

A Guided Meditation for the Fourth Sunday in Advent—“A Violet in the Snow”

This morning, with the help of our imaginations, I’m going to invite us to travel backwards in time and across a great ocean. Backwards in time about 2000 years. Across a great ocean to a land called Israel. (*If you’re like me, you might need to close your eyes to help in the transport!*) It wasn’t that long ago that a revolt re-established this Jewish nation--freeing it from an occupying empire. Now, there is a new occupying force, the Romans, but they seem willing to let Israel have some independence like their other client states--so long as the taxes are paid and the peace is kept.

You travelled to Jerusalem just last year for the Passover pilgrimage. And there, just as in the stories the elders told, was a great and glorious temple. Rebuilt with sturdy stone walls that promised never to be brought down again. The schedule of sacrifices had been re-established too. In the streets and at the markets, you had overheard conversations flavoured with hope that God would surely do something soon to save the people. But for hundreds of years the heavens have been silent. There are no more prophets and it seems that God has stopped speaking. For years and years, you, the people of Israel, have been living on hope and prayers. Hanging on tenaciously to all that is left, the promises and the covenant. Wondering if God has abandoned you. Wondering if the promised Messiah will ever come. Some people have hope. Some believe. Yet many are filled with doubts.

How far away does God seem from you this day? Do you feel that your prayers echo off the walls and disappear into an empty sky? Do you dare to believe that God could come to you? (Pause) Wait, listen, and see how close God has come.

*When it all began, God was so very far away,
a mighty king, whom man must honour and obey.*

*But we went astray and God said my people need a friend.
So many years ago, in Bethlehem, a baby came like a violet in the snow.*

You are in the town of Bethlehem now. The town of Bethlehem about 2000 years ago. It is night there and the town is quiet now. A cat meows off a side street nearby. A gentle wind stirs the trees. The sweet smell of jasmine mingles with the smoke smell of the tar from the torches burning outside the doors. A quiet laugh drifts out into the street. The hard-packed dirt of the street firm beneath your soft-bottomed sandals. Your loose-flowing cloak whispers against your legs as you walk towards a small house—made of the same hard-packed dirt as the street. Its walls are whitewashed though. It’s an ordinary house, nothing special. Outside, near the little barn at the back, a man paces, anxious, impatient. Throwing nervous glances toward the house every few seconds. Trying to avoid the dog running about his feet. The man’s name is Joseph. His hands are rough and scarred, his fingernails short. You guess he must be a carpenter by trade. You know he is a godly man. For in between his furtive glances toward the house come furtive glances toward the heavens. And as you approach, he even falls to his knees for a brief prayer before jumping up to resume his pacing. Only one thing leads to this much anxiety. His wife is in labour inside that house. It’s scary and mysterious, this business of giving birth. He wants to be with her, but it is thought to be no place for a man in those days. One of the women comes out to tell him that the pains are closer together now; surely the child will be born soon.

As he waits, you walk up to him and sit beside him quietly on some hay. He begins to talk to you of the events of the past nine months. He tells you of his shock and anguish when he learned that Mary was with child. Of the pain he felt in knowing that had he betrayed. His demand to know who she had betrayed him with. And of more pain at the thought of losing Mary. Mary whom he loved.

The pain he felt when he realized he would have to hurt the woman he loved even more than she had hurt him. For when he broke their engagement, as was demanded by custom, everyone would soon know why and Mary's life would be over. Literally.

He remembers to you, the fear in Mary's voice as she begged him to believe her story. But how could he dare to believe?

He relives his dream for you, that incredible dream, that larger than life dream. In which God's silence was broken when a heavenly messenger spoke to his heart. "This is God's child. The time has come for the Promised One to be born."

He, Joseph, a regular, ordinary Joe, had been chosen by God to help raise this promised child. The wonder and responsibility of his task hit him again. (Pause)

A child's cry suddenly pierces the silence. A woman ushers him inside, and Joseph stumbles to Mary's side. Her face glows with the radiant joy of a new mother as she cradles her child tears slipping down her cheeks. With gentle hands, Joseph takes the newborn child into his arms, and with a voice thick with unshed tears gives him the name Jesus, just as the angel told him to do.

Push open the rough wooden door and walk into the room. It is still dark. A light burns in a niche by a cupboard and a fire glows gently, throwing shadows on the wall. In the corner on a straw pallet are Mary and Joseph with Jesus. Joseph gently hands you the baby. You hold him in your arms. He doesn't look any different from any other newborn baby, rather red and wrinkled, sucking his fist and making those funny little sounds that babies make.

Look at this sign of God's love. God has come to us, a helpless baby, the Saviour of the world wrapped in rags. Jesus born to reveal our own holiness. Do you dare to believe?

He was wrinkled and red and he cried just the same as you and I.

And as she held her son Mary's secret filled her eyes.

Yes she thought of us and knew that his peace could fill our lives.

So many years ago, in Bethlehem, a baby came like a violet in the snow.

There is a knock on the door now. Outside are several shepherds with their faces dirty from the blowing sand. You hold Jesus close as the shepherds stand staring at their weather worn hands wondering just how they got there in the first place. Glancing nervously at one another then back into the little room where Mary and Joseph are looking at them curiously. There is just enough room as they crowd their way inside, and begin to stutter out their story. Of angels and hillsides. Of messages of peace that would fill our lives. Of stars and hope. Of God's silence broken. Although it is still night, you notice there is light streaming in the window now. Light from a star overhead. And seeping through the very walls is an angelic sound, music so light and airy it fills your very soul. Excitement and joy fill the room. The Shepherds crowd around you holding the baby and make cooing noises. Looking into that tiny scrunched up face. Not understanding what exactly is so special about this baby but knowing it is something. You hold Jesus close and look again into his little face. Understanding that God has entered creation in person. Knowing that God is love. Will you let God's love speak to your heart today?

Oh the shepherds came, and the angels sang throughout the night.

And the light of the star banished hopelessness and fright.

Yes our brother has come and now we know that God is love.

So many years ago, in Bethlehem, a baby came like a violet in the snow.