

READY OR NOT

**A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 21, 2014**

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

This Is the Season of Preparation

I have two simple messages for you this morning. Today is the Fourth Sunday of the season of Advent. Christmas is upon us in the middle of this week. We have lit all four candles at this point, the three purple ones and the rose-colored one for Mary. The time is at hand.

Advent is a very old Latin term. The “vent” syllable of the word you might have heard in “veni,” a kind of root meaning “to come.” So Advent means “to come to” or “to come toward,” basically “it’s coming.” Brace yourself.

In many ways this is the season of preparation. A baby is coming, and we’d better get ready. So Message Number One has to do with the notion of preparation. Now I’d ask, insofar as you’re able, for those of you who are parents to think back to the birth of your firstborn, whether or not you are parents. I know some of you aren’t, but try. And for those of you who are, go back in memory to the time when you didn’t have children, and your first one was on the way.

What Did You Do to Get Ready?

You probably talked to people who knew what they were doing. You might have read books about it, about what’s involved in raising a baby and the feeding schedule and the diaper-changing schedule and the teething issue and what do you do with the vast quantities of drool – all the things that you might have learned about.

You might have taken birthing classes, and then you’ve got a room to prepare as well. Maybe it’s a portion of your bedroom, a corner of your room where you can put a crib, but hey, you don’t even have a crib yet. You gotta buy a crib. You gotta buy a car seat. You gotta buy all these different things, all made out of plastic and all pretty cheap. So you prepare.

Now the question I’d ask you is that, having done all that stuff, to what degree did you feel ready? I would guess that, even though none of that stuff was really a waste of your time, in no way were you fully prepared. I would bet that’s true for the vast majority of soon-to-be parents.

The same thing in marriage. If you’re a married person or if you have been married, can you remember back to a year or so before you got married. Some clergy offer premarital classes for couples. I offer it for starry-eyed teenagers; they’re the ones who need it most. But often I marry people who have lived together for twenty years. I don’t have much to tell them. But try

to imagine what you knew about marriage before you got married, compared to what you learned on the job.

Your Preparation Is Generally Inadequate

Speaking of jobs, you might apply for a new position, and then you would prepare for it. But that preparation is often completely inadequate. Not a waste of your time. It's worthwhile doing, but you learn on the job, generally speaking. It's like reading a book on how to kiss. Do that if you like, but you will surely learn on the job.

As all of you know, there was recently a death in my family. My mom was ninety-five years old. You would think I was prepared, right? I should have been. I thought I was. But no, I really wasn't prepared at all.

Now here's the message: All that preparation prior to a baby entering your family, prior to getting married, prior to a new job, or prior to a death in the family – these are just four examples. There are many others. All that preparation is not a waste of time, but it's not complete either. You learn on the job.

So Message Number One is what the angels said to Mary in heralding the approach of the new baby Jesus. They said, "Don't be afraid." You will rise to the challenge. You will be able to do it. You will learn on the job. You will succeed. And there are a hundred examples of how you succeeded, even though you weren't fully prepared as you entered into a major change in your life.

The Angels Repeat, "Don't Be Afraid"

Message Number One, "*Don't be afraid!*" is in every single portion of the infancy narratives that we find in Matthew and Luke.

For example, the angel came to Joseph, who was ticked off at this point. His bride, whom he hadn't yet married, was pregnant, and he was not happy about it at all. Guys, you understand. So Joseph planned to divorce her. He was upset! Although the text is very gentle, he was mad, and he's going to divorce the love of his life! He was that mad! And what did the angel say to him? "*Don't be afraid!*" The rest of the sentence is to exhort Joseph to "Take Mary, your betrothed, as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit." There's not a clue that he understood what was going on, but he wasn't afraid and he continued the marriage plan. We're all glad he did.

The angel Gabriel came to both Zachariah and Mary with messages for each. The core of each message was also, "*Don't be afraid!*" Then the angels, actually a throng of them, came to the shepherds, and the very first thing they said was, "*Don't be afraid!*"

You may have prepared, but maybe you don't feel prepared. However, there's no reason to be afraid because of what's coming in Message Number Two. This message consists of one of the

names that feature prominently in the whole story, as we are now on the Fourth Sunday of Advent on the brink of Christmas. Message Number Two is the name Emmanuel.

The first time we read about it is eight centuries before the birth of Christ in the prophecy of Isaiah that Emmanuel will be born to the people. It's an ancient Hebrew name meaning "God is with us." The "el" syllable is the name of God. So when the Bible says, "God created the heavens and earth" in Genesis, it's "Elohim." This is simply the term for God, and it's used in many different Hebrew names such as Ezekiel, "God is with us."

In the business of this season, at this time of your life, who knows what you're facing, but remember the two core messages of this story, "Don't be afraid," your preparation *is* inadequate, and that's fine because you will rise to the occasion. You will survive. You will be just fine because God is with us.

To spell that out a little, what it means is that the spirit of God is in constant communion with your spirit, so that what you need to rise to any occasion, regardless of how ill-prepared you are, is provided by that communion. It's invisible and it's always there. It's ubiquitous in your life.

Two Messages: "Don't Be Afraid." "God Is with Us."

One more thing, if I may. It's one of the things that sort of bugs me about the way in which Christmas is observed in our culture. I'm not going to talk about materialism but rather something else: Virtually every Christian and every non-Christian, whether they're atheist or agnostic or Jewish or Buddhist, virtually everybody agrees that the core message of Christmas is about the birth of a baby. Duh! Everybody gets that.

Those who deeply venerate Jesus, who are really gung-ho into it, they sort of make a correction when they say, it's not really about the birth of *a* baby, it's about the birth of *the* baby. The uniqueness of Christ. The way in which Jesus as a spiritual master is above and beyond everybody else. It's not about the birth of *a* baby, the indefinite article. It's about the birth of *the* baby, the definite article.

I submit to you a different way of looking at it. It's about the birth of babies, plural. It's about birthing. It's about the newness of life that is constantly being poured out into our world, regardless of death, regardless of disease, regardless of war. It is newness and life and spirit and hope and graciousness being poured out nonstop into our world. It is about birthing, newness all the time.

It's About the Birthing of Christ-Consciousness

People are increasingly trying to think and act in the same way that Christ did. One at a time, across our globe, giving us hope. It is about the birth of justice. All these issues that we have right now with the police and racial issues. Justice is being birthed into the minds and hearts of countless people – citizens, police, military, government, church, everybody. It is about the birth of hope. It is about the birth of love, poured out nonstop through this message into our world.

It was about a month ago that my mom died. My wife and I had planned a trip to Brooklyn in order to visit our new granddaughter. We had planned several weeks ahead, but in the middle of the week, my mom died; we were planning to go to Brooklyn the following Saturday, just a

couple days later. We decided to take the trip anyway, even though we really weren't ready, and emotionally we were a mess.

Birth as the Best Medicine for Death

I submit to you that there was no better time, no better medicine for me and my wife than to take that trip and to hold a new baby right after my ninety-five-year-old mom, with all sorts of medical issues, finally passed away in our home. Holding that little baby was the best medicine I could ever have had. But it was not limited to Art and Tracy feeling better because we were mourning the death of an old person, and therefore we were holding a baby.

It was not limited to that. Instead, it was this glimpse of an insight that death and life are not separate things. They're part of one thing. They're part of spirit. They're part of Life, with a capital "L." They're part of divinity. They're part of God. They're part of the whole being of ourselves. That is good and true and beautiful.

So don't be afraid, whatever is facing you in your life. And remember that God is with you.

Amen.