

## ***“Living on the Threshold”***

Rev. David Gregory

December 1, 2019

Advent 1



*The angel Gabriel and Zechariah*

### **First Reading**

Luke 1:78-79 (*New Standard Revised Version*)

By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.

### **Second Reading**

*Crossing the Threshold* by Gunilla Norris

from *Being Home, a Book of Meditations*

Many times today I will cross over a threshold.

I hope I will catch a few of those times.

I need to remember that my life is, in fact,  
a continuous series of thresholds:

from one moment to the next,

from one thought to the next,

from one action to the next.

Help me appreciate how awesome this is.

How many are the chances to be really alive...

to be aware of the enormous dimension  
we live within.

On the threshold the entire past

and the endless future

rush to meet one another.

They take hold of each other and laugh.  
They are so happy to discover themselves  
in the awareness of a human creature.  
On the threshold the present breaks all boundaries.  
It is a convergence,  
a fellowship with all time and space.  
We find You there.  
And we are found by You there.

Help me cross into the present moment —  
into wonder, into Your grace:  
that “now-place,” where we all are,  
unfolding as Your life moment by moment.

Let me live on the threshold as a threshold.

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Like a child who longs to hear her favorite story, told again and again, and though there is little mystery (for she knows even before it starts how it will end), she still wants to hear it, as we begin our Advent journey, it is an entirely new year of telling our story. The story moves through Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. For many of us, the story has been told to us for many decades, in one way or another. Our understanding of it has evolved from wonder and magic, to questioning and skepticism, and hopefully in some sense capturing the wonder and magic once again.

It starts with an old priest named Zechariah, married to a woman named Elizabeth, and though they were, as they say, “on in years,” they had no children. In their time and culture being childless was considered a sign of a blessing withheld. It’s a common theme in all of scripture, the unlikely birth, as when Sarah birthed Isaac, or Hannah birthed Samuel. Zechariah was offering incense in the sanctuary when the angel Gabriel appeared and announced the impending birth of a son for Zechariah and Elizabeth, a son they would call “John.” He would pave the way for a Messiah, and in the spirit and power of Elijah, he would turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to wisdom, to make the people ready for the one who, though yet unknown, was to come. The old man was skeptical, of course, and as a result, Gabriel announced that he would be unable to speak until the child was born.

During the time of quiet waiting, they were visited by Elizabeth’s young cousin Mary who was also expecting, the two unborn children leaping in their respective wombs purportedly in excitement for all that was to come. When Elizabeth finally delivered her son, she said that he was to be called “John.” “Silly woman, no one in your family is named John.” And they dismissed her. About that time Zechariah asked for a writing tablet, on which he wrote “His name is John.” And with that decisive voice of patriarchy, Zechariah’s literal voice returned, and he sang a song of celebration and thanksgiving, including the words of our first reading today.

*By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.*

As our story begins yet again, I wonder what it would feel like to be silent for nine whole months. For Elizabeth, we might speculate that it was a little slice of heaven. “Finally, I can get a word in.” If you or I had to wait for nine months to say our very next words, can you imagine what it would be like to finally be able to let loose and say all that you had been thinking? Zechariah was living on a threshold. The life he had led up to that moment was definitely changing forever. But the new life that was coming had not yet arrived. He was in that beautiful liminal space. It is a space that is not the future and not the past. It’s that in-between space that we call the present moment.

Whether or not the Advent story resonates personally for you, there is one piece of it that pulls us all together this morning, and that is an invitation to the present moment, present for the sake of itself, not as an interpretation of the past or a vision of the future; just the *now*. It is the “now” that most often gets overlooked, and the irony of it is that we’ve turned Advent into perhaps the busiest time of the year, a time when we hurtle toward the beginning of a brand new year in a frenzy of food, family, and celebrations, which are all good things. It’s just that they distract us from the very thing we need the most, and that is the ability to wait with confident expectation in the present moment.

Gunilla Norris is a name that is new to me. She is the author of children’s books, of poetry, and of books on meditation. Her piece entitled “Crossing the Threshold” is taken from her book of meditations called *Being Home*, and you’ll find it in today’s entry of the Advent Reader contributed by Sylvia Victor, who remembers her being here at CCC years ago. Norris says, “Let me live on the threshold as a threshold.” It is, as she says it, the place where “the entire past and the endless future rush to meet one another.” It is the place where really all of life is lived, and she reminds us that it is quite possible that we will attempt to pass over all the thresholds in our life, straining ourselves to run from the past or rush to the future without ever experiencing the gift of the present moment.

Earlier this week I had this flash memory like a video playing in my head. It is me in an easy chair with two little boys on my knees, the three of us looking at a book that I’m reading to them. The boys are freshly bathed and in their jammies. Brian’s are blue and Ben’s are red. As I say it, I can smell their little shampooed heads. The ulterior motive is to get them away from the television and calm them down so they can go to sleep. It occurred to me that this was a moment that transcends time and space, and far from being the weepy wish that I could return to the good old days, it is a call to the present moment, to a life of present moments, like the one where I’m standing in front of you speaking from my heart, where we are gathered in a place that is sacred to us, surrounded by the loving faces of spiritual community. The present moment where a candle is lit, a story is told, and we bring together all of our joys and concerns to celebrate them in some way right now. It is not about Christmas. It’s not about what we have to do this week. It’s not about anticipating the next pieces of our lives, it is about living the ones that are right here and right now.

Advent calls us to this, but this practice of living on the threshold is not just for a season, it is a spiritual practice of daily living which, if we can master it, and if it can become our nature to live this way, will ground us in ways that will take us through any rain and windstorm of life. It can make us people of “strong and confident expectation.” Nine months of silent waiting might not be such a bad thing after all.

