

*Come, Spirit of the living God, and take up your place our hearts.*

They had their lives all set. The years of hope and heartbreak were behind them, they had settled into a comfortable rhythm of work, worship, volunteering. He had his twice-weekly golf game; she ran a local Food Bank. The pangs would hit periodically – when they saw a family in the park, when a niece or nephew had a birthday; their longing for a child never went away, but it was a dull ache, a faint echo of the acute agony they used to feel each month when it was clear she had not conceived. Could not conceive. Would not.

So they built their life and lived it, loving each other, loving their neighbors, loving God. And now this? What were they to do with a baby now, so long past their energetic prime? Was she going to have to give up her sewing room or he his man cave? What about all the travel they'd come to enjoy? What were they going to do with a baby now?

What are we going to do with a baby now? In many ways, making room for Jesus, our theme this Advent, is like making room for a baby. Oh, he doesn't need us to feed, burp or change him. But he does need us to set aside time to be with him, as we would for a baby. He needs us to make space in our schedules and homes, as we would for a child. He needs us to feed and nurture our relationship, taking time just to exult in love as we do when we gaze upon a baby. He needs us to hear and respond to the cries of people in need as we would to the cries of a newborn in the house. Jesus needs us to want a relationship with him, not just a mutual caring society.

There is nothing convenient about being a follower, a friend or a disciple of Jesus Christ. It is not something we can manage in an hour a week on Sundays, any more than we could care for a child in that time. The life of faith is not to be squeezed in to our available time slots; It is the container in which the rest of our activities are lived, the context that makes sense of everything else we do.

I grew up thinking it was about church on Sundays.  
And then I went to college in New York City and fell into this wonderful church that was in the midst of a revival, and had tons of 20 and 30-somethings. Suddenly I was going to Monday Night Bible Study, which began with a time of singing praise songs led by incredibly talented actors and singers; and always had room for questions; and within a few years, when we added a Wednesday Night program, I was going to eucharist at 6 o'clock and then dinner and prayer groups. Church twice a week! And yes, most of us were single or married without children, but there were ways that families could go deeper in their faith too. Talking about your relationship with Jesus became the norm. Do you know how much vitality is generated when we share our spiritual lives with each other? That's why I keep talking about spiritual growth groups, prayer groups, whatever we want to call them, because they bring our faith alive. Lively faith brings churches alive.

Then I learned about spiritual direction and a deeper life of prayer and in exploring that I discovered that "relationship with Jesus Christ" was not just an expression – it was something I could experience in my prayer life and gradually become more aware of in the rest of my life.

Do we want that? Do we want a relationship with Jesus?  
Do we want to make room in our lives for him and all his priorities and claims? 'Cause it'll affect the way we spend our time, spend our money, spend our lives. That refiner's fire Malachi talked about – that's a fire that burns away all that is not true in us, all that keeps us from putting God first. It purifies the gold in us. Just think how a baby upended Zechariah and Elizabeth's lives. And filled them with joy. Jesus is a magnificent disruption, if we allow him to disrupt us.

What would it look like for Christ Church to always put Jesus first, in everything we do?  
In how we budget, and how we teach our children, and how we decorate our sanctuary, and how we worship, and how we run our Food Pantry?  
What would it look like in your life if your relationship with Jesus came first? Think about times you went on a diet or began an exercise regimen – it came first. It altered how you spent your time, how you ate, how you moved. But we see the rewards, or we don't keep going.

Or a time when you fell in love – talk about having to make room in our lives!  
But the rewards are so full and so wonderful.

The rewards of a rich, full, living relationship with Jesus are wonderful too –  
more peace, more purpose, more sense of God’s presence all the time.

I want you to want that, because what I love best is to help connect people  
to Jesus. That’s why I send out and record and post a spiritual reflection  
every single weekday, to nourish your faith.

That’s why I do bible study and Lunch & Learn and worship,  
to help facilitate that spark of connection between you and Jesus.

That’s why I long for us to have a Wednesday night or Sunday after church  
or whenever opportunity for us to hear some teaching and then gather in  
spiritual growth groups to pray and hold each other up.

That’s something others would find compelling.

But we would have to be willing to make space in our busy, busy calendars.

And you have to want it. No one can do it for you.

But the moment we whisper to God, “Yes... I want more of you,”

God is right here. Jesus is right here. The Holy Spirit is right here.

If we want to open ourselves to a deeper experience of God’s love and power,  
we can ask for a deeper filling of the Holy Spirit. And make room.

Elizabeth and Zechariah no doubt had some adjustments to make,  
so much to create in their home and lives and hearts...  
but when that baby arrived, what joy.

Elizabeth experienced a wiping away of shame she had felt in her childlessness.

Zechariah experienced a new obedience to God  
and the recovery of his voice for praise.

Advent is a season of making more room for Jesus, preparing to celebrate again  
the great story of how God so loved the world he sent his Son into it,  
the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us, full of grace and truth;  
the story of the maker of heaven and earth taking on human form and the  
complete dependency of a human infant, in order to lead us to freedom.

Jesus is no longer that dependent infant, except in this:

no one in this world will see him except through us.

As we invite him into the center of our lives, we will make him known everywhere.

**Amen.**

**Luke 1:5-25**

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years. Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur." Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. When his time of service was ended, he went to his home. After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people."