

“Hurry Up and Wait” – Advent 2 – December 8, 2019

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Nobody likes to wait. For many of us, anticipation is an overrated experience. “I want what I want when I want it...and by the way, I want it now.” I don’t think it’s always been like this. Having to be patient was just a normal part of life. In a few weeks, the Star Wars saga will have finally reached its conclusion with the new movie *The Rise of Skywalker*. You all, I’ve been waiting around since 1977 for this. I still had 20/20 vision back when I first saw Luke Skywalker gaze longingly toward the setting suns of Tatooine.

So I think this phenomenon of cultural impatience is a result of our techno world. Technology has made everything faster, and everybody is always in such a hurry. I’m amazed every time I get on a plane. We make a landing somewhere, after coasting along the tarmac to the gate, the pilot turns off the “put on your seatbelt” light, and suddenly everyone stands up, grabbing their bags, and crowding the aisle. And I’m like, where are you going? Sure, maybe a few people have to run to catch their connecting flight. But most of us will exit the plane, only to sit at another gate for an extended period of time, or others of us will head down to baggage claim, and again wait for our luggage to appear.

And don’t even get me started about how early the stores are putting out their Christmas decorations and merchandise. You know what I’m saying!

We have lost the capacity to wait.

Yet, in the middle of the frenzy that is the holiday season, we find Advent - the four weeks before Christmas that beckon us to slow down. While our secular society has been shoving holiday decorations, mistletoe, eggnog, the so-called war on Christmas, department store Santas, and light up nativities with an inflatable baby Jesus for our yards – all since the day after Halloween – Advent tells us to wait.

Wait for what, you might wonder? The baby Jesus was already born a couple thousand years ago. We’re just celebrating his birth, like a big birthday party, right? Well, sort of, but not completely. The birth of Christ ushered in a new age, the dawning of God’s reign here on earth. It signaled the time when light began to pierce darkness, and hope was born anew. Hope for the total fulfillment of God’s plan of redemption.

The ancient Israelite people understood what it meant to wait. They had been holding onto the promises of God for generations, ever since God made a covenant with Abraham and Sarah and promised, that through them, all nations and peoples would experience God’s blessings. Throughout the history of Israel, we see these plans of God unfolding and the promises renewed. While the Israelites longed for those promises to be fulfilled, they trusted in God, and they believed, that in the fullness of time, they would be fulfilled. We Christians

believe that in the birth of Jesus, the time of fulfillment has begun. God's plan of redemption has been set into motion, and now we wait for that plan to be completely realized.

Had we been here last week, thank you snow storm, we would have talked about living into a new normal. That as we are living in this time of fulfillment, we are to live in expectant anticipation. Yes, it is a time of waiting, but it is not a time of passivity. It is a time to live in active readiness – it's like being on call – when we are expecting the realm of God to break through at any moment. It's a time of restrained excitement, full of hope and expectation. The early apostles, like Paul, thought that the return of Christ was imminent. And so, they encouraged living into this state of readiness. But in last week's text from Matthew, we see that even Jesus did not know the time it would happen.

Now this doesn't mean that we are to be blindly optimistic and ignore the chaos and turmoil of our world. That would be incredibly naïve. Nor are we to live in hopeless pessimism, resigned to the tragedy of our world until God changes things. Advent reminds us to live hopeful expectation. Realizing that there is much yet to be redeemed, but that God's plan of redemption has begun and we are part of that plan.

Isaiah spoke during a time of great upheaval for Israel and Judah. It was a time war and violence, uncertainty and upheaval. The people were living in fear and in despair. And the stumps of what were once great cedars were symbolic of their hopelessness. When chaos is normative, grief and fear become part of one's daily living. This hope doesn't just wick away the pain. It's not some magic formula that offers immediate relief. Despair is real. Pain cuts deep. Grief overwhelms. And sometimes the result of the hurt and disorder is a lifeless stump. A tragic reminder of what was once something full of life and whole. And perhaps we find ourselves living in the sawdust of despair.

But the vision that Isaiah had was of a tiny green shoot breaking through the lifeless, cold bark and bringing new life from what was believed dead. And in Isaiah's image, this shoot came out of a family tree – the family of the great King David – and this new ruler would bring justice and equity, righteousness and faithfulness. In these words, Christians have found the prophecy of Jesus.

And Isaiah goes on to picture the full redemption of creation, where death is no longer present. Predator and prey no longer have a violent relationship. Wild beasts and domesticated animals lie together in the grass without fear or inclination to kill. They graze on the fruit of the earth. And infants and toddlers can play without any danger. This is the image of the Peaceful Kingdom. A return to the perfection of the Edenic garden, where the shalom of God, the peace of God, permeates all relationships.

So, in a world seemingly overrun with tragedy, dissent, violence, grief, and injustice comes a tiny green shoot of hope. A reminder that chaos never has the last word. Hope does. A hope born out of trust in a God who loves beyond measure and longs for restored relationships. A hope in a God whose promises are trustworthy and true. A hope in a God who took on human flesh to dwell in solidarity with humanity, who came to us in the vulnerability of an infant child.

Advent calls us to wait, to slow down, to look for the places where new life has come out of darkness and despair. And Advent calls us to trust. Trust that God has glorious vision for this world. We may never see it in its totality, but if we look closely, we can witness those pinpoints of light that shine out, piercing the darkness.