

Blessed be God who animates our lives and offers us the gift of Advent. May we come to the place we started and know it again for the first time. AMEN

This morning I would like to tell you a timeless story, a story which did not happen on the first Sunday of Advent, but a story which brings me and, I pray you, the joy and hope which is so desperately needed this day. The joy and the hope which are the Christian Christmas promise. The joy and the hope which inhabit the space we prepare as we wait, the Mary-like space, and fertilize the womb for the birth of love and life for which we wait.

The story takes place toward the end of Barbara Kingsolver's novel **Flight Behavior** when the main character Dellarobia is tending the sheep as winter becomes spring, as the fig tree might be showing signs of bloom. She has not had much previous experience with sheep, especially pregnant ewes, but there she was, charged with watching out for them in place of her bossy mother in law, even though she had plenty of other issues to deal with.

For months the times in her sleepy Appalachian town have been cataclysmic and apocalyptic, very reminiscent of Mark's Gospel.... very reminiscent of Isaiah's time when the people felt abandoned by God when the temple was destroyed. A startling flaming migration of monarch butterflies never before seen has caused upheaval, misunderstanding and even pentecostal religious conversion. But due to global warming and other scientifically undefined changes in the environment, the butterflies are not mating and thus birth, struggle and extinction are arriving too quickly and out of sync. To add to all this, a period of drought has been followed by unprecedented rains, bringing to mind the flood of Noah's time.

Dellarobia has the presence of mind to notice that God might be calling her to a new kind of attention. On a day in March as temperatures plummeted, the torrential rains turned to snow, albeit wet and slushy. Life was getting more complicated. Dellarobia was watching the hill strewn with pregnant ewes and comparing the colors of their coats against the whiteness of snow, when she noticed one female down and in distress!

It was not time, she thought, but then remembered that these things happen in God's time which is not sequential

She frantically donned her boots and tried to rush up the hill slipping and sliding and clutching at anything she could. When she arrived there was a burst of something from the mother, wet, indistinguishable and bloody. She bent to pick up the moist mass only to realize that this newborn lamb was not breathing

Somewhere deep inside her she remembered something about a process to get a lamb to breath if clogged with unlodgeable mucus; so she grabbed the lamb's legs, braced herself as best she could, and started whirling and whirling, hoping for a miracle of centrifugal force. Finally losing balance she collapsed clutching the lamb and realized that there was indeed a pulse and faint breath. She tucked it under her coat but even as she did she felt that faintness get even fainter until she was sure the lamb must in fact have died. The next thing that happened came from some place of deep instinct and faith: she blew into the lamb's nostrils and massaged and massaged and massaged. she kept it warm. she held it close. It began to breathe ...steadily

she was watching  
in a time of uncertainty and chaos  
She was alert and knew not when the lamb would arrive  
but was prepared  
not just with hot water and steady hands but with deep faith, instincts and hope  
she welcomed new life in a most unlikely and even miraculous way

This story brings to mind the sacrament of time, the sacrament of space and the sacrament of holy waiting...all Advent concepts:

With respect to time while we know in some chronological logic that today is Advent 1 and that Christmas day is indeed December 25, on another level Advent 1 is timeless as is Christmas...as is Easter...as is Pentecost...or ordinary time. It is an eternal point on a theological trajectory. That is not to diminish the historical reality of events, nor to suggest some heretical liturgical change. Rather it is to wonder and probe this time together and not get trapped or bound by chronological expectations or those bloody "shoulds" when should the tree be up, when should the presents be wrapped, when should Christ enters our hearts... The power of Advent, the miracle of Christmas, is in its call to stop, wait, keep awake and prepare. We might turn to the Holy Spirit to illumine how we might simply **be** in this time.

Whenever we find ourselves drawn into despair for our circumstances or the world's, our faith in God and the memories of the stories of salvation remind us to rest in the One who gave us life, to get very very very still, to pray, that life - giving answers of hope will be offered. To lie down with the warmth and peace of

wild things brings that dissolution of chaos and confusion and offers a grounding which returns us to God.

Dellarobia had come to that place...out of the despair of dying monarchs, chaotic and oppressive town politics, great wisdom came in gazing out her window, breathing in nature's wildness and beauty, gathering an appreciation for the moment

The chronological time was March. The timelessness was of holiness breaking into the world.

In the timelessness of it all, in the God's time of it all, a lamb was about to be born out of sequence and out of the normal pattern, into an uncertain world. A miracle was about to occur which was enabled by Advent-like awareness. you know not when the bridegroom comes

And so too the sacrament of space. Advent offers us the opportunity to reconsider the womblike space of God which is always holding us and nurturing us. Mary is our iconic moment for this. Saying yes to offering ourselves, our souls and bodies, for the life-giving potential of God's grace is what this period of reorientation is all about. Creating compassionate space then is duplicative of mary's womb or the humble stable. In Advent we are called to prepare these spaces, these life-giving opportunities. Dellarobia was ready and recognized the need to create such a space for the lamb. Her arms, her movements, her stance created a home and breath for the creature. I think of her reactions as those of a lifeguard in a flood saving a drowning beloved being. It became a mercy space.

And then Advent calls us to holy waiting. We don't really know what we are waiting for. I mean Christmas yes. But I wonder whether we often get lulled by the pattern of it all and distracted by the busyness of it all instead of focussing on the how of waiting. it is like one who lives by the train tracks doesn't hear the trains after a while.

Waiting is an active verb. And while stillness is a very important part of Advent, the stillness of the soul, the stillness of God, is not opposed to active waiting. Advent calls us to be prayerful in responding, yet again, to the Grace of God coming into the world. Active waiting is responding appropriately. Active waiting involves such disciplines as praying, journaling, contemplating, giving, gazing, ...well you get the point...all these ing verbs help us in becoming, loving and belonging

The Christ child is always coming into the world, just as the Kingdom, here and yet to come. it is not sequential; it is revolutionary.

It is all a process revolving and spinning within this cosmic mystery we call God.

Dellarobia was actively waiting: on one level for the lambs to be born, though not that day, on another level for some calming of the storms in her life, and on yet another level for her identity. She was becoming a caregiving, lifegiving, disciple making good choices trusting her instincts.

I invite you to consider your own stories of life-giving choices. And to allow the Holy Spirit to inspire you to do so.

I hope the story which I have told today opens up some new ways of being in Advent for you. I hope we realize together that it is less about what we do than about **how we are**. I hope we will recognize during this season, life-giving choices in the midst of oppressive circumstances. I hope that we realize new hope and new joy which is God-given. And i pray that the power of the Holy Spirit working in us can do infinitely more than we may do ourselves...if we are open and ready and willing! AMEN