

November 27, 2011 (1st Sunday of Advent, Hope)

“What Are We Waiting For?”

Isaiah 64: 1 - 9. Mark 13:24-37

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Advent is a time of waiting. This season of the church year is a blessing we have received from Christian tradition. It is a quiet time for preparing the heart to take in the mystery of Christmas. Yet, each year, these four Sundays pass by almost entirely unnoticed, for in our culture and time, we expect everything to be immediately accessible. Waiting is seen to be an inefficient use of time and an unnecessary one. We can get what we want with the click of a button. We can shop, carry on our daily business, do our banking, get instantaneous answers to our questions, and line up our next trip, twenty four hours a day and seven days a week. Why, online, we can even ask our medical questions to a virtual physician. In today's world we don't have to wait and we don't see any value in it. Advent is no exception. As early as the beginning of November, we are bombarded with advertisements to promote gift buying. No, a season devoted to waiting initially makes no sense in our world. Christmas boldly announces itself on store shelves as soon as the Halloween inventory is taken off. Red and green replaces orange and brown and off we go, propelled unconsciously forward into this annual holiday of commercialism and conspicuous consumption. When we finally arrive at the long awaited Christmas morning, it can seem rather anti—climatic. We are often surprised to find it come and go like every other morning (despite all the hoopla in getting to it). For all too many of us, Christmas will be over in the time it takes to rip the wrapping off the packages under the tree, think, “Well, what now?” quickly begin cleaning up the mess and moving on to the next thing.

If, as the writer, Simone Weil, once said, “Waiting patiently in expectation is the foundation of the spiritual life,” then we should probably take a closer look at this “Advent waiting.” What are we waiting for? This question means different things depending on how it is asked. What are we waiting for? can mean, Why should we wait? Let's get the lead out and move on with things, perhaps even change direction

or try something new. But it can also be a sincere and simple question. What **are** we waiting for? Do we know **what** we are looking for, **what** we hope to find? Would we know it if we saw it? Do we have the capacity to see? In this time of Advent, it is not a specific event, a wish, or an outcome, upon which we wait, but rather, simply this *capacity* in ourselves--this capacity to wait, actively present to the moment, trusting and expectant, but with no aim to control or pre-determine the future.

Today, during the lighting of our Advent Wreath, we listened to a rather dark passage from the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah's words can be best described as words of mourning or lamentation. Why, on this first Sunday of Advent, this Sunday of hope, do we begin with words of mourning? This passage was probably written some time after the return of the Hebrew people from exile in Babylon. At the time of return there was great hope that all could again be well, that Jerusalem could shed the painful and shameful years of slavery and subjugation and could be restored to its former greatness. The people would then be renewed in their faith in God's covenant with them and could again find comfort and peace. But now, after some time has passed, the hope of many has faded. People have remained distant from God, lost, and undirected. So we find the prophet, Isaiah, crying out in pain with these words, " We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away."

The words from the Gospel of Mark read this morning are equally somber. They warn that a time of earth shaking violence is soon coming with the return of the Son of Man and that, though the timing of this event is unpredictable, we should remain awake and ready.

Why would we lead into the Advent season of light with its joyful anticipation and promise of new birth with such despairing words?

Theologian, Diane Jacobson, offered this thought. "In many ways, their (the Hebrew)

situation resembles ours. Our hopes are pinned on the fact that Christ has come; the promise has been fulfilled. But life somehow remains imperfect. The problems of the world persist and we are not all that we should be.” It has become impossible to pretend that all is well in our world or to deny the gravity of the problems humanity faces. We must open our eyes to the real world around us and the confusion within us. Opening ourselves to our grief over the human condition, the wars, the hatred, the suffering of so many, the great distance from God in which the world continues to operate, strange as it might seem, may be necessary to our experience of real hope. The passages in Isaiah remind us that there is a divine force stronger than the world’s darkest forces. We won’t be abandoned by our God, so we need not live in hopeless fear.

In his article, “Waiting for God,” the Catholic priest and writer, Henry Nouwen, declared that “waiting” is deeply revered in scripture and is itself a spiritual activity. All of the characters in the Christmas Story, from the first and second chapter of Luke, are themselves busy waiting. I like the juxtaposition of those two words, “*busy waiting*.” For waiting in this deeper sense is an engagement—it is not passive but spiritually active. We find Zechariah and Elizabeth (the parents of John the Baptist), actively waiting for his birth, Remember, after the angel Gabriel’s announcement of John’s coming birth, Zechariah becomes suddenly mute and remains so for nine months until, on the 8th day after the child’s birth, at his circumcision, when there is a collective assumption that he will take his father’s name, Zechariah writes on a tablet, ‘His name is John,’ and he immediately regains his voice. Young Mary also waits—patient and expectant. She takes in the angel’s announcement about the child she carries, accepts this unfathomable promise and humbly waits for the birth of Jesus. Simeon and Anna, (the old priest and prophetess in the temple who bless the infant Jesus and speak of his future greatness) have waited their whole lives for this moment of divine entrance into the world upon which history will turn forever. These stories suggest that waiting, is not passive but active and rich, deep and fertile. Even though all of these people have received and accepted the Divine promise, the truth they carry within themselves is not a thing of the past but one of the present. They cannot control the future but are radically open to the experience

they are having in this world in the “now” of their moments and days and trust this experience (whether pleasant or unpleasant) to teach them what they need to know. The seed of their faith has already been planted and now they wait, nurturing the present moment and open to a future epiphany.

Think for a moment about the meaningfulness of some of your own experiences of waiting. What have you waited for? What has been worth the wait? Many of my most vivid memories of the soulful nature of waiting have come from my childhood. I remember once getting a bicycle for Christmas and feeling great excitement as I looked at that new pink metal wonder with the white wicker basket that was all my own. At the same time, I felt the sudden realization that it could be a long time before the sun would be warm enough to melt the ice on the road so that I could actually ride it. My husband recalled a similar early childhood memory of receiving his first baseball glove one Christmas morning. He described how he wore it all around the house, rubbed oil in it and tied it with string, to make it supple and bendy, and slept with it at night smelling the delicious leather and dreaming of the green baseball field he would play on in the spring. When we are in a time of waiting in the promise of something wonderful, we find ourselves living in an awkwardly glorious “present absence.” We enter a time of “not yet” that nevertheless lives within us as both excitement and longing. Childhood is full of these “not yet” promises, these “present absences.” That is one of the reasons childhood can be so rich and beautiful if this beauty is not destroyed by the confused and abstracted relationship to life of the adults who surround the children. Children do not assume that they can have control over all the aspects of their lives. As they wait, their wonder can blossom out of the seed of their awe.

Henry Nouwen concluded, “We can only really wait if what we are waiting for has already begun for us. So waiting is never a movement from nothing to something. It is always a movement from something to something more.”

If we arrive at Christmas Morning and sense a disappointing vacuum of meaning where the Holy could have found a home, we shouldn’t be too surprised. Waiting is

never a movement from nothing to something. It is always a movement from something to something more.

Have we trusted God to plant the seed of the holy within us? Advent is here. What are we waiting for?