

Participating in God's Future
Advent 3, Year A
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St. Thomas's Anglican Church, Toronto
Matthew 11.2-11

✠ In the Name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

“Advent is a season in which the past and the future seem to collide with one another.” So writes Fleming Rutledge in a sermon published in *Advent: The Once & Future Coming of Jesus Christ*. For those of you who have never heard of Fleming Rutledge, she's an Episcopal priest known for her intellectual yet Evangelical preaching style, and is the author of a number of books. She even has a Toronto connection, having been the visiting professor of homiletics at Wycliffe College in the fall of 2008. As she notes in her Advent book, “No other time of the church year presents us with so much contradiction. I'm not thinking so much of the contrast between the shopping mega-frenzy and the church's summons to hushed reverence. Rather . . . I am thinking of the tension between looking back and looking forward, and above all the question, looking forward to what?”

No less a personage than John the Baptist himself asks this question in today's gospel lesson. John wants to know whether he is looking forward to the right thing, so he sends his disciples with a message to Jesus asking, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” In response, Jesus simply says, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.”

This raises the question for me, “What are *we* looking forward to in our own lives and in the life of this community?” For *her* part, Rutledge writes,

The closer we get to Christmas, the more tempted we are to retreat to the cozy, imagined world of our childhood . . . Sentiment and nostalgia play a major role in our Christmas observances. We bring out the ornaments we loved as children, we display little nineteenth-century towns with snow-covered roofs, we collect figures of carolers dressed in the style of Dickens's London. There is nothing wrong with this . . . but it does illustrate our tendency to romanticize the past . . .

For *my* part, I have to admit that I take part in this looking backwards, too. This past week, for instance, I found myself on YouTube watching my favourite clips from the 1964 Christmas stop motion animated television movie, “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer”, starring Burl Ives. From there, I went to Wikipedia, where I learned that “Other than Burl Ives, all [the] characters were portrayed by Canadian actors recorded at RCA studios in Toronto.” Now *there's* a bit of trivia you can trot out next time you need to make small talk at a Christmas party. If “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” isn't nostalgic and sentimental, I don't know what is.

But Rutledge claims that “Advent is exactly the opposite of [a romanticized past]. Nostalgia and sentiment play no part in the season . . . Advent refuses to dwell in a past that never was. Advent is

about the future. It isn't a season of remembering something that happened a long time ago; it is a season of preparation for the great coming day of the kingdom of God."

She continues,

We are not looking backward sentimentally to a baby; we are looking forward to the only One in whom the promise of peace will some day be fulfilled. Trusting in that promise, we can do things we thought we could not do. Relying on him, we can change our habits, confront our addictions, forgive our enemies, curb our spending, challenge our society, raise our pledge, lower our defenses, stand up for justice, speak the truth—not all of these things at once, to be sure, but even one break from past patterns of sin will be in its way a sign of Christ's coming. Because God is out ahead of us, we know that . . . the old world . . . is passing away. We are not trapped in our mistakes . . . God is enlisting us on the side of his future . . . God is on the move toward us, not the other way round. In the very midst of our confusion and incapacity, we are met by the oncoming Lord.

"God is on the move toward us, not the other way round."

What signs do we see that God is, in fact, on the move towards St. Thomas's? Can we "go and tell what [we] hear and see?" What do we hear and see?

Every day, I see God on the move towards St. Thomas's, and do you know how that makes me feel? I feel too small. I feel like I don't have what it takes to keep up with God. But maybe that's not what God wants from me, or from you, or from any of us. If God is on the move towards us, what should we do?

Fleming Rutledge's assurance is that "We can do things we thought we could not do." And you know what? She's right. Over the past few years, even in the midst of so many transitions and a pandemic, we at St. Thomas's have consistently done things we thought we could not do. I won't list them, but it's true.

Just as Jesus invited John's disciples to testify to what they had heard and seen him do, I hope you will go and tell your friends, co-workers, and neighbours what you hear and see going on here, and invite them into what God is doing here as we approach Christmas.

But let's look beyond this Christmas, as well. If it is true that God is on the move toward us, enlisting us in God's future, not our own, then we can reliably trust that God's future will happen whether we want it to or not. So the question is: If you're looking forward to this future, do you want in on God's future *now*? Do you want to *participate* in God's future? Do you want to *cooperate* with God's future? What will it take to do so?

Paradoxically, this means you are going to have to start doing things you thought you could not do. What is it in your personal life that you cannot do but that you know would be a good thing if you

did it? What is it in our communal life as a church that you don't think we can do but which we can if you help us?

I began this sermon with Fleming Rutledge's question, "looking forward to what?" The answer is that we are looking forward to participating in and cooperating with God's future, come what may—a future in which the church flourishes, in which each and every one of us has a flourishing spiritual life because of our connection to St. Thomas's. To do this, we must do everything in our power, with God's help, to make St. Thomas's pandemic-proof. We can't prevent illness, but we can be fearless in the face of our mortality. We must do everything in our power, with God's help, to make St. Thomas's recession-proof. We can't control the economy, but we can be generous in the face of scarcity. And we must do everything in our power, with God's help, to make St. Thomas's foolproof. We can't keep all fools out of the church (yours truly included) but we can be more accessible to all, regardless of our physical or mental capacities. A foolproof parish, after all, is a church that is "so simple, plain, or reliable as to leave no opportunity for error, misuse, or failure." As we heard in the first lesson from Isaiah, "A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way...it shall be for God's people; no traveller, not even *fools*, shall go astray." I believe St. Thomas's can be that sort of highway, that sort of Holy Way, that kind of parish church for the world, without jettisoning anything in our Anglo-Catholic tradition; in fact, the more we *intensify* our identity, the more foolproof we will be.

This all means that in the present, we can count on God to help us do things we currently think are impossible, in our lives as individuals, in our families and with our relatives, with our careers and in the way we get involved with what's going on around here as we live out our mission.

For my part, I'm really looking forward to seeing what God's future has in store for us, because I really do believe we have a future with God. My problem is that I'm a very impatient person, and I want the future to arrive now! But it must be enough in this season of Advent simply to be looking forward to God's future as we live into what God has called us to do in the here and now.

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