

“HURRY UP AND WAIT”
Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36
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When I was about 6 years old my brother and I went out with my Dad and his brother for a day of water skiing and boating on the Spokane River. That day often floods my mind with memories of the sunlight beating off the orange deck of my uncle’s boat, pictures of the floating marina where we had lunch, and memories of getting to drive a boat (assisted by my Dad) for the first time. That day has taken on an almost idyllic quality in my mind. Whether it was the boating or the “hanging out with the guys” I don’t know, but when I think of my uncle and Dad together I often return to that day. I also return to it because I remember on the ride home my Dad told me that if I passed two more levels in swimming class, I would be allowed to water ski.

Looking back on that day and knowing my Dad, what he probably said was, “Pass a couple more levels of swimming and you can begin to learn to water ski.” There is a subtle difference to be sure. That is not how I heard it, however. In my mind I would pass that test, we would then call my uncle and arrange to go to the lake, and as fast as I could put on my child-sized ski vest, I would then be skimming across the top of the water.

There are a few things you should know, however. First, at that time, I probably weighed only about 50 lbs soaking wet and I was pretty short for my age. I remember the “kids” skis we had seemed like they were 100 feet long as I bobbed up and down in the water. After trying to get my feet to stay in on the smallest setting I began to wear shoes inside the bindings so they would stay on. And after witnessing my Dad and uncle perform feats of great daring on water skis, I was more than discouraged as I spent the better part of a summer and a half trying over and over to get my arms and legs coordinated in such a way that the first pull of the boat didn’t send me flailing about mostly below the water, leaving me closer to snorkeling than to skiing. As I tried over and over to ski, the discouragement was almost overwhelming. Hurry up and pass your test, but wait, you can’t really ski yet. Hurry up...let’s go. Oh, well, try again. Wait, I’ll circle the rope around you again. And, thus, water skiing became my first “hurry up and wait” experience.

On this first Sunday in Advent, I would argue that we find ourselves very much in a “hurry up and wait” kind of place; and I am not sure that is necessarily such a good thing. You see, our culture has invested so much in getting to the holiday season that I think we run the risk of perpetual disappointment. I think that is why Costco has Christmas displays beginning in September; we are almost desperate in our desire for the holiday season, even when we don’t know exactly what to do once the holidays arrive. Retailers bet their entire year on this shopping season; and every year as they total their Thanksgiving weekend sales, they are filled with gloom. Irving Berlin and Bing Crosby have told us for years that a white Christmas is the ideal, but it probably is not going to happen in this part of Oregon. Even Christians fall prey to the syndrome because I think that too often we wrap our faith in the idealism of a manger-born baby. It is true that it is much easier for our faith to subsist on the celebratory anthems of the Christmas season than it is to have to wrestle with the depth of the issues that following the resurrected Christ will bring. But is Jesus the baby in this scenario, or is it our faith that remains infant-sized? If our faith depends only upon making it to Advent and Christmas then these seasons have become nothing more than pacifiers—keeping us calm and sedated while the complexities of our faith remain beyond our reach from the bassinet. Or worse yet, if Christmas

becomes nothing more than a commodity, even for those who claim the Christ story as their own, then how does it have any more value than the latest trend in clothing or electronics?

Let me give you an example: On Monday I had a conversation with someone in a dentist's office that left me shaking my head about whether or not Christianity has a chance in the marketplace of ideas, or whether Christianity had become just another thing to buy. We started off talking about the snow that was falling and I mentioned that I was glad it hadn't come a day earlier because I might have been breaking trail through the snow as one of the few people who was headed to work. Once she had ascertained that I was a pastor, she began telling me about her church and we somehow slipped into a discussion about the difference in the styles of the pastors there. As she compared the two pastors she said that one of the pastors spoke with great conviction, but that he never quite got her ready to "buy" Christianity when he spoke. Her other pastor, she said, was like listening to a stand-up comic with a message. "He puts on such a great show that when he tells me what God has in store for me, I am sure that he is right. I'm so glad that he is one of my pastors because he keeps selling me on Christ and eventually I buy, every time." The only thing I could do as I listened to her tell me about her church was to wonder what type of fancy wrapping-paper we should wrap Christianity in to make sure that it is ready for the department store shelves. This isn't the way it is supposed to be. Do God and Christ really need an agent, a marketing plan, and a good crop of salespeople to be relevant and heard in our culture?

Clearly this wasn't the case in the book of Jeremiah. While Jeremiah was admittedly quite convincing in promoting the idea that God was going to do something great for Jerusalem, it is a good thing that the Israelites weren't depending on God to package it all nice and neat for them. Remember that Jeremiah was speaking to them while the city of Jerusalem was under siege by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, and the people would shortly go into exile. Jeremiah himself was facing imprisonment. God's people were about to lose everything that had given meaning to their lives: their temple, their city, their king, the priesthood, their homes, and their family. With good reason, it might have felt that God was silent, absent, or preoccupied with judging them for past wrongs.

But in this passage, from the Book of Consolation in Jeremiah, the prophet gave hope to the people. And Jeremiah didn't even have to package it with a pretty bow. Instead, the prophet speaks, and they are promised that things are going to get better for them as their destiny will be fulfilled with "a righteous branch from the lineage of David." While I would argue that within our current times it is our tendency to think of waiting as a passive, almost lazy activity, for the Hebrew people this waiting was about speaking from prison about hope beyond exile: of envisioning that through commitment to the old covenant expectations there would be a day when the sound of joy would again be heard. Waiting was about knowing that the future was completely tied to the last statement in our Hebrew text: that "the Lord is our Righteousness."

In our text and, indeed, in the contemporary season of Advent, waiting for the Lord becomes about knowing that "the source of energy behind any hope for the present or future is God's own word and action." Advent waiting, then, has its focus not just on waiting for God to fulfill a promise, but upon having our relationship with God transformed as we await the coming of the Christ child. The announcement to the Hebrew people was never about God somehow changing course; but, instead, it was always about how God's love and care continues to be present in the lives of God's people. The same is true today; Advent does not announce something new, improved, and more beautifully packaged from our God. Instead, in our Advent waiting, we are hopefully to find that God's providence and God's loving care continue to be evidenced in new and transforming ways for God's

people.

Our Gospel lesson, too, announces hope in the midst of a confusing time as Luke announces that “redemption is coming near.” This passage has more than a hint of an apocalyptic tone, which makes it both a strange and well-suited passage for the first Sunday in Advent. Luke appears to set up the commonly held belief that the climax of the world was set to come with the coming of Jesus. This, it seems, was the moment when Jerusalem would finally be redeemed and the son of man would usher in a new time and new order to all things worldly. But Luke seems also to have the sense that this isn’t simply an apocalyptic warning but, instead, that this is a call to just and faithful living. “Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.” These words are not simply a warning about what is to come but, instead, a plea for the followers of Jesus to live faithfully even as the assumed date of the coming of the Lord fades further into the distance. Here we witness Luke wrestling with the fact that Christ has not yet come again and the people have become restless. This is Luke answering those who would say, “After a few years of faithful living, Christ was supposed to come again and save us from having to work so hard.” And as the first century church began to wrestle with the ongoing nature of their faithful living we too must do the same. This passage and the Advent season “are not then about our own survival, but instead about the survival of all.”

What then does our waiting for Christ’s coming...in the shape of an infant or as the “son of man coming upon the clouds,” require us to do for our world? Both our texts have dark and foreboding overtones - not exactly what we think of as we enter into the season of Advent. Perhaps, however, these overtones are exactly what we should be hearing as we await the coming of the Christ child. We do know the trajectory of this life right? We do know that that little babe, the one who we proclaim never cried while “away in the manger” eventually becomes the one who will lead a mild little uprising that will change the world as we know it? We do know that that little child will forever change the meaning of kingship, of a feast, of servanthood, and of love. We know all of this, right?

In this Advent season, then, we are left with the truth that this story probably doesn’t belong in a beautifully wrapped package. Christ doesn’t come exactly when and how we want him to. As we rush into Advent, with our lists of things to do and gifts to buy, perhaps we will even discover that it isn’t quite time yet. But as we wait, do not despair, don’t be impatient; because what the Christ child will bring, will be worth the wait. The babe is soon to be born...hurry up, get ready, and wait for his coming! Thanks be to God. Amen.