

HOPE-FULL WAITING

by Rev. Susan Morrison

First Sunday of Advent

November 27, 2005

A reading from Mark 13: 24 - 37

“But in those days, after that time of distress, the sun will be darkened, the moon will lose its brightness, the stars will fall from the sky and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Promised One coming in the clouds with great power and glory; then the angels will be sent to gather the chosen from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

Take the fig tree as a parable: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. In the same way, when you see these things happening, know that the Promised One is near, right at the door. The truth is, before this generation has passed away, all these things will have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

But as for that day or hour, nobody knows it – neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only God knows. Be constantly on the watch! Stay awake! You do not know when the appointed time will come.

It is like people going on a journey. They leave their home and put workers in charge, each with a certain task, and those who watch at the front gate are ordered to stay on the alert. So stay alert! You do not know when the owner of the house is coming, whether at dusk, at midnight, when the cock crows or at early dawn. Do not let the owner come suddenly and catch you asleep. What I say to you, I say to all: Keep awake.”

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Advent is a time of waiting. It is a “pregnant” time, a time of anticipation and expectation. Advent is a vigil. I don’t know about you, but I associate the word vigil with Easter. The Easter Vigil – that time of waiting from Good Friday to Easter morn. Not often do we hear the phrase the “vigil of Advent,” but truly these four weeks before Christmas are just that.

And this vigil is twofold. It is a time of waiting for the Feast of Nativity, the celebration of the birth of Jesus and it is a time of waiting for the Second Coming of Christ. Because of this dual period of preparation, Advent has historically been observed as a time of solemnity and fasting. That’s why the penitential color of purple is the liturgically correct color for the Advent season.

We are all familiar and comfortable with the waiting for the Feast of Nativity, the birth of Jesus. But did you know that this feast day of Christmas didn’t emerge as an observance until the fourth century A.D.? And it wasn’t until the sixth century A.D. that prayers were written and scriptural texts were selected to correspond to the Sundays of what we now call Advent?

Contemporary Christians for the most part are not as comfortable waiting for the Second Coming of Christ as they are waiting for the Feast of Nativity. The earliest Christians thought that the Second Coming would be immediate, and they lived accordingly. Today, most of us live with a much less heightened sense of the end times. Most Christians operate with only a dim awareness of such apocalyptic imaginings and focus much more, liturgically and in their personal appropriations of faith, on the mystery of the first coming, the “God-with-us” in the birth of Jesus. Of course, there are some striking exceptions to this. We hear about those who read the signs of the times as signs of the “end time” when Jesus will return. War and violence; plagues and famine; earthquakes and hurricanes are seen as the foreshadowing of the end of the world.

You might disagree with me, but personally I have a hard time interpreting these signs as apocalyptic signs. It is not humankind who will bring in the “end time” but rather it will be God’s doing, God’s reign that will make all things new. Oh, God is depending on us to partner with God and participate in eradicating evil and injustice and hate and war and violence and anything else that diminishes the goodness that God intends. But the ultimate fulfillment of the kingdom of God has little to do with the “end of the world” and everything to do with the creation of “a new heaven and a new earth.” And if and when it ever happens it will not be through our **d**estruction but rather through God’s **c**onstruction, God’s creation of something new.

In the meantime, even as we yearn for God’s fulfillment of peace and justice in this world, we recognize that we are not yet at that place where the fullness of God’s kingdom has been realized on earth. In fact, in every arena of life, we fall far short of what God must imagine earth and life and care for one another could be. We are in an in-between-time, between the “already” of Jesus’ birth, and life, and death and resurrection and the “not yet,” the fullness of the reign or kingdom of God.

Howard Thurman helps us understand this in-between-time in which we live as he intersperses the Lord’s Prayer with the phrase “but not yet.” Hear what that says to us. “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name... but not yet. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven....but not yet. Give us this day our daily bread....but not yet. And forgive us our sins even as we forgive those who have sinned against us....but not yet. And lead us not into temptation...but not yet. And deliver us from evil....but not yet. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever...but not yet.”

The “not yet” time becomes the time of active waiting, of waiting for signs from Jesus of how we might partner with God in our own personal lives and in our life together as a church to help realize more and more of the kingdom of earth, here, now, in our very midst.

During Advent, I wait for the Feast of Nativity and at the same time, I wait for the next time (rather than the end time) that Jesus will come again into my life. I wait and I watch for signs of Jesus love and grace; forgiveness and hope; peace and joy – right here, right now. Isn’t that what Jesus instructs us to do in this morning’s lesson? Watch! Wait! Keep alert! Keep awake. You do not know when I will come again.

Let’s face it. We have a hard time waiting for anything. In fact, most of us hate to wait. Watch how well people wait in line at a cash register during the Christmas shopping season. Or witness the patience of drivers when they are waiting in traffic. Billions of dollars have been spent in “time saving” devices that crowd our living spaces. Waiting is equated with emptiness, with delay, with a void of meaningful activity, with unproductive use of time. In short, we hate waiting because it seems like such a waste of time.

I love Advent because it calls us to a time of waiting, a time of “wasting time with God.” Advent waiting is not inactive, inattentive waiting. It is not boring. It is not useless. Advent waiting is active, hope – full waiting. It is no wonder that pregnancy is such a pervasive Advent theme in scripture. Mary finds herself pregnant with the God’s child. And soon we find her on route to spend time with her kinswoman Elizabeth who is also pregnant. Her son, John, will be the one who will prepare the way of the Lord. The young Mary and the older woman Elizabeth become symbols and metaphors for the “pregnant” days of Advent.

Pregnancy is at the core of Advent waiting. It is not just Mary and Elizabeth who are pregnant in this season of waiting. Each of us, male and female alike, can share in the experience of pregnancy during Advent as we learn something about the waiting for God, who breathes and moves in us, longing to be born. In the words of Wendy Wright, “we are the womb through whose pulsing life God is born.” (*Weavings*, Jan/Feb 1987)

Pregnancy takes on special meaning for me this Advent as I watch my daughter-in-law move through these days of expectant waiting. (Yes! can you believe that Jeremy Morrison is going to be a dad?! And that Jay and I, come mid May, will be grandparents?) Priscilla’s pregnancy reminds me of the demands of pregnancy. If we are to be God-birthers, each of us, it means experiencing the rigors of pregnancy in order to birth God’s will and intentions in this world.

Advent. A time of active waiting. A vigil. A time of pregnant possibilities. A time of remembering the past while anticipating the future and all the while, being alert and awake and aware of the present moment. The past tells us that Jesus is already among us. His birth signaled the moment that God became flesh and dwelt among us. The future anticipates the next time that we will recognize the bold and gentle spirit of Jesus in our midst. And the present moment calls us to be awake, alert, ready for the in breaking of the Holy Spirit.

St Augustine begins his *Confessions* by claiming that “our hearts are restless until they rest in God.” There is such truth and wisdom in that saying because when we are not oriented toward God, waiting can breed restlessness. It is only when we turn to God that our waiting loses its restless quality and becomes hope-full and anticipatory and we discover and rediscover the peace and rest that only God can give. Prayer, worship, and study reorient our restlessness.

So what does this waiting mean for you and for me this Advent? It feels like we’ve had a very active, very busy few months together. The church fair, the church auction, and the craft fair have kept so many so busy. The Stewardship Campaign asked a lot of each of us. And all of this in the midst of the many changes in your life here at Holy Trinity as well as my own transition from Lexington to Danvers. It’s been a time to acknowledge loss and experience grief; a time to reckon with differences and change while being excited and hopeful about future possibilities, even daring to begin to *IMAGINE* them together.

Maybe this Advent, we need to accept the invitation of making this the Vigil of Advent and spend time, even waste time with God. I like the invitation that Wendy Wright gives to us for The Vigil, the days of keeping watch in the season of Christ’s coming.

“The Vigil,” she writes “begins in the season before seasons. It has its beginning in the heart of God. And so we must begin there as well. The ancient desert dwellers of our early Christian communities tell us that the surest way into the heart of God is to be still. In being still we learn to be attentive to the vast and hidden stillness that permeates all things.

So I invite you to begin by becoming attentive to that stillness as well. Seek it first in your own home. Go at night into the darkened room of your sleeping child and breathe with the moist, quick risings of a child’s breath. Rise in the thin light of a new day. Do not turn on the lamp or the television or the coffee maker (or the computer), but stand by an east window and let the dawn’s fingers creep up over the fingers of your own hand.

Listen next for stillness as you venture out of doors. Hear it in the splintering of fall leaves as you cross a grassy knoll. Find it in the first cape of snow draped over the eaves of your house.

Turn finally to your own heart. The same stillness is there as well. At the core, buried beneath the turbulence of emotions rubbed raw by life’s labor, is the same stillness discovered in the slow-moving sap of an autumn tree. In that primordial stillness beats the heart of God. And there is correspondence between our hearts and God’s. They have imprinted on them the same unimaginable hope, sealed with a promise. The hope is for fullness, for completion, for being one with each other. Together we listen for the divine heartbeat. Our entire lives are a vigil, a keeping watch, for the fulfillment of this hope” (Wendy Wright, *The Vigil*, pp.15-16).

“Be still, my love, and know that I am God” whispers our Creator, our Redeemer, our Eternal Spirit. “Be still, my love, and know that I am God.”

I wish for you hope full waiting this Advent. I wish for you a stillness that will take away your restlessness, if only for a moment, and that you will find your rest in the heart of God. I wish for you the hope that comes from knowing that the Feast of Nativity is coming and that the Jesus will come again into your life if you simply watch and wait and keep the vigil. I wish for you an Advent Vigil that leaves you, on Christmas morn, happy and grateful that you kept the Advent season in such a way that you emerge closer to your family than you were when Advent began, and thankful that in some real sense you have recognized Jesus breaking into your world.

It is good that only one candle has been kindled on our Advent wreath. We have time to wait for the others to glow.

It is good that the tender new leaves on the narcissus and the amaryllis are only beginning to grow. We have time to wait and watch for the emergence of their beauty. If, according to Jesus, when the branches of the fig tree become tender and put forth leaves, it signals that summer is near, so, too, the tender green shoots on the narcissus and the bulging growth of the amaryllis signal that Advent is here and that Christmas is near.

It is good that the Vigil of Advent is only beginning to unfold. We have time to be still and to let our hearts be one with each other and one with the heart of God. May you know the blessings of this vigil this Advent. Amen and Amen.