

Waiting for New Life

Isaiah 2:1-5 and Matthew 24:36-44

Good Morning Friends,

We have arrived at Advent, Christmas is around the corner. So many people helped to decorate the church this week, and it looks beautiful. I am grateful to be spending another Advent season together with you, our Langham Family.

One of the challenges of preaching during the season of Advent is the question of how does one make such a familiar story seem fresh or ask new questions? The Christmas story is one that is deeply familiar in our western culture, even for those who don't consider themselves to be followers of Jesus. The Christmas story, Mary, Joseph, and Baby Jesus, has been turned into movies. There are nativity scenes as part of many Christmas light displays, it's a story that feels both familiar and comforting.

Advent is a season that is imbued with waiting. Just ask my kids, who wait and anticipate and ask and plead sometimes about when Christmas will be. How many days until we can open the advent calendars from Anna? Why is Christmas so far away? As a sometimes stressed out holiday parent, I think Christmas is coming too fast! How many days until Christmas!? Ack! Depending who you are, the waiting for Christmas

can be lightning fast or achingly slow. So we have a very familiar story, and a whole stretch of waiting mixed into the season.

What does this so familiar story have to teach us about waiting? What does it mean to wait faithfully and attentively? Because really, this idea of waiting and waiting well is at the heart of Advent.

God's people have been familiar with waiting for thousands of years. The Old Testament passage in the lectionary readings for this week is a familiar one. One that Roger coincidentally used last Sunday as his call to worship. It's a text filled with beautiful imagery of the promise of Good Things, Sacred Things that are to come. It fills me with a sense of hope to think of a time when God is going to right every wrong, when the tools of war and death become tools of peace and life. ,”He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” Imagine Ukrainian and Russian Soldiers planting sunflowers side by side.

Yet this beautiful prophecy was written at a time of great turmoil for the God's people. These verses address a nation facing an uncertain future. The relative prosperity and peace the nations of Israel and Judah experienced during the early 8th century BCE are a distant memory—like a dream one barely remembers after waking. Instead, the relentless advances of the Assyrian Empire have decimated the nation of Israel. Many

Israelites escaped Assyria's invasion of their home and sought refuge within Judah and its capital city, Jerusalem. This southern refuge soon confronts the same Assyrian enemy and the hardships a prolonged military siege produces. Against this backdrop of suffering, anxiety, and imminent imperial conquest, the prophet announces he has received a vision concerning God's perspective about Judah and Jerusalem (Isaiah 2:1).

This prophetic vision (like many in the Hebrew Bible) promises a future that contradicts that of people's present experiences. The opening phrase in Isaiah 2:2 is often translated as "in the last days," which can imply an eschatological or "end-time" setting. But really, in the original Hebrew, this prophecy doesn't necessarily have the end times for a foundation- just at a future date—a hopeful time promised amid a dire present." And while these verses are prophesying the first coming of Jesus, they are just as resonant and hopeful for us waiting for the second coming. After a global pandemic, heightened climate crisis, and the invasion of Ukraine, we're all waiting for God to prevail; for Jesus to come and fix everything. Jesus is coming to make all things new.

And like the people living Isaiah's time, we've been waiting a long time. The people who heard the words of Isaiah waited 700 years before this Immanuel, this God with us and among us arrived to lay the first stones of this new Kingdom, and we've been waiting over 2000 years for Jesus to return and create his Kingdom of which there shall be no end. I can imagine the response from my kiddos if they were told they'd have to wait 700 years to start on the chocolates in their advent calendars.

What's interesting about lectionary passages for this week is we have this beautiful piece of prophetic poetry about for the first reading and then the Gospel reading about the future feels intense, almost fear-inducing. "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

Truthfully, this passage has been used by the church to create a sense of fear, panic, and urgency. To be sure, fear is an effective way to motivate people, and one the church has harnessed throughout its history. I remember singing a song at camp as a kid that had the line, "there's no time to change your mind, the son has come and you've been left behind." I'll admit that it's hard for me to step back from what I was always taught about this passage and see good news, or at the very least see what Jesus is calling us too, and I don't think it's a snap decision or running in a panic towards safety.

So, thank goodness for biblical commentaries. Really, it's only been over the last century, these verses have often been read in support of dispensationalism, especially "rapture" theology, which attempts to plot where we are in proximity to the end—precisely what Jesus tells his disciples not to do. The illustrations that Jesus uses do not likely depict a moment when the righteous are plucked up from the earth and taken to heaven, while others are "left behind" to await tribulations and final judgment. For first century audiences familiar with the ways of the Roman Empire, being left behind was surely preferable to being taken. For the people of Noah's day, being swept away was not a good thing. Instead, these sayings simply depict sudden, surprising separation, without indicating cause for judgment or reward on the part of those taken or left behind. Rapture theology, which has little or no scriptural support, may offer comfort for those who seek certainty or presume to have secured the inside track to heaven, **but the focus of this unit is on remaining vigilant amidst the uncertainty of a long wait amidst discouraging circumstances.** Keep awake, be ready! Watchfulness or wakefulness is here not a defensive or preventive posture, but heightened attentiveness, attuned both to the signs of God's presence and power, as well as the signs that the powers of this world are doubling down. Christians do not know, cannot know, and are not supposed to know when the Lord is coming. This is a condition we are to embrace, not attempt to overcome. Watching and readiness are not meant to be switched on and off according to perceived need. These are, in fact, the disciplines to which Jesus calls his disciples more than any other as the end of his ministry draws near. You're living at the end, so stay awake and watch.

We have two strands of ideas here, a long wait for something beautiful, hopeful, and good and this call from Jesus to be ready, not be fearful, or panicked, but to be ready. To wait with a sense of purpose, rather than fear or even the disassociation, discouragement that comes with waiting. So many people throughout Christian history believed they were waiting at the actual, chronological end, and it's been 2,000 years. Knowing that Jesus may not return and make all things new in my lifetime can pull me, us, away from that sense of readiness. To get pulled into the dominant story of the world around us, to lose sight of the beautiful, alternative vision that Jesus is proposing.

What does it mean to wait with readiness and hope?

“Advent, meaning “the coming,” is a time when we wait expectantly. Christians began to celebrate it as a season during the fourth and fifth centuries. Like Mary, we celebrate the coming of the Christ child, what God has already done. And we wait in expectation of the full coming of Christ, what God will yet do. But this waiting is not a passive waiting. It is an active waiting. As any expectant mother knows, this waiting also involves preparation, exercise, nutrition, care, prayer, work; and birth involves pain, tears, joy, release, community. It is called labour for a reason. Likewise, we are in a world pregnant with hope, and we live in the expectation of the coming of God’s kingdom on earth. As we wait, we also work, cry, pray, ache; we are the midwives of another world.”

Truely, that's the most salient metaphor I can think of for someone who waits and prepares with joyful readiness- a midwife. I was so, so fortunate to have midwives for the labour and delivery of both of my children. Their calm, ready, presence spoke volumes as I stepped into motherhood. Life was coming and they were there to usher it in, no matter the circumstances. When my midwife Sabrina showed up at my door at 5 am, as I had faced steady, painful contractions throughout the night, certain the baby was near. When it became clear that this was just pre-labour, and the baby was in fact far from arrival (it would, in fact, be days yet), she comforted me while I cried. When my labor with Junia stretched past 40 hours, there was Miriam, who hadn't slept in far too many hours, with her own toddler waiting at home, telling me to "roar like a lion!" through three hours of pushing. Who encouraged me to keep going, despite my deep discouragement that this baby might perhaps, never be born. Life was coming! And the pain and sound of it did not frighten her, it was all part of it. There was Romaine, my midwife for Ezra, who sprinted up the stairs to our third floor condo in Warman to find me, fearful and wracked with pain. She confidently told me that I would be having that baby right then and there, on my bedroom floor. Seeing the panic wash over my face, she put her hand on my knee and said, "This was not our plan, but it was the Lord's plan." Minutes later, she lifted my son onto my chest.

The readiness that Jesus calls us to is like that of a midwife. To live our lives in the here and now with expectant hope. To live as if the final reign of Jesus is already here, to be present as all creation groans for redemption. Christ has changed us, and we live as changed people now, even as we await the fullness of that.

Romans 13:11-14, another scripture from the lectionary for today says this, Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.``

So Friends, that is our calling now in this season of advent and, truly, in all our days. To put on the Lord Jesus Christ, to live with readiness and hope, to be midwives of another world -a world defined by hope, peace, joy and Love. A world where Christ is in the centre, and in this time of now and not yet, we aim to live with Jesus as our centre so that the world may get a foretaste of the beautiful future we will all someday live in together.

Amen.