence on the other end of our prayers, we are able to have hope.

Knowing those stories, our hearts will say, “God's light came into the dark places before, God's voice came into the silence before, and it will come again.”

We thank God for times of preparation, for rhythms and practices that equip our souls.
We thank God for light that has come, in times long past and in our own lives.
But most of all, for the hurting among us, we thank God for the light that will come again.

Amen.