

The First Sunday of Advent
December 1, 2024
Jeremiah 33:14-16, Psalm 25:1-9
1 Thessalonians 3:9-13, Luke 21:25-36

Waiting in Hope

As I mentioned at last Sunday's observance of Christ the King, we have come full circle. This first Sunday of Advent, we are confronted with the narrative of an age that is full of turmoil, upheaval and suffering, and an age that is heading for the end. And yet within that narrative, there is also another story—a story that contains the seeds of hope for a new beginning, of the Holy One coming to us in humility, clothed in flesh, restoring and healing our humanity.

We just lit a candle on our Advent wreath that signifies hope, hope for the light of Christ to come in our midst, hope for redemption and transformation for ourselves, for our communities, and for the world. It is the lone light on the wreath right now, yet it shines strongly and bravely. And yet, at first glance, today's Gospel reading seems less like a beacon of hope and more like a list of warning signs! There are signs in the moon and the stars, there is foreboding, people fainting from fear, the power of the very heavens being shaken. We are told to be on guard

and to be ready, so as not to be caught in a trap. We are to pray that we will have the strength to stand firm and escape these things that are to take place. And all these exhortations that were spoken so many, many years ago, in ancient times, which seem so far removed from our own time, are strikingly relevant to us today. We, too, are fearful of upheaval in our lives, of change that is happening too fast, of economic hardship, of political strife, turmoil and war and violence, alienation from our neighbors. Where is the hope here? The future can seem bleak and frightening.

Oddly, enough hope is to be found in waiting. Waiting. Waiting often seems counterintuitive in our hyper-busy culture. And we tend to want to be busy, to scurry about preparing for the holidays in a frenzy of shopping, buying, wrapping, cooking, cleaning, preparing to the point of exhaustion, and then we are unable to listen to the still small voice inside of us, the voice of the Spirit, who tells us not to be afraid, to stand up and wait with bated breath in anticipation of the new thing that God is doing, the story that is being told. It means to slow down long enough to see that in the darkness, the confusion, the swirling uncertainty, there is

indeed coming a steady dawning of the light of God who is coming among us as a helpless young babe to bring light and peace and joy.

It is difficult to wait. And it can be scary, too. If we are quiet and undistracted, we are left to confront our fears, our uncertainty, and it is too uncomfortable. It's better just to distract ourselves. And it's so easy to get caught up in the tyranny of the linear process of time. There's never enough of it any time, and particularly not during these four weeks of the last month of the calendar year! We need to plan this, get this done, get these cards written, decide what we will buy for whom, fret about whether the person will like it, or God forbid, already has it! We must outdo ourselves, and we only have so much time to make this Christmas definitively the "best ever." The house must be immaculate and exquisitely decorated, and everything must go off without a hitch, because it won't do for it to be anything less. Sound familiar? I know in the past I have fallen into this. And yet for some, all this bustle and merriness is a recipe for stress, for a lack of peace, or depression, or emptiness.

Instead, if we live with an awareness of Kairos time, of time that is measured not in minutes but in the experience of God's love, of time that invites us to live deeply in our hearts and souls and wait for the Christ to be born anew in us, we will know the peace that will keep us steady in the midst of the chaos of our own personal seasons, and of the world around us. In his Advent sermon "We are Waiting", the Rev. Charles Wynder, Dean of Chapel at St. Paul's School in Concord, New Hampshire, writes: "The whitewater rapids nature of our common life leaves many scared, questioning and hopeless. It seems that things are out of control. Or at least out of our control. Perhaps that is the point. We are not in control." And rather than try to wrest control back, or bury our fear in busyness, we are called to do what seems to be going against the grain—to stop, to watch, to wait, to be in the midst of the chaos without fighting it, where we can finally hear the still small voice and recognize the whisper of the Holy Spirit.

Let's listen to what our Scripture lessons have to teach us today about waiting and hoping. The prophet Jeremiah writes to the people of Israel during the Babylonian exile. He believes that the destruction of

the temple, the exile, and other calamities that befell the people came about as a result of their lack of faithfulness to the covenant they made with God. And yet he brings encouragement and tells them that God will not hold it against them forever, and that there would be restoration. We read “I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will live in safety.” There is hope for better times ahead.

With the psalmist, we can lift our souls to God, we can put our trust in him, we can ask him to show us his ways and teach us his paths. We can remember that God is the God of our salvation, full of compassion and love, from everlasting. We can wait, and tarry a while in the presence of God, knowing that he is working his purpose out, down through the ages, into our very own day.

And the apostle Paul, in his first letter to the Thessalonians, believed to be the first letter that he wrote, encourages the fledgling church to continue in faithfulness and hope, and prays that they “may increase and abound in love.” He knows there will be trials and

tribulations and persecutions that they will face before the soon-expected return of Christ, and he prays for them to courageously continue and be strengthened and be ready to anticipate with joy the coming of the Lord. And we can see these signs in the Gospel of Luke as well. In the midst of all the portents, the heavens being shaken, the distress of the nations, they are not to cower, but stand up and hold up their heads, for redemption is drawing near. They are to remember the sign of the fig tree, with the leaves as a sign that the season of God is near. They are to hope because he is indeed the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning, and the end.

So for us, dear friends, descendants in Christ of these faithful ones of old, we can be present to the Holy One during this Advent time of expectation, this in-between time when we know the promise of the one who is coming among us in the flesh, Emmanuel, the Prince of Peace, and yet await the final fulfillment of the reign of God. We can slow down and wait with thankfulness for what God has done and will do in our midst. We can enter the future with hope, hope and expectation for the inbreaking of the Kingdom! A blessed Advent to us all! Amen.

