

November 27, 2016 "Holy Waiting" Isaiah 2:1-6 Matthew 24:36-44

The countdown has begun! We have lit the first Advent Candle. Issy set up the Advent Wreath. Poinsettia orders are due this week. The outdoor nativity will soon be up, and plans are underway for Caroling and a Christmas Day impromptu pageant!! One could say that we're getting ready!

Certainly the merchants are getting ready! Sales abound, decorations are going up, lists are being made. Just like last year, and the year before, and years before that. So what makes this Advent any different? What is this time of waiting really about?

The gospel lesson for today is not one of my favorites, and I considered avoiding it today, but we need to hear it, for through it Jesus asks us to drop the tinsel and even the gift lists for a while so that we can remember who is really in charge of this event we call Christmas; and indeed, to remember who is in charge of this experience we call life. GOD - and only God - is in charge.

We know how many days and weeks there are until December 25, but we really don't know much more than that. Time-lines belong to God. Life belongs to God. Death belongs to God. Everything finally belongs to God. So when we talk Advent, we're talking something BIG.

Yesterday the song, "Have Yourself A Merry, Little Christmas," ran through my mind, and I found myself humming it. But then I stopped and thought about it, and realized that God is not asking us to be part of a "Merry Little Christmas," but to be part of something really profound and life-changing. God, who made this world and everything we discover about it and space and the intricacies of the human body, cares so much about us that God entered human life as a baby who grew into a man, to show us the way to live and to be the perfect offering for our sins. All of our sins, forever. That's big!

We are called to get ready by letting our waiting in the time of Advent be holy. Holy waiting lives on hope and watches for God's new creation. It sees all the discouraging situations and hears all the negative reports, it feels fear and discouragement, but nevertheless refuses to let go of its hope in God. It believes that some day God's mountain will be visible above all the hills and valleys of life, that even TODAY God's Kingdom is here for those who dare to live in it.

Jesus spoke of the days of Noah. Noah had to build that ark and even load that ark with all those animals before any raindrops had fallen. Noah's neighbors ridiculed his warnings and his actions. They didn't see God at work. They saw no reason to change their ways of life. They were comfortable. They didn't realize that God was about to execute judgment on them.

Imagine Noah's waiting, there in that ark with the stench and noise of the enclosed animals. He and his family probably had several days during which his sanity was held in question. "Okay, Noah, we got into this boat. So where's the rain-water? We feel like idiots sitting here waiting." But the water did come. The ridiculous boat became a means of salvation for those who had listened to laughing-stock Noah. Surely, as the days and weeks passed with no land in sight, those aboard that crowded, unpleasant boat had as their only strength their hope in God's continued work in the world.

Many of the conditions of our world make people wonder if God *is* still at work in this world. As comfortable as some of us are, we are afraid of cancer, accident, or economic collapse. We feel powerless when we think about refugees or children without clean water to drink or parents with no hope for their children's future. A walk down the aisle of a store too often makes us witness the brokenness of families as parents lose patience and equilibrium with their children. The economies and politics of our world are frighteningly fragile. Human greed, on the other hand, seems remarkably persistent and intact. *Is* God really here, *can* God be more powerful than everything that seems so wrong in this life?

For lots of people, Christmas seems only a sweet story and little more. Today's scriptures would tell us that it is actually a very serious, not-so-sweet story. God went to incredible lengths to show us the way to salvation; God gave the biggest Christmas present ever imagined. God did this because of God's love for us. BUT, there is a "down" side. "Thank you" notes to God can't just be written on paper or sung in a hymn. "Thank-you" notes must be lived out in human lives, just as God's gift was *given* in human life. (pause)

We thank God by doing the best we can to return God's love. Jesus repeatedly told us that the best way one can love God is to love one's neighbor. Isaiah proclaimed the results: "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears in to pruning hooks...O House of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!" (2:4-5)

Our time - whether it is a day or a year or a 100 years - is a time of decision, when we must decide whether or not we trust God and then whether or not we will spend our time as an offering to God. We decide if we want to be part of the usually-invisible Kingdom that Jesus established for us, or whether we'll just bide our time until it's gone goodbye.

Jesus' words were disturbing: "Then two men will be in the field; one is taken and the other is left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one is taken and the other is left. Watch, therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming."

I heard a story from a pastor who received a frantic call from a parishioner. "Pastor, come right over," she sobbed. It turned out that she had been robbed—someone had broken into her home and stolen all of her family heirlooms. The silver, the china, the cut glass, were all gone. These things had meant a lot to her, always on display in her home, an inheritance from her parents and grandparents. A neighbor worried that she might go into depression, that she could just quit living, because those things seemed to be the most important things in her life.

Yet, the pastor reported, six months later the woman had experienced a totally different perspective on life. She said, "In one way, that burglary was the best thing that ever happened to me. I didn't realize it but I had become tied down by all of those things. I was afraid every time I left the house, afraid that this might happen. I spent half my time polishing silver, dusting glassware, worrying that some guest would chip one of those china cups. I look back and see how stupid I was to waste my time on those things. Life has to be more than taking care of things. Right after the burglary I thought that I would die—and perhaps a part of me did die. But since then I've experienced a new freedom—freedom from things; I am so much better off without that stuff."

(Told by W. Eddins)

So here we sit in church on this first Sunday of Advent. Three more Advent candles and lots of songs later, we'll be celebrating Christmas. How will we use the time until; how will we wait? Can we open ourselves to be receptive to God's perhaps unexpected work in this world and in our lives?

I close this sermon with a story which illustrates two who waited, one for her family, and one by seeing an opportunity to make a difference in someone else's life: holy waiting. The story comes from John Sumwalt. "Every afternoon after work," Herb said, "I jog down to the store where my friend behind the counter saves a paper for me. The other day I when saw him, he had tears in his eyes as he stood staring out at the bus stop across the street. Before giving me my daily paper he said--as if he had to share this with someone--

-`Herb, do you see that bus stop over there?' I nodded. `Well, there is an old woman who comes there every day about this time. She sits there about an hour knitting and waiting. Buses come and go but she never gets on one, never meets anyone; she waits and knits. One cold day I took her a cup of coffee and sat with her for a while. She told me that her only son is in the Navy. She last saw him right there two years ago when he took a bus and left. He's married now, and he has a baby daughter. The old woman has never met her daughter-in-law and never seen her grandchild, and they are the only family she has. She told me, `It helps me to come here and knit little things for the baby, and I imagine them in their tiny apartment on the military base. They are saving money to come here next Christmas, I can't wait to see them.'"

My friend behind the counter took a deep breath, and then he said to me, "I looked out there today, just a few minutes ago, and there they were, getting off the bus. You should have seen the look on her face as they fell into her arms. When she laid eyes on that little granddaughter for the first time, it was incredible - the nearest thing to pure joy that I ever hope to see. I'll never forget it as long as I live."

Herb went back to the store the next day. While there he decided to check out his hunch. Later he told about it: "As I picked up my paper I looked him straight in the eye and said, `You sent that woman's son the money for the bus tickets, didn't you?' He looked back at me with his eyes full of love and a smile that was the nearest thing to complete joy I've ever seen and said, `Yeah, I had some extra.' We stood in silence sharing the moment. It was holy." (pause)

We have a lot of waiting left to do, as a church and as individuals. Advent invites us to let God renew our vision and to understand our choice: Keep our eyes averted, downcast, and our waiting will be tied to earthly things; Lift our eyes beyond the hills to watch for the Lord of Life in every moment and in every person we meet, and our waiting will be a holy living for God. May we live out a holy waiting as our thanksgiving to God! Amen.