

“Waiting”

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

Advent 1/A, November 28, 2010

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Have you ever wondered why the Christian church has this season called Advent? It seems like most of our activities during Advent have nothing to do with the birth of Jesus; more shopping, less time to ourselves, more socializing, less sleep. This morning we begin the season of Advent, the weeks before we celebrate the birth of Jesus once again. How many of you know the origins of Advent? In the Christian church, the New Year begins with Advent, a time when we commemorate the *adventus* of Jesus, his coming, arrival or birth into the world. Some time around the sixth century the tradition emerged to set aside four weeks before Christmas, beginning with the Sunday closest to Saint Andrew’s Day which falls on November 30, as a period to look both backwards in history and forward to the future. Therefore, on this first Sunday we do not start at the beginning of the story. We start at the end with a gospel lesson that seems as “unChristmas” as you can get.

Starting at the end is not a foreign concept to most modern people. We do this all the time. When we set a goal for ourselves, like getting a college degree or running in the Santa 5k run, we envision ourselves fulfilling that goal. Every class we take, we imagine walking across the stage to receive our diploma. Every mile we run, we envision friends cheering wildly as we cross the finish line. When we look ahead to the days when we will no longer work full time, we may consult an investment counselor who will help us prepare for that time, albeit a long way off. This concept of living into a not yet realized future seems logical in our secular life however it is a bit unsettling in our spiritual lives.

The preacher Amy Richter says, “Advent is the season of hope, a season to remind us that we worship the God of things that are not yet, the God of things that will be. Advent is the season to hold up before us visions of things that sound impossibly remote to us—Advent images, like today’s of weapons of war turned into tools for producing food, the lion lying down with the lamb, light that the darkness will never quench, a child born of a virgin, whose name shall be called Wonderful, counselor, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.”

This hope we experience in the Advent season must move us expectantly into that not yet realized future. The secular traditions of the season draw us nostalgically into the past. For many people Christmas is all about upholding traditions. Today we ponder not Christmas, but that expectant mystery of God coming to dwell among us. Our Advent hope must be big and bold. Sometimes our hope fails because, of a lack of imagination, lack of courage, or because, as Amy Richter laments, we fritter away our hope on small, private things, like a peaceful moment to ourselves, which is nice, and maybe sorely needed, but not as compelling as peace in the world.<sup>1</sup> I submit it is not an either/or but a

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<sup>1</sup> The Rev. Dr. Amy Richter, “Sermons that Work: November 28, 2010”

both/and situation. We can not hope big or envision peace on the global scale if we have yet to make peace within us or those closest to us. Forgiveness and reconciliation are the foundation of Advent hope.

The story we hear in Matthew's gospel is confusing and unsettling. It would appear to have nothing to do with peace. Christ is described as a burglar, we hear of workers in the field are snatched up while others are left behind. There is talk of the master returning however we are uncertain when or how this will happen. Is the master an image for Jesus? Are we waiting for him to come again? Matthew encourages us to be ready, to live in such a way that it does not matter when the master returns. This story feels out of place in this season when we anticipate the arrival of a young mother and child, of Magi and Shepherd and angels. It doesn't seem to fit a time of hope-filled preparation.

It is easy to recoil from this strange story. Instead we might press into the insecurity and unsettledness of it and see what happens. Jan Richardson comments, "Advent is a season to look at what we have fashioned our lives around—beliefs, habits, convictions, and prejudices—and to see whether these leave any room for the Christ who is so fond of slipping into our lives in guises we may not readily recognize." Such an invitation seems more Lenten than Adventen (if that is even a word?) However, it makes sense. God reveals God's self to us in the least likely ways, in a child born in the most primitive surroundings, to simple parents, in the midst of turmoil and chaos. Should it to be any different in our own lives? Would we recognize him when he comes?

It is easy to assume that such mystical encounters are for someone else. We likely have these transformative encounters all the time and do not recognize it. One way to remain hope filled is to trust that at any moment we will be surprised by the sudden presence of God. One day Jesus may appear to us in the clouds, but before that he is more likely to appear as one who needs to be fed, or comforted in his grief or begging for forgiveness. This is what Jesus was trying to teach his disciples. Although the circumstances in which we live may seem desperate and difficult, God has not abandoned us. If we remain hopeful we will find him waiting for us just around the corner. Yet we acknowledge how difficult it is to remain hopeful. When every day looks like the other, when there seems to be no end to war, when the cancer treatments seem to have no noticeable effect, when no amount of cajoling or prayer moves your loved one closer to sobriety, it is easy to feel sleepy and weary.

Perhaps this is how the early church was feeling when Matthew wrote this stirring gospel story. It is not about the "second coming" at the end of time. Matthew tells this story to help those early followers of Jesus understand how they were to live despite their challenging situation. Christianity was small and fragile. There were, perhaps, a few thousand people who would have identified themselves as followers of Jesus. They were living between an oppressive government on one side, and a Jewish majority that no longer wanted anything to do with them on the other. The vast majority of people lived in abject poverty under Roman rule.

It is not unlike how many people feel today. Throughout the world people struggle to pick up the pieces of their lives shattered by war, famine, oppressive regimes and one natural disaster after another. The people of Haiti pray to get through each day as they recover from their life altering earthquake nearly a year ago only to be hit by a new medical catastrophe. Just a few years after a tsunami devastated Indonesia, they are hit with another. We don't have to have lived through a natural disaster to know what the gospel writer is talking about. Many people live every day in situations one writer calls "quiet apocalypses" those situations that threaten to undo us all; domestic violence, job loss, disease, addictions, betrayal. So how is it that we are to live, in the midst of large and small catastrophe's that is at once hope-filled and life giving?

We place our trust in the God who keeps promises. We pray to the God that finds a way to transform war into peace. We believe that God has a purpose for our lives. We embrace an Advent hope that helps us envision a world unlike the one in which we live today. It is not easy to hope big. Such visions seem either impossible or even foolish. Can we really hope for swords beaten into plowshares, or spears into pruning hooks, or Christ entering our lives at a moment we least expect it to bring not calamity but peace? If such things have not yet happened, what makes us think that today will be any different? So where is the Good News?

The Good News is that anxiety and fear, destruction and death are never the final answer. We are a resurrection people. We know what happens. Just like the marathon runner sees himself crossing the finish line in victory, we envision the end and the new beginning that is only possible through this creative and transformative power of God. The Jesuit priest and peace activist Daniel Berrigan has written an *Advent Credo* in which he captures the tension between what God initiated on that mysterious night so long ago and what has yet to be completed. We wait in Advent hope while together we may confess with him this *Advent Credo*:

#### *Advent Credo*

It is not true that creation and the human family are doomed to destruction and loss—  
This is true: For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.

It is not true that we must accept inhumanity and discrimination, hunger and poverty, death and destruction—  
This is true: I have come that they may have life, and that abundantly.

It is not true that violence and hatred should have the last word, and that war and destruction rule forever—  
This is true: Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, his name shall be called wonderful councilor, mighty God, the Everlasting, the Prince of peace.

It is not true that we are simply victims of the powers of evil who seek to rule the world—

This is true: To me is given authority in heaven and on earth, and lo I am with you, even until the end of the world.

It is not true that we have to wait for those who are specially gifted, who are the prophets of the Church before we can be peacemakers—

This is true: I will pour out my spirit on all flesh and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions and your old men shall have dreams.

It is not true that our hopes for liberation of humankind, of justice, of human dignity of peace are not meant for this earth and for this history—

This is true: The hour comes, and it is now, that the true worshipers shall worship God in spirit and in truth.

So let us enter Advent in hope, even hope against hope. Let us see visions of love and peace and justice. Let us affirm with humility, with joy, with faith, with courage: Jesus Christ—the life of the world.<sup>2</sup> Amen

Sources:

The Rev. Dr. Amy Richter, “Sermons that Work: November 28, 2010”

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<sup>2</sup> *Testimony: The Word Made Flesh*, by Daniel Berrigan, S.J. Orbis Books, 2004.