

Sunday December 21, 2025 Fourth Sunday of Advent

Meditation: “Are you listening?”

Barbara and I have a favourite Advent show. It just isn't nearing Christmas without watching 'How the Grinch Stole Christmas'. Not the movie version full of computer animated special effects and Newmarket, Ontario native Jim Carey. Not the new one with Benedict Cumberbatch. Not the play on at the Grand Theatre in London. No, the good old original animated version, featuring the voice of Boris Karloff as both narrator and Grinch.

You know the story, right? Poor old Grinch. He sits atop Mt. Crumpet and he hates Christmas, particularly the noise, and most especially the singing. After 53 years of persevering Christmas, he finally decided he could stop all of it if he took everything away. Like some kind of evil inverse Santa, on Christmas eve, as the village of Whoville slept, he snuck into town and took all of the Christmas decorations, leaving only nails and some wire on the walls. He took all of the presents and noisemakers, the ta-tinkers and wu-wuzlers. He took all of the food, even down to the last can of who-hash. And then he, or to be more accurate, his dog Max, hauled it back up Mt. Crumpet towards his lair. When they were almost back home, something happened. Dawn arrived and the Whos woke up and they did something unexpected. They did the very thing that the Grinch hated most. They gathered in the village square, around where the Christmas tree had been only minutes before, and they sang their Christmas song. Grinch hadn't stopped Christmas. And then something else unexpected happened, the Grinch's heart grew three sizes and he rode into the village atop his sleigh, blowing a horn, and he distributed all of the decorations and the presents and the food, and at the feast, he himself carved the roast beast. Who could have foreseen that happening?

Who here thinks that the annunciation, the announcement that Mary would have a child who would be called 'God saves', happened when the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary? Well, you'd be right if you were reading Luke's gospel, but this year we are reading Matthew's gospel. The annunciation in Matthew's

gospel takes an unexpected twist. In Matthew's gospel the annunciation isn't made to Mary, it's made to Joseph. The angel appears to Joseph in a dream and tells him that Mary will have a child from the Holy Spirit and that he should be named 'God saves' because he will save his people from their sins. There is no mention of the angel's name, and Mary is only mentioned in passing. Instead we are reminded of the prophecy in Isaiah that says, "the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him 'God is with us'".

A few years back I read a book called 'The First Christmas', which is co-authored by two theologians, John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg. When it comes to explaining why Matthew's gospel has the announcement made to Joseph instead of to Mary, they argue that you have to look at the two different genealogies that the two gospels list. In Luke's gospel, the genealogy of Jesus is listed in the third chapter, just after the baptism of Jesus. It starts with Jesus and goes right back to Adam. Luke is declaring that Jesus is the new Adam. However, Matthew's gospel starts with the genealogy of Jesus and starts with Abraham and works down to Jesus. The story of Herod's pogrom against the male infants mirrors Pharaoh's, and Matthew is declaring that Jesus is the new Moses. Digging back through some extra-canonical texts from Jesus' day, the targums and midrashim, the story of the birth of Moses is told, and it is told entirely from the perspective of Moses' father, Amram, and not from the perspective of Moses' mother, Jochebed, therefore, Matthew tells the story of the birth of Jesus, the new Moses, from the perspective of Joseph, not Mary, as Luke does.

Okay, I hear you. So what? What difference does it make that Matthew tells the story from Joseph's perspective and not from Mary's? Well, the first so what is, how many of you thought the announcement could have been made to Joseph and not to Mary? We are so used to Luke's account of things that we probably don't even realize that neither Mark nor John even have an account of the nativity and that Matthew's is totally different. We accept, without question, that the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and told her that she would have a

child. In fact, in Luke's gospel, it is Joseph who is almost invisible. Even in Matthew's gospel, Joseph has no lines to learn, only roles to play. But the point I want to make in all of this is this. In Luke's gospel the angel appears to Mary, before her pregnancy. In Matthew's gospel an angel appears to Joseph in a dream, after Mary becomes pregnant. The point is that God speaks to different people, in different ways, and at different times.

In one gospel, God speaks to Mary, in another to Joseph. In one gospel God speaks through an angel, literally a messenger, in another God speaks through a dream. In one gospel God speaks prior to conception, in another following conception. In those days, God spoke to Joseph and Mary, in our days, God speaks to us, young and old, male and female. The question is, are we listening? Actually, a better question is, who are we listening to? Are we listening to the hucksters on tv trying to sell us excitement and glamour and the prospect of untold wealth that can be ours when we gamble? Are we listening to the voices of social media mavens who promise us fame through 'likes' or 'clicks'? Are we listening to anti-vaxers who promise to save us from the deleterious effects of vaccines? Are we listening to big pharma who want to save us from every human frailty? Are we listening to big oil, or conspiracy theorists? Are we listening to environmentalists, or scientists, or physicians, or...? Who are we listening to?

Maybe we are listening to Jesus. You know, the one whose life was threatened by Caesar Augustus when Jesus was in utero. Caesar Augustus was the one who issued the edict that a census be taken and each man had to return to his home town. It's about 90 miles, as the crow flies, from Nazareth to Bethlehem. An arduous journey for Mary to make with Joseph in the final days of her pregnancy. Anything could have happened to her the her unborn baby along the way. And all because Caesar wanted a census to figure out how much wealth he could extract from Judea.

Jesus, the one whose life was threatened as an infant by the tyrant Herod, who had killed members of his own family because he thought they were a potential

threat to his throne. As a result, the holy family became refugees seeking political asylum in Egypt. No home. No work. No support network. Nothing.

Jesus, the one whose mother wrestled with the fear that Joseph could have insisted she be stoned for becoming pregnant by another while betrothed to Joseph. And if not fear, then shame at a pregnancy out of wedlock. Or Joseph, whose own fear of being a public laughing stock because his betrothed was pregnant by another while his betrothed – oh, the shame of that.

Jesus, the one without a place to lay his head, and no food banks around to feed his followers, other than the gleanings left in the fields.

Jesus, the one who wept at the news of the death of his friend Lazarus.

Jesus, the one who yearned for justice for the downtrodden, liberation for those held hostage by circumstances beyond their control, healing for the broken hearted, reconciliation with God for all, and whose yearning led to his crucifixion.

Perhaps the best question of all is, are we listening and responding as Mary did, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Are we paying attention to our dreams, as Joseph did, not once, not twice, but three times (once to take Mary as his wife, once to flee to Egypt, and once to return to Nazareth) Are we paying attention to our dreams and, as Joseph did, then quietly doing as God asked?

This advent, what seed is the Holy Spirit planting in you? In the midst of all the hustle and bustle of the coming week I invite you to take some time to sit quietly with God and listen to and nurture the message God is planting in your heart, for as surely as God spoke to Joseph in his dreams and as surely as God planted his seed in Mary, God is speaking to you and planting his seed in you. Amen.