

“AWAITING THE UNEXPECTED”

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

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Welcome to Advent, the season where we are intentional about marking the time before the Christ child will once again be born into our lives. Perhaps you, like me, are always a little bit surprised when the scripture is read on the first Sunday in Advent. On the first Sunday in Advent our lessons include Old Testament prophecy and New Testament talk about the end of the age. There is no lesson that proclaims the coming of the Christ child, no mention of angels, and Mary, that young pregnant woman is nowhere to be found either—those lessons will have to wait for future weeks. On this first Sunday in Advent we focus on watching and waiting—on the spiritual discipline that defines Advent.

Our first lesson comes from the book of Isaiah and it features a hopeful vision of the future. This lesson is included on this first Sunday of Advent because in its beautiful vision of hope it proclaims that the reign of God will one day come. One of the difficult parts of this passage is that although it offers this wonderful vision for the future, there is no specific time frame given. Thus we are left to wonder when exactly it will come to pass that nations will no longer fight against other nations. We are left to wonder when those swords will be formed into pruning hooks. I must admit that often when I hear this passage and its promises still seem so far off, I wonder why exactly is Isaiah so revered? However, upon further examination the open-ended promise of this passage is a stroke of theological genius because in this passage there are only two actors...God and the nations. Now everything I know about God tells me that it isn't God who is holding up the implementation of this vision. So then this passage sets us into Advent with a call to prepare the way so that the hopeful vision of the prophet Isaiah might come to pass. This passage sets us to work as we begin Advent.

Our second lesson comes from the gospel of Matthew and is concerned with the coming of the Lord. For Advent this passage has an odd feel to it because concerns the cosmic and historical signs of the second coming of Jesus and it is filled with allusions of the end of time. How did we end up *here* on the first Sunday of Advent? I thought we were here to celebrate the coming of the Christ child? Where is the baby? This reaction demonstrates how it is that we get off course during Advent—we get hooked into the idea that Advent is nothing more than a series of Christmastime preliminaries, when it is in fact a season related to, but distinct from the joy of Christmas. This is a season when we highlight watching and waiting—not because of some sadistic desire to keep us from holding that beautiful baby in our hearts. Instead, Advent highlights watching and waiting because in this season we are to be getting ourselves ready for the changes that should overtake us as we experience the joyous birth of Christ. But there is some theological prep-cooking to be done first. Thus, we interact with the prophets of old and the announcement of the coming of the Lord—all in an effort to make sure that the glorious coos that will emanate from the manger scene do not sidetrack us from the fact that our faith story is about more than a baby. We must remember that it also includes darkness and light, judgment and redemption, repentance and grace. And so we begin our Advent journey reminded of sin and redemption exemplified in the story of Noah and the flood. We are reminded that there are times when we are stolen away by God for purposes that we cannot understand—and that as faithful people we must be

ready to hear and accept God's call. We are reminded that we must be ready for whatever comes our way...

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So what does all of this mean for us as 21st Century Christians entering into Advent for the 10th, the 29th, or 77th time in our lives? How is this supposed to be anything but a replay of last year? First, as we enter into Advent, as we commit to watching and waiting for the Christ child I believe that there are some pretty big individual responsibilities that come our way. I believe that watching and waiting can be seen as a passive activity, but in truth our Advent work is to be anything but a passive. Just as we work at preparing our homes for the holidays...with lights, with decorations, with a Christmas tree—we should also be about the work of preparing our hearts so that we are ready for the coming of the Christ child. I'm not sure I know what this will look like for everyone, but I do know that it requires an inventory of sorts: Where are my priorities? Do my actions and words give opportunity for swords to be made into plowshares? Am I busy with the things that matter or am I just busy? Is my faith evident as evident on Thursday as it is when I worship on Sunday morning? A faithful inventory of our lives might just tell us how ready we are to meet the Christ child.

Second, I believe that our Advent observances must take us beyond our individual spheres of influence and comfort. It is not enough to make sure that our spiritual and family life is in order when people are dying alone in the cold, when families have to make the difficult financial choice between food and health care, when war and the threat of war fills our world with fear and violence. It is not enough to only take an introspective look at Advent when there are vegetables to be chopped and people to be fed at Stone Soup. It is not enough to think that the Advent journey is ours alone when animals face extinction, when weather patterns make dramatic changes across the globe and thus people die due to drought, severe cold, flooding, hurricanes and the like. It is not enough to enter Advent, let "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" play constantly on our Ipod's and ignore that the world around us is in need—perhaps more than ever—of people who are willing to love and care for others. We cannot simply light the candles on our Advent wreaths and pronounce ourselves ready...the whole world knows it isn't true and during Advent we must hear that call too.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we all know that Advent and the birth of Jesus aren't new things; we have all been here before after all. Advent is a season of expectation—when we are expecting that in preparing for the coming of the Christ-child we will experience God in new and revealing ways. But what if during Advent, rather than preparing for the coming of the Christ-child, we instead look around us to find where the Christ-child is living around us and among us already. Let me tell you a couple of stories to illustrate my point:

The other night I was sitting on the couch watching Marin work at pulling herself up onto her feet. The pattern of activity goes something like this: she pulls herself up, looks around a bit, offers a huge smile as we watch what she is doing, and then ends up falling to the floor when her legs no longer have the strength to support her anymore. And then she waits a few seconds, maybe crawls to the other edge of

the coffee table and there she reaches up and begins the process all over again. It is exciting to watch the enthusiasm with which she approaches standing up, even if it seems that she isn't entirely sure what she is to do next. The pure enthusiasm that I witness in her is proof to me that I don't have to wait for Christmas to see and experience the presence of God. That joyous smile as magazines are pulled off the coffee table tells me all I need to know about God...that God is imbedding in our learning and in our little moments in the same way that god is imbedded in the creative impulse that led to the planets being placed amid the cosmos.

Another story is of the people who line up and await the food at Stone Soup. I am always awe-struck by the care and compassion that is offered among this hungry bunch of folks waiting for the food to be served. Someone is always there to help the one who cannot walk well. Someone is there to help carry the hot soup for the one who has bad hands. Somehow this bunch of folks has become a community, different from the community I know, but a community nonetheless. As I watch this community I am reminded that the Christ child among us might have torn clothes, might need a shower, might be hungry...but whatever the Christ child looks like the "child" shows love and compassion and sometimes stands in line for soup.

Finally, as youth group devolved into a game of sardines last week I witnessed the Christ-child alive in our youth as they swarmed around the church searching diligently for these who were hiding and then as I listened to their laughter and their joy at being together I recognized the sound of the Christ child on the cusp of adulthood. They were joyous, they were loud, they were funny, ironic, sarcastic, and the Christ child was alive in all of it!

And so it goes...are we await the Christ child that we will celebrate on Christmas we have the chance and the obligation to search for the Christ child that is already here.

Thanks be to God! Amen.