

## Opening – Standing on the Threshold

Friends, today we stand on a threshold... For eleven weeks, we've walked through the "silent" gap between Malachi and Matthew. We've watched empires rise and fall, traced roads and valleys, hills and harbors, and listened to the land with Cyndi Parker. We've kept asking: *Where is God when it feels like nothing is happening?*

Now we arrive at what Paul calls "the fullness of time" (Gal 4:4). Advent is about that moment: the on-ramp from our long waiting into God's surprising arrival.

Before we step into Luke 1–2, I want to do two things:

1. Offer a brief review of what God was doing in the "400 Years of Silence."
2. Invite you into a story of what it might have felt like when the silence finally began to crack.

## How God Set the Stage

In Galatians 4:4 Paul writes, "When the fullness of the time came, God sent His Son..." History was not random; God was arranging the stage.

- **From Persia to Greece to Rome.** When Malachi finished, Persia ruled. Alexander the Great conquered Persia and spread Greek culture. After his death, his empire fragmented, and Rome took center stage. By Jesus' birth, Roman law, roads, and power held the Mediterranean world together—perfect for news to travel.
- **A Common Language.** Because of Alexander, Greek became the shared language of the eastern Mediterranean. The Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek, the Septuagint, so promises once heard in Hebrew could echo in Greek marketplaces and synagogues.
- **New Religious Structures.** Synagogues appeared as local centers of Scripture and prayer. Groups like Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes emerged. By Jesus' day, synagogues dotted the land—the very places where Jesus and later Paul would teach and announce the kingdom.
- **The Maccabees and Hanukkah.** When Antiochus Epiphanes desecrated the temple and tried to erase Jewish identity, the Maccabees led a revolt, reclaimed the temple, and rededicated it—giving rise to Hanukkah. Even in the "silent" years, God was shaping a people who refused to forget His covenant.
- **Herod, Roads, and the Land Between.** Herod the Great expanded the temple and built fortresses, cities, and the harbor at Caesarea Maritima. Roman roads linked cities; harbors like Caesarea, Joppa, and Ptolemais served ships; the Sea of Galilee sat at a crossroads of trade. When Jesus called fishermen from Galilee, the world was already networked to carry their message far beyond their lakeshore.

- **A World Tired and Expectant.** Pagan religions felt empty. Many Jews were worn down by empire after empire, still waiting for God's promises. Into that unresolved story, the Messiah came "in the fullness of time."

That's the stage: empires, languages, roads, synagogues, revolts, builders, and a tired world. But what did it feel like for ordinary people?

Let me tell you a story.

### **The Day the Silence Cracked**

This is not written in your Bible exactly like this, but it lives in the edges of Luke 1–2...

Imagine you are **Yosef**, a young craftsman in Galilee. You've lived under Roman rule your whole life. The ridge road not far from your village carries soldiers, tax collectors, and traders to coastal highways, harbors, and eventually to Rome itself. You've never seen a prophet, only heard stories.

Every Sabbath, you walk to the synagogue. You know the rhythm:

- The Shema
- The psalms
- The Law
- The Prophets

You've heard the same promises:

"The people who walk in darkness; Will see a great light" (Isa 9:2).

"Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me" (Mal 3:1).

But week after week, nothing changes. The Pharisees argue with the Sadducees. The priests in Jerusalem feel far away. Herod builds down on the coast and in Jerusalem, but you just try to keep food on the table. Old men in the marketplace talk about Persia, then Alexander, then the Maccabees, and now Rome. You've heard about the Septuagint, about synagogues everywhere.

You've never seen a prophet. And God feels...quiet.

### **Rumors from Judea**

One day, a traveler arrives, dusty from the Jordan Valley. You ask, "What's the news from Jerusalem?"

The traveler says, "You know the old priest Zechariah, from the division of Abijah?" (cf. Luke 1:5–9). "He was chosen to burn incense. When he came out, he couldn't speak. They say he saw a vision."

He goes on: “Then, months later, Zechariah’s wife Elizabeth, who was barren, gave birth. At the circumcision, Zechariah wrote, ‘His name is John,’ and suddenly he could speak. He began to prophesy about a child who would prepare the way for the Lord” (cf. Luke 1:57–79).

## A Girl Named Mary

Soon another rumor drifts north, about a girl from Nazareth:

Her name is **Mary**, and she is engaged to Joseph. An angel visited; she conceived by the Holy Spirit; she hurried south into the hill country of Judah to visit Elizabeth (cf. Luke 1:26–45). You’ve heard rabbis call your land a “bridge,” a land between continents. Now the news traveling those roads is that God might be moving again—not just kings and armies.

## A Census and a Birth

Rome announces a census. Orders race along Roman roads: everyone must register in their ancestral town. You watch Joseph and very pregnant Mary leave Nazareth, heading toward Bethlehem, the city of David (cf. Luke 2:1–5).

You go back to your workbench, but your mind is not on your tools; your mind is on the prophets: a ruler from Bethlehem, a son of David, a messenger in the wilderness.

Then, one Sabbath, your rabbi stands in the synagogue, eyes wet.

“Brothers and sisters, news has reached us,” he says. “In Bethlehem of Judea a child has been born. Shepherds say angels filled the sky and spoke of ‘good news of great joy which will be for all the people.’ They say a Savior has been born, who is Christ the Lord” (cf. Luke 2:8–14).

Around you, people gasp. Some scoff. Some shake their heads. You feel your heart pounding. For centuries, you have read and studied the prophets. Tonight, it feels as though those stories are being fulfilled.

## Walking Home Under the Stars

Walking home under the Galilean stars, the same hills and stones feel different. Powers have shifted from Persia to Greece to Rome; Greek has spread; roads and harbors knit the world together; synagogues dot the land. And now, in a little village called Bethlehem, a baby has been born who might be the One.

The silence has broken—not with a shout from heaven, but with a baby’s cry.

Friends, that’s what Advent is: standing in Yosef’s sandals—feeling the length of the silence, hearing the old promises again, and then discovering that in Jesus, God has quietly stepped into the story.

## Fullness of Time and Holy Listening

**Read Galatians 4:4–5.**

A Sermon by Paul David Bravard, First Friends Church of Marion.

Paul says Jesus came in the “fullness of time”:

- **Historically:** the world was knit together by Roman roads, a shared Greek language, and a weary spiritual landscape.
- **Biblically:** Israel’s story had reached a tipping point—promises to Abraham, David, and the prophets all hanging in the air.
- **Theologically:** God was not absent. He was
  - letting the old word sink deep,
  - rearranging the stage—roads, languages, institutions,
  - preparing hearts hungry for something real.

In the Friends tradition, holiness is usually quiet faithfulness: a life from the Divine Center. Advent is where we lean into that kind of holy listening.

### Immersing Ourselves in the Story & Three Advent Invitations

Let me give you one more picture, a way to practice this.

Imagine someone from First Friends this week—maybe you—sitting at the kitchen table.

You open your Bible to Luke 1–2. Next to it, you lay one of Cyndi Parker’s maps from *Listen to the Land: Historical Geography*. You trace the ridge route from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the hill country of Judah, the road down to the Jordan, the Sea of Galilee and its networks.

You move slowly through the text:

- You read about Zechariah in the temple and picture Jerusalem’s hills.
- You read about Mary going “with haste” into the hill country and see the contours of the land.
- You read about shepherds in fields near Bethlehem and imagine the chill of night air and the surprise of glory.

As you read, you remember what you heard from the past eleven weeks: Persia, Greece, Rome, the Maccabees, Herod, synagogues, Septuagint, roads, and harbors.

At some point, you realize these stories are not just generic religious tales. This is God coming to a specific place, at a specific time, along specific paths.

And you notice something else:

The silence you feel in your own life, the unanswered prayers, the long waiting, the unresolved stories, follows the same pattern as those 400 years:

- You don’t hear much from God.
- You live under forces you can’t control.

- You watch the news and wonder what God could possibly be doing.

And in that moment, Advent becomes more than candles and carols. It becomes a **practice of trust**: “Lord, I don’t always see what You’re arranging. But I believe that You work in the silences, and that Jesus is Your final Word of love to me.”

That’s holiness in a Friends key: a faithful presence in an anxious world, grounded not in constant noise, but in deep confidence that God is at work even when we feel nothing.

Let me offer three simple invitations for this Advent season...

**1. Live in Luke 1–2.**

Read it slowly this month—a paragraph a day. Ask: *Where is God moving quietly? Where is fear giving way to trust? Where is joy breaking in?*

**2. Name Your “Silent Years.”**

Where does God feel silent—in your relationships, health, work, family, or calling? Name it. In Friends language, “hold it in the Light.” Don’t numb it or spin it; bring it honestly into God’s presence.

**3. Practice Faithful Presence.**

Our world is overloaded with anxiety, chronic stress raises the emotional temperature and pushes us toward reactivity. Advent invites a different posture: be a Christ-centered presence. You don’t always have to speak or give an opinion; quite often, a calm, prayerful, attentive presence brings more peace than any words we can speak.

## Conclusion – When the Silence Breaks Again

The same God who worked in those 400 “silent” years has not changed.

The same Jesus who came in the fullness of time still comes by His Spirit.

The same Spirit who overshadowed Mary and loosened Zechariah’s tongue is present here in Marion, Indiana, in 2025.

The silence is not empty.

So, as we light candles, sing carols, and move toward the manger, may this be our prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ,

You came once in the fullness of time.

Come into the silent places of our lives.

Teach us to wait, to listen, and to live as Your faithful people  
until the day You come in glory.

Amen.

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