

**The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza  
The Church of the Good Shepherd  
The Third Sunday in Advent  
Sunday, December 13, 2020**

*Stir up thy power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

This is the third Sunday of Advent. It is also called Gaudete Sunday in many liturgical churches and the Latin word “Gaudete” means “rejoice.” The season of Advent originally started as a season of fasting in preparation for Christmas, and Gaudete Sunday offered a break in this fasting for rejoicing in the nearness of the Lord’s coming. Pope Francis calls this Sunday the “Sunday of Joy”, and this special focus is also known as Rose Sunday and is often symbolized with a rose-colored candle in the Advent Wreath.

The tenor of Advent is one of expectant possibility – as the world eagerly awaits the transformation that will come with the fulfillment of God’s promises. In this season, God calls us to quiet watching and listening for what new things He is doing now. We sit and we wait, holding our breath with anticipation, straining our ears and eyes for the signs of God’s incarnate Word appearing in our midst. This Gaudete Sunday reminds us that even as we wait in the quiet darkness for the coming light, we do so rejoicing that our God is not only one who is continually incarnating new life into His creation, but is also one who waits with us.

The season of Advent always makes me philosophical and my attention frequently turns to the heavens. This year, I have been enjoying the 13<sup>th</sup> annual Hubble Space Telescope Advent Calendar<sup>1</sup> hosted online by The Atlantic. Each day in Advent, a new deep space image from the Hubble Telescope is published. These images of newly born stars, the awe-inspiring colorful expansion of hot gas of the Lagoon Nebula, the enormous swirl of gas and matter that comprise the Giant Spiral galaxy, they capture my imagination and fill me with wonder, awe, and not a little bit of existential fear. These images have been especially inspiring and grounding for me this year. As the conditions on Earth, and especially in this country, have been so anxiety-producing and overwhelming, gazing at the stars at night in my neighborhood and beholding the images of the deep-space heavens from the Hubble Telescope center me in a greater context. They give me the space to breathe and remember that God and God’s creation are larger and more awesome than my own limited perspective.

With all this in my mind, I paid especial attention when the news broke this week that retired General Chuck Yeager, the Air Force test pilot who was the first to break the sound barrier, died on Monday at the age of 97. Throughout his life, he broke numerous speed and altitude records, including becoming the first person to travel 2<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> times the speed of sound. And he trained men who would go on to join NASA’s Gemini and Apollo programs. I admit I am continually fascinated by those who feel called to touch the heavens and explore the deep mystery beyond our planet.

Reading about Chuck in the Washington Post reminded me of another famous test pilot, astronaut, and senator who died in Advent four years ago nearly to the day. Like Chuck, John Glenn lived a long and full life – his was 95 years. In 1957, just months before the Soviet Union launched its first Sputnik satellite, he made the first transcontinental supersonic flight. In 1959, he was one of the first seven pilots selected to be astronauts in the fledgling NASA agency. While he was not the first in space, John was selected to be the first astronaut to orbit the Earth in 1962 and was the first to fully capture America’s attention and admiration.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2020/12/2020-hubble-space-telescope-advent-calendar/617199/>

This space mission came after months of delays because of mechanical problems and bad weather. Finally, on the 11<sup>th</sup> scheduled launch time, the Mercury rocket carrying the Friendship 7 space capsule lifted off from Cape Canaveral. The nation stopped in its tracks to watch on television and listen on the radio. The country held its collective breath and prayed for him as he entered the Earth's orbit. His flight lasted five hours and he orbited the Earth three times.

I have found myself imagining what it must have been like for John, alone in that tiny capsule so far, far away from all that was familiar. The quietness of space – the frightful distance and yet terrible intimacy with a reality far bigger than we experience here on earth. The fullness of the universe stretching out before him and yet surrounded by the unsettling sense of emptiness. John was entirely alone at this new frontier, even while remaining tenuously tethered to the familiar. It took a host of people and technology to launch him into space, but once there he was effectively on his own. Return was his responsibility alone.

Things went wrong, as they often do.

After the first orbit, a mechanical failure developed that required John to fly manually for the rest of the flight. Then a warning light came on indicating possible failure of the heat shield, yet no one could be sure and so he had no choice but to chance re-entry through Earth's atmosphere. As John plummeted to Earth, a metal strap came loose and banged around inside the capsule and he saw flaming chunks flying by outside the window and wondered whether the heat shield might be falling apart.

I relate this story to you because his was an Advent experience – one in which he was empowered while remaining somewhat powerless, alone while remaining tenuously connected, active while also waiting, observing while also engaged. John relied on ground control but ultimately, he was on his own. John was not unlike like Mary, the mother of Jesus, waiting in the darkness, accompanied and yet alone, pregnant with glorious promise and yet contemplating an uncertain and unknowable future. These are contradictions, of course, but I think Advent is largely experienced as contradiction and dichotomy. I think that is what is so unnerving about this season, if we take seriously. The Advent experience is one of active waiting, of receptive labor, of finding the fullness amid the emptiness. The Advent experience is one of pregnant possibility in the midst of absence – of waiting to enter the coming light while settling uneasily into the darkness.

But John Glenn was more than an astronaut and senator, of course, he was also a husband and father. He was married to his wife, Annie, for 73 years. We lost Annie this year also, dying at the impressive age of 100 from complications due to COVID-19. Annie said she and John met when they were two years old, and throughout his life she was by his side; his constant companion, chief supporter, willing partner, and the grounding center of his life. What is remarkable to me in this was that Annie was also disabled, suffering from a terrible stammer.

For most of her life, Annie was afflicted with an 85 percent stutter, meaning that she would become tripped up on 85 percent of the words she tried to speak. This was a disability that affected every area of her life and Annie barely spoke, not because she didn't have anything to say, but because when she did, people often assumed she was either deaf or mentally deficient. Throughout the public life she shared with her famous husband, she struggled with this handicap.

At the age of 53, she underwent a new type of therapy that involved a three-week in-patient rehabilitation in which she was completely isolated from her family and had to relearn how to speak each letter of the alphabet. The program was successful and when she called home at the end of the treatment and spoke clearly and easily to John for the first time, he cried.

Most people had thought that Annie simply couldn't talk, but once she received the gift of clear speech, she became an active public speaker, initially in support of John's senate campaigns. It is said that after speaking, Annie sought out in the crowds those that everyone else ignored – the disabled. Annie understood deeply and painfully what it was like to be overlooked by strangers and to be discounted, and she became an ardent and vocal supporter of those who suffered disabilities. She became their voice in a world that often refused to listen to them.

I suspect that Annie understood the Advent experience. She spent decades of imposed quiet and fasting, waiting in uncomfortable silence and isolation for her time to speak. She spent long months waiting for her husband to be strapped to a rocket and shot into space and then another terrible five hours holding her breath and waiting with the nation as he orbited the globe and returned to Earth. Again, she spent another nine days in uncertain waiting in 1998, as John at the age of 77 returned to space aboard the space shuttle Discovery. Yes, I think she knew this Advent waiting – waiting that is both pregnant with hope and new life, as well as fraught with uncertainty and the fear of the unknown.

This year, we are living in an Advent time more poignant, fraught, and dichotomous than any other in my lifetime. We wait – empowered and yet interdependent; isolated from those we love yet connected in newly-experienced ways; anxiously diligent and yet grasping to nascent hope; uncertain yet faithful. We wait – after 11 months of living through a global pandemic that has sickened and killed so many, vaccines are rising on the horizon. We wait – pregnant with hope for the coming light of a new dawn while yet remaining unsettled and impatient in the cold dark stillness of night. In our Advent waiting, and on this Sunday of Joy, we are invited again to still our hearts and minds and watch and listen deeply for the signs of God incarnating new life in the world around us, listening for the voice behind the silence and watching for the pinpricks of light beyond the darkness.

Amen.