

### **Hold your nerve!**

Hold your nerve! Yes, there are decorations on the tree; yes, this evening we will be singing our hearts out to the best carols; yes, our gospel reading is the Christmas reading, but my friends hold your nerve! It is still only Advent 4.

Hold your nerve. Fans of Rudyard Kipling's poem "If" may be familiar with the concept of holding your nerve. In a poem that holds such a picture of perfection as to be unobtainable Kipling writes,

"If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew  
To serve your turn long after they are gone,  
And so hold on when there is nothing in you  
Except the Will which says to them: 'Hold on!'"

Advent might feel like that, but I much prefer the advice of Quentin Crisp, "I never dust, after four years it never gets any thicker, you just have to hold your nerve."

This morning, we are encouraged to hold our nerve as we hear prophet, apostle and angel. In these over familiar passages, we are drawn into the

mystery of what God has planned from the beginning, if we can hold our nerve and hear the message each gives us.

Isaiah is addressing a concrete situation in his prophecy, as real as Russia invading Ukraine, or the threat of Russian spy ships and submarines off our own shores. King Ahaz is facing a threat from Israel and Aram to depose and replace him with someone who will join their ultimately disastrous plot to defy Assyria. Isaiah tells Ahaz not to worry, God will defend him, he will not be deposed. We pick the story up where Isaiah says to him, “ask God for a sign, God will move heaven and earth to show you this is true.” Ahaz hides behind his piety and refuses to ask for a sign, but in reality, he has replaced his trust in God with his trust in his own political skills, he will call to Assyria for help, that will show them! Isaiah’s message is, hold your nerve, God will save you, but Ahaz “decided that it was more expedient to be ‘son and servant’ to the King of Assyria than son and servant to the invisible God. He took refuge in a lie. The independence of Judah was surrendered to Assyria.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets*, p.81

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God gives him a sign anyway. In the midst of siege and warfare, where life appears curtailed, God will give new life, and where food and sustenance is limited and threatened there will come a time quickly when that situation will be reversed. If Ahaz could have held his nerve Judah could have survived trusting in God, who had already promised to move heaven and earth.

The Apostle Paul is not known for losing his nerve, and he hasn't lost it in the opening to his letter to the Romans. Paul didn't start this church, doesn't know them particularly well so can do some serious theological thinking. Paul can hold his nerve because the resurrection shows that this Jesus who he calls Lord is the Son of God. And because the Romans have never heard Paul preach, he gives them the gospel in a nutshell. God had promised through the prophets to raise up a King, a Messiah who would be the true Son of David, and in fact, because of the resurrection we now know him to be the Son of God as well. And because of all that you and I are called to belong to Jesus Christ. We belong. Hold your nerve.

Belonging is important, it is vital for human flourishing. Advent reminds us that we belong to something that existed before us, and that will outlast us, something eternal, the kingdom of God. We belong as a part of God's story of

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salvation, the privilege of which we get to tell again every year. We belong to something bigger than an idea, something wider than bordered countries, something more lavish than the narrow understanding of ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality, ability or class. We belong to something to which all are invited to and from which none are excluded. Which is why as the parish church for this town we stand firmly on the side of those who are being told that they do not belong. Hold your nerve, there is space for all.

And belonging is precisely what Matthew wants us to understand, that Jesus belongs to the royal line through being Son of David, and through that belonging we are all brought into the relationship of God with us. But first Joseph has to hold his nerve. Joseph has to hold his nerve against, doubt, disappointment, distrust, and fear. Joseph has to hold his nerve against what the letter of the law says should happen, he has to hold his nerve against the certainty of his righteousness that would be within its rights to put Mary to death. Joseph has to hold his nerve against dismissing a dream for being that last bit of cheese he shouldn't have eaten. Joseph has to hold his nerve and trust that he has been invited to be part of God's plan of salvation.

Now it's kind of awkward that here we are in Advent 4 thinking about Mary, and it's Joseph who takes centre stage. Some of you may say 'twas ever thus!

In fact, Mary is named in our reading, one of very few uses of her name in Matthew's gospel. We know from Luke that Mary too had to hold her nerve, as she pondered Gabriel's message and all that could happen from her yes.

She had to hold her nerve as the poet Thom Gunn puts it

*How could I know what I began*

*Meeting the eyes more furious than*

*the eyes of Joseph, the eyes of God?*

*I am my own and not my own<sup>2</sup>*

Hold your nerve. We are called to hold our nerve when all we have is a dream, or a hope, or a faint wish. "God doesn't appear to Joseph when he is wide awake and at prayer. There is no assurance of a burning bush or parting clouds on the mountaintop. There is only a dream. The dream however was enough for Joseph."<sup>3</sup> If all we have is the dream, the hope of God's coming kingdom in a world of violence, suspicion, hatred and fear, hold your nerve, the dream is enough.

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<sup>2</sup> Thom Gunn "Jesus and His Mother",

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Harris, *Feasting on the Word: Year A volume 1*, p.97

Hold your nerve to hear again the Advent proclamation in these last few days, “that the baby in the manger is the reigning Messiah, that the crucified Jesus will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, that the one who is to be delivered up is the one who will dispose of all earthly power and authority with imperial ease, being King of Kings and Lord of Lords. The Word of God that holds and shapes the future is the same Word who implanted prophecies in the testimony of his people Israel for the comfort of those who still travel in the wilderness. The wonder of it is that, for us whose calling is to live and bear witness in the time between the times, it is still an hour in which God says I am not against you: I am with you.”<sup>4</sup>

Hold your nerve! Hold your nerve in the mystery of God made man, of life being created within the womb of a virgin just as God created life out of nothing, in God moving heaven and earth to give us a sign that God is with us. Matthew goes further than Paul, he tells us that Jesus is God’s Son right at his conception, that this was always God’s plan, that God has always wanted to be with us and has moved heaven and earth to be with us.

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<sup>4</sup> Fleming Rutledge, *Advent*, p.356

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On this shortest day when darkness appears to win out, we are encouraged to hold our nerve that the light will shine in the darkness, and the darkness will not overcome it. That our waiting won't be in vain, that the cry we will hear in a few days' time of a newborn baby will be the sound of heaven being moved to meet earth. That the king whose kingdom we await with hopeful and joyful anticipation will come, does come every time we allow his kingdom into our lives and to work through us.

Friends, hold your nerve, in the busyness of choir rehearsals, of last minute shopping or food collecting, in the making up of spare beds or packing of bags, in the crowded trains or busy roads, in all that would distract us in the coming few days hold your nerve. Dream the dream of the kingdom, hope for the light to flicker in the darkness, make yourself ready; for God is coming to be with us.

Hold your nerve.