

WAITING AND HOPING
Advent 1A Sermon for 11-28-10
Scripture: Isaiah 2:1-5 and Mt 24:36-44

Welcome to another Advent season, the 8th season I have been serving as your pastor here at Deering. It's always a bit jarring for me to start this season with eschatology or apocalyptic readings about the end time, and that is just what our scriptures today are about. If we take these readings seriously they can make us feel uncomfortable. You know me, I'd much rather focus on a baby being born in a manger and the message of God's love. OR the last part of the Isaiah reading, God's vision of peace would suit me just fine. The Matthew reading reminds me of the Left Behind series, books written by Jenkins and LaHaye that are so popular these days (over 65 million sold) and not a theology that I believe in.

Advent means waiting, waiting with a sense of expectancy. It's not clear when Advent originally started. For that matter we are not even sure what year or what month Jesus was born. It was not until the mid 300's that Constantine the Great built the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and declared Jesus' birthday a national holiday; and Julius, the bishop of Rome set the date as December 25th. It was the mid-400's before the majority of Christians accepted this Christmas date.

So what are we suppose to be waiting for? In the gospel lesson Jesus talks about "that day" and seems to refer to the end of time, the eschaton when the Son of Man, the resurrected Christ, will come on the clouds and

bring the saved to be with him in glory. There is much agreement amongst Biblical scholars that Jesus, himself both human and divine, did not know the exact timing of “the end”. What Jesus does emphasize is that God has already broken into human history; and we Christians understand that as Jesus being born and revealing God by his life and teachings. I especially like a comment by David Bartlett who writes, "One day Jesus may appear in the clouds, suddenly, like a thief in the night. But before that – as Matthew reminds us – Jesus will appear just around the corner, suddenly, like a hungry person, or a neighbor ill-clothed, or someone sick or imprisoned" (Feasting on the Word). It's so important for us to remember that.

In Jesus day just as in today there is a sense of unpredictability, beautifully captured in these words by Thomas Long, "When tomorrow is just more of today and all labors of love seem poured into a bottomless pit of human suffering, indifference, and cynicism, then it is hard to march out the front door to be a disciple. In the face of the crushing needs of the world, the only way to preserve hope, the only way to maintain a willing sense of discipleship, is to trust that at any moment we may be surprised by the sudden presence of God...we may never know when we may encounter the living God waiting for us around the next bend. Indeed,

each unexpected meeting, each moment of holy surprise, is but an anticipation of the great climax of all human history and longing,"¹

Yes, Advent is a disruption in our ordinary, day to day lives. In the church year it is the beginning of a new year where as in the secular world it is the end of the year, a time to start looking at annual reports, profits and losses, consumer spending and Christmas bonuses or the lack of them. Indeed Christmas and the weeks leading up to it is appropriately celebrated with joy, great singing and feasting, and sharing gifts. For Christians I hope there is something more—a serious searching for meaning, a reflection about our lives, our own inner selves and something larger than our own lives that we can place our hope in. The Advent season remembers and re-tells the story of other people long ago, who, like us, were waiting for the promises of God to be fulfilled. It is a season when we can reflect on how we can change, turn back to God and live in ways that offer hope both to us and to the larger world, the world that God loves.

Waiting and hoping—it's not easy. It's easier to be cynical and disappointed. John Cobb, the founder of Process Theology, was a guest lecturer in several of my classes at Claremont School of Theology where I began seminary. He has said this about hope: "Hope has survived repeated disappointments in the past. It will survive many more in the

¹ *Matthew, Westminster Bible Companion.*

future. It will do so as long as we believe in the biblical God.”² For him the biblical God is concerned with history and works in history for peace and for justice; however, God’s working does not displace the working of human beings. He says, “We believe that God’s hopes, also, are repeatedly frustrated. God works in hope for peace and justice, but the world turns to violence and oppression. Still God’s work is not futile. Here and there it succeeds... that success depends on our response to God’s invitation to share in the achievement of God’s purposes.” Maybe our hope lies in the fact that God is far wiser than we are and can bring about new good in those situations that we see as hopeless. Our job is to remain faithful and participate in the ways of Jesus.

The Isaiah reading is one that is important for my ability to hope. Isaiah promises a time when ALL peoples, ALL nations will come to the Lord’s house, to learn his ways and walk in his paths (v. 3b). With the help of God, all nations will transform their instruments of war into instruments of peace and there will be war no more. To me this passage acknowledges that history belongs to God and surely will unfold as God sees fit; God is in control not us; however, there is work to do and a call for us to participate in bringing Isaiah’s dream and God’s promises into reality.

² John Cobb, **Process & Faith Lectionary Commentary**, Advent Season, Year A, November 28, 2004 online.

Waiting and hoping—what can we do? In Matthew 25, the next chapter after our gospel for today, we are given some pretty good suggestions; feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit those in prison, welcome the stranger, give water to the thirsty, take care of the sick. As we share our time, talent and treasures, love our neighbors as ourselves, pray for those that persecute us, is it then possible that Jesus the Christ does appear, appear in our individual lives and in the life of our church?

So my sisters and brothers let us start this advent season focusing on Hope. There are many kinds of hope; I wish for you the hope that is based on Isaiah's prophecy of peace and Jesus' promise of salvation. It is up to us to choose whether we get caught up in the frenzy of activity, buying expensive gifts, and doing things we really don't want to do or if we spend our time and money serving and loving others and not forgetting to be kind and loving to ourselves. Only the hope we have in our living Lord, Jesus the Messiah, can make the celebration of Christmas something more than a brief, frantic time of feasting, and drinking, and overspending. Jesus says that we must be ready at all times for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour. So we stay awake, we watch, we wait, and we hope. Happy Advent to all of you.