

*A Sermon preached by The Reverend Deborah Phillips
At Grace Church in Salem*

Advent 4 Year C

“What song will you sing?”

Each month, the clergy of the North Shore Deanery get together for lunch.

Last week when we met, we had a conversation about our Advent traditions.

A few of us mentioned how much we love Advent hymns.

One priest mentioned how even his children prefer the music of Advent to Christmas carols.

He also related that, although it is often difficult to find common ground with his college aged daughter, when he mentioned to her that they were singing, “Lo! he comes with clouds descending” that week at his parish, she became quite animated and before he knew it, the conversation progress to where they were sharing the important things going on in their lives.

A piece of our tradition, born out of community, reconnects a father with his child.

Although I too find Advent hymnody full of hope and expectancy, and rhythmically diverse, there is one Christmas hymn that makes me confident that all that Advent hope in divine love has been fulfilled through Jesus Christ.

As you all know, I grew up in very cold upstate New York.

Each Christmas Eve we would be bundled up in just about every article of clothing we owned and go to the midnight service.

It was always wintry, with much snow and gusting winds.

We went to the cathedral in Albany a few years.

Even as a teenager, it seemed so big.

The service would begin in deep darkness, with only the dimmest of candlelight.

Being ushered in was similar to being ushered into a darkened movie theater.

The nave would be filled with people in heavy coats and being so small, I was always wedged into the corner of the pew.

I was enveloped in darkness and strangers.

In those initial moments, though filled with awe and wonder, I would also feel a little lost.

Then, suddenly, everything would change.

From the south entrance, the small voice of a child is heard, piercing the stillness singing the first few lines of the hymn, “Once in Royal David’s City.”

The lights are slowly brought up and the darkness is gradually cast away.

The incense flows throughout, picking up the odors of our human experience and carrying them up to heaven.

The hymn continues; rising from a tradition that reminds us of the promise fulfilled.

The congregation stands and joins in the song of love that fills the cosmos.

In a desolate world, hopes wipes away all fear.

The strangers, huddled together, by raising their voices in song, are made into a community, united by this holy song about this holy child.

The full choir, with descants straight from heaven, fills the space and we are swept up by its sound as we magnify the Lord.

The world was very big and frightening those days in Judea.

Between the Roman occupation and the abuse of religious authority, the world, at times, seemed darker than dark.

Some believed God had forgotten the Messiah promised so long ago.

The underclass was all packed together, wedged into the corner of society.

They were enveloped in darkness with strangers.

In those early days, though filled with awe and wonder, people felt a little lost.

Then suddenly, everything changes.

The small voice of a girl is heard, piercing the stillness singing, "My soul doth magnify the Lord."

She sings of a world where darkness is gradually cast away.

She sings a song which picks up the reality of our human experience and carries it up to heaven.

Her hymn continues; rising from her tradition; the words coming from the tradition of Abraham and Moses that reminds her of the promise fulfilled.

Her cousin Elizabeth joins in the song of love that fills the cosmos.

In a desolate world, hopes wipes away all fear.

As she continues to carry the Christ-child and sing her Magnificat, the strangers huddled together become community, united by this holy song about the coming of this holy child.

At his birth, the full choir of angels and archangels with descants straight from heaven fill the world and we are swept up by its sound in the magnificence of our Lord.

The world can still be a very scary place, filled with anxiety and fear.

As the nights get colder and the winds pick up, darkness may surround us.

The continuous uncivil discourse in government and society frays the edges of our calm.

We are packed in with others made strange by their circumstances and our culture's depiction of them.

We seek an age to usher in the bright promise of eternal life.

Even in times filled with awe and wonder, we still feel a little lost.

But, we know that suddenly everything can change.

We can raise our own small voice and pierce the stillness singing the song of redemption, mercy and love, instilled in our hearts at conception.

We can sing away the darkness.

We can sing a song which picks up the reality of our human experience and know that in the ascension, it was carried into heaven.

Our hymn will continue; if it rises from the tradition of this community of faith, a tradition that includes all people, a tradition with prayers ancient and modern, a tradition that believes that the power of the resurrection is present in each of us, but is never so powerful as when we are together in Christ's Name.

We all stand together and raise our song of liberation.

As we join with the angel chorus, strangers huddled together become community, united by this holy song about the coming of this holy child.

The Song of Creation, with descants straight from heaven, fill the space and we are swept up in its sound as we magnify the Lord.

This final Sunday in Advent we are asked: What song of hope and praise will rise from within you?

How will our Lord be magnified?

How can our prayer and presence lift the gloom and despair of those locked in fear?

How will we join the angelic chorus which sweeps up all of humanity into the Divine Love?

This final Sunday Advent, as we give thanks for the blessed mother who in answer to Gabriel's question sang a song which magnified the Lord, we too are asked a question from on high:

What song will you sing?