

## **Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus**

**Isaiah 64:1-9**

Good Morning Church Family,

It's good to be together this first morning of Advent, as we step into a new year on the Christian calendar, as we anticipate the birth of Jesus and the start of a new story for ourselves and this world.

During the season of Advent, each week and each candle represents a different virtue: Hope, Peace, Joy and Love. This year, I'm going to be drawing from the Advent themes of the Carmelite Tradition. The Carmelites were a religious order of women. The Carmelite nuns are an ancient order whose spiritual focus is on contemplation as prayer, community, and service. Thérèse of Lisieux and Teresa of Ávila were both Carmelites. The advent "themes" that this order used to guide their worship and prayer during advent are: Waiting, Accepting, Journeying, and Birthing. I love those actions, Waiting, Accepting, Journeying, and Birthing. These are all verbs, rather than the usual Advent Nouns, so my hope and pray is that these words might offer us a new perspective on a beloved, old story.

We've lit our hope candle and now we are waiting, waiting for Jesus to arrive, waiting for

all things to be made new, for all things to be made right and just under the Lordship of Jesus. What does it mean to wait with hope? To anticipate life, even when it feels far off?

First, we need to acknowledge that waiting is hard. When I was a kid, the wait for Christmas felt eternal. All those presents under the tree- all those good things! Shaking the presents, rearranging the pile of gifts with your name on them to get a sense of what you might have been gifted. And I had to wait for them. As an adult, waiting takes on new, more complicated forms, waiting for your child to be born, waiting for the doctor to call with the test results, waiting for a new season of life to come your way. Waiting is Hard.

The Children of Israel, God's People, were in a protracted season of waiting around the time that the Prophet Isaiah was speaking and writing. During the course of Isaiah's writing, Israel and Judah, which had been stable, prosperous nations were conquered and exiled from their promised land. In 722 BCE, the Assyrian Empire conquered and destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel. This is when ten of the twelve tribes of Israel were lost to history. In 587 BCE, the Babylonian Empire conquered and destroyed the Southern Kingdom of Judah and Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. The prophets of Israel explained both disasters by claiming that the sins of the Israelites (specifically their idolatry) led God to punish them. However, they also offered a message of hope: sometime in the future, God would intervene once more in the final days (*eschaton* in Greek). At that time, he would restore Israel to its former glory and rectify all injustice."

So, Israel knew what it was to wait. They were not so far from the “glory” days of their nations to not have a collective memory of the good life, and they’re also coming to terms with the choices they made as a people, against God, while still remaining hopeful for things to be made new again. God’s people were mired in this collective tension around this waiting—a nostalgia for the olden days, a reckoning with their choices, and also waiting, hard waiting, for God to make this right. Because they knew only God could.

Our scripture passage for this morning shows us this aching back and forth that characterized their waiting. The opening verses, “Oh that you would burst forth!” Come down now Lord, right now! Don’t make us wait any longer, come in your full flaming power and your blazing justice. Push back those who do evil!” The wait for justice feels eternal. Verse 5, you meet those who do right! But we realize we’re not those people, we’re not living up to all you ask of us God. Ehh. Maybe we don’t want your full power to come. Verse 7, but we see you at work, molding us and shaping us and we want that. We want repentance. We want to live as your people. Come back to us, please? Come back.”

So what can the posture of the Prophet Isaiah tell us about what it means to wait with hope?

First, we must resist the temptation to give into despair. We must resist the temptation to give into despair? I'll admit that this is a struggle for me personally. Every time there is some sort of mass shooting or school shooting event in the states, there is another call to action to ban assault rifles or put more gun controls into place, and so I call or email my US senator or my congressman, and I say please, make a change. And it happens again, and again. To younger children, to more vulnerable people. And internally, I think, what is the point? Nothing will ever change. We've shown our priorities. Perhaps some of you have felt this way about issues or government positions before, or even matters of faith or the broader church. The voice of despair and disillusionment can be so loud.

No doubt God's people in the time of Isaiah experienced similar feelings. What's the point? We've suffered, we've prayed, we've pleaded and we're still here. Nothing will ever change.

Yet, these verses, and indeed all of scripture tell us a Story of God as victor, God as Redeemer. In one of my Bible courses in college, our professor told us that the point of the book of Revelation was not to give us a detailed description of the last days, rather the point of Revelation is to tell us that "God wins." God wins. God will have the last word. All that is broken and unjust will be righted. Verse 3-4 of our scripture this morning, "When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him." God is a work. Hanging on to that truth can help to pull us out of despair.

Martin Luther King Jr. the famous African-American Civil Rights Leader, a man who would have known a great deal about waiting, and how slow change can be in coming, one said, “Martin “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” Change takes a long time, but it does happen.

Secondly, the antidote to despair is action. The antidote to despair is action. Holy waiting, hopeful waiting is not about a passive waiting, not about twiddling our thumbs, or finding something to take our minds off of the waiting. Hopeful waiting asks us to wait with purpose.

And there are two sides to the equation of action that we see in scripture: both an internal action towards repentance and renewal and the outworking towards love and justice for our neighbors.

Let’s talk about the first antidote-Internal Renewal and Repentance. Over and over in the scriptures, we see the God, through the Prophets and the Apostles calling his people back to him. Back to a love for Jesus. We cannot ignore in the inner condition of our hearts. In our passage for this morning, we see this admission of wrong and desire to turn back to God, to be reshaped from the inside out as his people, “You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways. But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed. 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. There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity. Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.”

In broader church circles in North America, there's been a lot of talk about how the church might be in a time of reformation. It's a time of great upheaval in the church as church attendance shrinks, our culture changes, and many of the old ways of doing church are being called into question. Throughout history, the church has gone through a reformation roughly every 500 years. The last reformation, which prominently featured Martin Luther, and which helped to birth Anabaptism was 500 years ago, so the theory goes that we're due for another. Now a reformation sounds great, exciting, God is birthing something new! The problem with reformations is that we only know it's a reformation in hindsight. We can only see these big shifts when we look back, when we're in the middle of it, it feels unsettling, like we're coming undone. A friend of mine said, "I wish there were more writings about how they survived through the change of a reformation, not just about all the good things after." I've been pondering that question a lot lately, how did the church survive the discomfort that reformation can bring?

One way Christians in history have responded is through inner renewal. In one of the earliest Christian reformations, in the 300s, the Roman Empire had legalized Christianity and made it the dominant religion. Christian faith became conflated with power and culture in a way that really troubled some Christians. So, men and women,

moved out into the desert and set up a daily life built around prayer, around reading and preserving the scriptures, simplicity, fasting, and giving to the poor. It was a really inner renewal focused movement- we know them today as the Desert Mothers and Fathers. They are credited now with being one of the largest influences in preserving the Holy Scriptures. Inner renewal is part of Hopeful Waiting.

Another element of Hopeful, Purposeful Waiting is outer action. The outworking of loving and serving our neighbors, of working towards blessing our communities, even when, or perhaps because it seems as if the world is on fire.

One of my favorite people on social media is a woman named Sharon McMahon. She's called "America's Government Teacher" and she spends hours breaking down news stories, explaining congressional procedures and reading supreme court verdicts. Her whole thing is to educate people, in the most non-partisan way possible, about how this all works. And there's plenty happening in the US government to feel despair about. But she wrote this, ""Hope is not a feeling we're waiting for, it is a choice we make. The antidote to despair is action."

And we, as people of the Hope of Jesus know that even the smallest actions, the smallest care, the smallest kindness is the action of the Kingdom of God. "Then the king will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who will receive good things from my Father. Inherit the kingdom that was prepared for you before the world began. I was hungry and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me clothes to wear. I was sick and

you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me.’ “Then those who are righteous will reply to him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? When did we see you as a stranger and welcome you, or naked and give you clothes to wear? When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ “Then the king will reply to them, ‘I assure you that when you have done it for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you have done it for me.’

Waiting with Hope means waiting with action- both the internal renewal of our hearts and the external acts of love and mercy.

Finally, I'd like to leave you with an image of Holy Waiting as we step into the Advent Season together. The image of a Midwife. I've been thinking about Midwives lately, because Pam's daughter is expecting her first child and is under the care of a midwife. Both Junia and Ezra were born with a midwife, and truly, they are gifts from God. My labor with Junia was nearly 40 hours, and more than once, I was on the edge of despair. But my midwife, Miriam, stayed with me the whole time and said, “we can do this. This baby is coming. You're going to make it.” And she was right. Ezra came in such a hurry that he was born on the floor of our condo in Warman. My midwife, Romaine, sprinted up to our third floor unit and found me on the bedroom floor, desperate to not give birth alone. When she checked me over and announced that the baby was coming right then and there, she saw complete panic was over my face. She took one look at me, placed her hand on my knees and said, “Emily, I know this wasn't our plan, but it was the Lord's plan.” 8 minutes later, she lifted Ezra onto my chest.



Life is on its way, and for midwives, no matter how long or short the wait, they're there. Ushering in new life.

As followers of Jesus, we're midwives of a new world. People standing in Hope, fighting despair, renewing our souls and loving the least of these, while we wait for the New World that Jesus assures us of. Sarah Bessey, said this, "Arundhati Roy spoke of this kind of waiting when she wrote "Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing." To engage in the work of preparation like Advent that is so ordinary, overlooked, practical, and necessary. Rather than throwing up their hands in despair or laying down on the floor to wait, they are at work. There's a heartbeat for new life: can we hear it? Are we preparing the way for delivery? Are we waiting with an ear towards the new world's heartbeat?"

Let's wait in hope, Sister and Brothers, because Jesus and his complete redemption of all things, is on his way.