

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Proper 1-B; 3 December 2017
Epiphany Seattle – Todd Foster
(rev. 201712011019)

A Time to Wait

In nomine...

Today we begin a new year on the liturgical calendar of the Church. We have traveled together through the full cycle of celebrations and enactments of significant events in the history of our faith, and today we are starting over. The Church Year begins with the season of Advent, a time of waiting and anticipation.

I. Waiting for Christmas

Most of us think of Advent as a time of waiting for Christmas, for the birth of the sweet, little Christ-child. We have Advent calendars and Advent devotionals, all focusing our attention on the amazing idea that God would put on flesh and be born as a vulnerable baby in a minority community to parents who couldn't afford a proper birthing center. This is, indeed, an amazing mystery to ponder.

When I was serving as a hospital chaplain at St. Joseph's Medical Center in Bellingham, the Spiritual Care Department would set up a creche, a manger scene, each year for the holidays. But we never put the baby Jesus in the scene until Christmas Day. People who, like me, had not grown up in a church that adhered to the Liturgical Calendar, were always asking after the baby Jesus because they were just sure it had been stolen. Finally we had to put up a sign on the front of the scene, explaining that Advent was a time of *waiting* and that the baby Jesus would be present during the 12 days of Christmas between December 25th and January 6th. Until then, fans of the baby Jesus would have to *wait!*

So we spend our days waiting and wondering and praying. Advent is about waiting. For some of us it is about waiting for a particular day, Christmas Day, and all the joy and the sorrow that that particular day might bear for us.

II. Waiting for Apocalypse

But here on Advent 1, as we begin a new liturgical year and a new journey through the story of the Bible, our readings say nothing at all about sweet little babies and quiet pastoral scenes! Instead, our readings are in the genre of apocalypse: they're all about the end of the world!

Isaiah says:

*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence--
as when fire kindles brushwood
and the fire causes water to boil. (Isa 64.1f. NRSV)*

Jesus says:

*In those days, after that suffering,
the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. (Mk 13.24f. NRSV)*

This is the language of people in anguish, people who are suffering. The people to whom Isaiah and the Psalm and Jesus are speaking are waiting, alright, but it's not a manger scene that they're looking for. They are crying out, "Your Kingdom come! Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven!" They are waiting for a God who has delivered before to deliver again, and completely. They are waiting for the world to be turned upside down and for unjust systems to be dismantled.

Now if you're comfortable with the world the way it is, reasonably content, the end of the world might not sound like good news to you. But for everyone who is *hurting* or *vulnerable* or *heart-broken*, looking to God to fix things, their most urgent question is, "When?" And Jesus' response is this:

“...About that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. ...What I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.” (Mk 13.32-37 NRSV)

That is profoundly disappointing to me. How does *Jesus* not know? Is Jesus not a member of the Holy Trinity, God in the flesh? Is Jesus like a cruel, teasing older brother? Relief will come, wars will cease, babies will no longer starve and people will no longer be loved any less due to their differences. All will be right in the world... but I'm not going to tell you when.

Or is there another angle on this puzzle? Is there another kind of waiting that might be going on? Maybe it's not just me who is waiting!

III. Jesus is Waiting for Us

Usually we like to think of time as a scientific measurement. We mark its passage by the phase of the moon or the sweep of the second hand.

But time can be something else, too. Time is a way of marking relationship with God. Time, our process of engaging in relationship with God, has been given totally over to our control. Because love cannot be synchronized to the vibration of atoms or the orbits of celestial bodies. Love can only be invited, freely given and freely received.

When Jesus says he doesn't know the time, maybe he's not talking about days and months and years at all, but about a relationship, a giving and receiving of love. Perhaps the mystery of the coming of the Kingdom of God into my life is an event for which *Jesus* is waiting with bated breath! Maybe Jesus is waiting, not like a child helplessly counting off the days until Christmas, but like a fisherman watching his line, relaxed and concentrating, ready to respond with joy and excitement, patiently enduring the nibbles and waiting for a proper tug. Maybe there was a reason Jesus liked hanging out with fishermen.

I don't know; no one knows, not even Jesus. But I wonder if the second coming of Christ will come on a day that is not yet fixed on a calendar. I wonder if the second coming of Christ could

happen even today, the moment we become open to an encounter with Jesus. The Kingdom of God is near!

That's what Jesus said, isn't it? Last week we heard Jesus talk about sheep and goats. Jesus said that when we feed the hungry, welcome strangers, and visit prisoners, then we have encountered him, Jesus, in the flesh!

When you look into your selfish, cranky spouse's eyes with grace, you will encounter Jesus there. When you respond to your demanding, entitled children with patience, you will encounter Jesus there. When you love the neighbor you don't know or, even more challengingly, the ones you do know, you will encounter Jesus there. If only we will have eyes to see: in all these places, in all these people, Jesus is waiting, welcoming us into the Kingdom of God! On the day that we open our eyes and look, as we encounter Jesus, then indeed the world will be changed. That will be the end of the world as we have known it and the beginning of our citizenship in the Kingdom of God.

“Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.”

This is the season of Advent. The church calendar invites us once again to a new awareness, a new readiness to encounter Jesus in the world today. You don't have to wait for Christmas, or for Easter, or even for Groundhog Day. The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand and, if you look carefully, you might find that Jesus is the one doing the waiting. Jesus is sitting right next to you in the pew this morning. He'll be seated across the table from you at lunch today. If you have eyes to see, you'll find him in your workplace this week. “Beware, keep alert!” Jesus is waiting expectantly, eagerly, to be encountered by you.

Sermon Questions:

1. What is your experience of Advent?
2. What are you waiting for?
3. Where or when have you encountered the risen Christ?