



Sunday Worship

November 29, 2020

*Draw near to God
for God is waiting for you.*

LIGHTING THE ADVENT WREATH AND CALL TO WORSHIP

If ever there was a year we needed Advent, this is the year. We hardly know how to describe the year we have lived through. We hesitate to reflect on all the mess around us in 2020. All we know is that nothing seems right, nothing seems like it used to be, nothing. We need Advent!

The prophet Isaiah cried out for us, “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down ... To make your name known ... so that nations might tremble at your presence.” So tear through the mess, O Lord, and come down to us again. We long to be your people, a people of hope.

We light this first candle as a sign of our hope. Hope that you can meet us, even in the mess of our world. Hope that you still see us, though we feel we are lost in the rubble. Let this light be the guide that brings us to Emmanuel once more.

O Come, O Come Emmanuel.

OPENING PRAYER

Loving God, we thank you for the hope you give us. Help us prepare our hearts for the Lord's coming. Bless our worship. Help us live holy and righteous lives. We ask it in the name of the one born in Bethlehem. Amen.

HYMN #105 People Look East

1. People, look east. The time is near of the crowning of the year. Make your house fair as you are able; trim the hearth and set the table. People, look east: Love the Guest, is on the way.

2. Furrows, be glad. Though earth is bare, one more seed is planted there. Give up your strength the seed to nourish, that in course the flower may flourish. People, look east: Love, the Rose, is on the way.

3. Birds, though you long have ceased to build, guard the nest that must be filled. Even the hour when wings are frozen God for fledging time has chosen. People, look east: Love the Bird is on the way

4. Stars, keep the watch. When night is dim one more light the bowl shall brim, shining beyond the frosty weather, bright as sun and moon together. People, look east: Love, the Star, is on the way.

5. Angels, announce with shouts of mirth Christ who brings new life to earth. Set every peak and valley humming with the word, the Lord is coming. People, look east: Love the Lord is on the way.

CALL TO CONFESSION

We try to stay faithful but fail. We long to care for others but end up focusing on us. We think we are being safe

but know how often we live dangerously. Yet, God knows our foolishness, and forgives our mistakes, so we can be made new people.

PRAYER OF BROKENNESS AND CONFESSION

Come, God-who-draws-near-to-us, for we live in fretful times, wondering if we will ever come out of them.

Come to us, with your grace.

Come, God-who-has-walked-these-roads, for we long to be faithful in these days, but find it all too easy to be seduced by worry.

Come to us, with your hope.

Come, God-who-carries-life-in-your-breath, for we try to stay apart for others and ourselves, but find it easy to listen to those who mock us for being so foolish.

Come to us, with your love.

Word of Flesh: have mercy;

Friend of the poor: have mercy;

Bridegroom of the faithful: have mercy.

WORDS OF BLESSING AND ASSURANCE

*In Christ we are made new. We are healed and forgiven, we are challenged and guided to become those who work for the better rather than those who would destroy and damage. God calls us God's people and we are eternally grateful. Remember this good news: **Jesus died for me. Jesus forgives me. Jesus loves me. Jesus is good to me. Amen.***

GLORIA PATRI

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON Isaiah 64:1-9

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—

² as when fire kindles brushwood
and the fire causes water to boil—

to make your name known to your adversaries,
so that the nations might tremble at your presence!

³ When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.

⁴ From ages past no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who works for those who wait for him.

⁵ You meet those who gladly do right,
those who remember you in your ways.

But you were angry, and we sinned;
because you hid yourself we transgressed.

⁶ We have all become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth.

We all fade like a leaf,
and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

⁷ There is no one who calls on your name,
or attempts to take hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us,
and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.

⁸ Yet, O Lord, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
⁹ Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord,
and do not remember iniquity forever.
Now consider, we are all your people.
¹⁰ Your holy cities have become a wilderness,
Zion has become a wilderness,
Jerusalem a desolation.
¹¹ Our holy and beautiful house,
where our ancestors praised you,
has been burned by fire,
and all our pleasant places have become ruins.

TIME WITH THE CHILDREN

HYMN #121 O Little Town of Bethlehem

1. O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie! Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light; the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

2. For Christ is born of Mary and, gathered all above,
while mortals sleep, the angels keep their watch of wondering love.
O morning stars, together proclaim the holy birth, and praises sing to God the king, and peace to all on earth.

3. How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven. No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin,
where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in.

4. O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray; cast our our sin and enter in; be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels and great glad tidings tell; O come to us; abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel!

GOSPEL LESSON Mark 13:24-37

²⁴ “But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
²⁵ and the stars will be falling from heaven,
and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

²⁶ Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. ²⁷ Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. ²⁸ “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁰ Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³¹ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³² “But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³ Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴ It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. ³⁵ Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, ³⁶ or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. ³⁷ And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

SERMON

In life there is a great deal of waiting. We wait in line. We wait our turn. We wait for test results. We wait for the meal to finish cooking or the dryer to finish its cycle. We wait to clean up. We wait for our next check. We wait for the baby to be born. Parents wait for their children. Children wait for parents. If my children or grandchildren have anything to do with it, my tombstone will read, "Wait a Minute."

Often we are not patient while we wait. There's story about a woman whose car stalled in traffic. She looked in vain under the hood to identify the cause, while the driver behind her leaned relentlessly on his horn. Finally she had enough. She walked back to his car and offered sweetly, "I don't know what the matter is with my car. But if you want to go look under the hood, I'll be glad to stay here and honk for you."

Waiting is not something that we do very well. As singer Tom Petty said, "Waiting is the hardest part." Maybe that's because as Canadian blogger Ann Voskamp said, "'Life has no waiting rooms. Life only has labor and delivery rooms.'" If you've ever gone through labor or even been anywhere near a woman in labor, you know that labor is not a comfortable state to be in. Quite bluntly: it hurts. A lot. A woman in labor, who was previously overjoyed at the thought of welcoming a new little life into the world, may decide she's changed her mind. "Forget this baby idea—just get me out of this insanely painful place," she may think.

When we are forced to wait in this life, when dreams, plans and goals that seemed like they were positive, God-pleasing things, just fall apart, it hurts. It hurts a lot. Voskamp's point, however, is a good one. "Waiting rooms," she says, "are actually birthing rooms and what feels like the contraction of our plans can be the birthing of *greater purposes*." Yes, for the believer in Jesus, there is a purpose for the pain involved in waiting.

Labor rooms, or birthing rooms are active places, usually abuzz with all the focus on the new life that's arriving into this big, cold world. But when we're waiting for rain to fall, as Voskamp's farming family was, waiting for exam results or waiting for someone you love to get well, to come home or to come to their senses, waiting for the election results to be finalized, waiting in a food line, waiting for the flood waters to recede or the fire to be put out--waiting feels like labor. It's an uncomfortable, frustrating and painful place to be.

Here we are in the first week of Advent and we are waiting. In a "normal" Advent season we would be waiting for the birth of God's baby boy and would do so with eager anticipation. This is because the "normal" Advent waiting is all about celebrating and revelry. We usually usher in this season with the Thanksgiving holiday full of gatherings of family and friends, feasting and parades where the last float is one with Santa on his sleigh. Sales would get us started with holiday buying. Parties, concerts, the Nutcracker, all of it putting us into the mix of crowds all wanting to make the most of the next four weeks.

But this year our waiting looks much different. It's like the waiting of the birthing mother who has reached the point where she wants to push in order to let the newborn's presence be known. This year, maybe more than other year, we are waiting, desperately waiting for God to make God's presence known not so we can Ooo and Ahh, but so that God's power can erupt into our messed up world and finally put things to right.

Why is waiting so difficult? Sometimes it is the uncertainty; we want to know what is coming, and the longer we are in the dark, the higher our anxiety level becomes. I think, more often than not, waiting is difficult because we are impatient and we want everything within a nano second. Both Isaiah and Jesus' community were having a hard time waiting and both were praying for God to show up NOW.

One woman commented to her friend, "I have a hard time waiting. I need more patience. Can you tell me where I can take a speed course on patience so I can get some quickly?"

Israel needed a speed course in patience that would allow them to wait. Maybe that speed course in patience would speed up the waiting itself. Isaiah wrote to people whose situation mirrors ours. Like survivors of California wildfires and Gulf Coast hurricanes, the coronavirus pandemic and the racial violence, they have lost so much of the life that they once had. These exiled Israelites looked at their home country and saw their "sacred cities... a desert, Jerusalem a desolation, their holy and glorious temple burned with fire..." The end of verse 11 sums it up: "all that we treasured lies in ruins." What happened? Babylon. The Babylonians came in and over a

period of about ten years ending in 587 BCE, completely wiped out Judah leaving only the “undesirables” within its borders. The temple in Jerusalem was leveled and the people were taken into exile in a foreign land.

Fast forward about 500 years. Jesus spoke his words to his followers at the end of his earthly ministry. The Gospel of Mark, believed to be the first of the four gospels written, was addressed to an audience living at about 70 AD following the defeat of the Jews at Masada. The temple, that had been rebuilt, once again had been destroyed. Persecution of Christians was rampant under Nero and hadn't subsided since, at least in particular areas of the empire. No wonder they yearned for God to come and set things right. We get it.

But Jesus' words were intended to give hope just as Advent is to be a season of hope. We start the four weeks before the birth of Jesus with hope. If we have no hope, there is no point in waiting. What we hope and therefore wait for is Jesus coming again.

If Jesus is not coming back to make all things new and bring in the kingdom he talked about all through his ministry, then any celebration of his birth really would be on a par with fantasies about Santa Claus and Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer or the generic “holiday spirit” with which people try to get infused every December. If Jesus is not the Lord of lords who can come back at the end of history, then “Silent Night” has all the charm—and all the meaning—of “Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire.”

But another reason for the church to ponder the day when the cosmic lights go out is because there is something about that prospect of darkness that makes people long for—and appreciate all-the-more—the One we proclaim to be the Light of the World. And once again to note the merely obvious, 2020 has left us longing for Light more than usual. If the whole world just generally resembled the little fantasy kingdoms many try to approximate in front yards each December, then the world would not need saving and God would not have needed to go to the bloody lengths he did to make that salvation a reality.

It may be bracing for the church to kick off Advent with an apocalyptic passage like Mark 13 but among other things, such a passage reminds us, and our culture, that the stakes in the Advent of Christ are exceedingly high. The Christ of God did not arrive in this world long ago to help people be a little nicer, to encourage a few weeks' worth of charitable giving to the United Way or the local soup kitchen, or any other such short-term, local goal. No, the Christ of God came to make straight every crooked way, to right every wrong, to upend every injustice, and to reconcile all things—ALL things—to himself.

Compared to all that, all of our little Christmas lights combined really do look pretty dim after all. This is why we wait. This is why our waiting is hopeful. Diana Butler Bass wrote in the *Washington Post* “Advent should not be a mini-Lent; it is not a time to examine sins, engage in self-denial, and confession. It is not about penance. Rather, Advent is of a different spiritual hue: It is a time of waiting, of expectation, of hope in the darkness. About fifty years ago, the protestant church at large switched from using purple, a color of confession, for blue during the season of Advent. The blue candles symbolize the color of the sky right before dawn, that time when the deepest dark is just infused with hints of light. Blue holds the promise that the sun will rise, and that even after the bleakest, coldest, longest night, the light will break forth, as the new day arrives. Blue may be the color of sadness, but blue is also the color of hope even when darkness surrounds, when all seems lost. When we hurt and think we have been abandoned, when all promises seem broken. When we light candles against the night, we are trusting and believing that a greater light will arise. A single flame becomes an inferno of compassion and justice. As Robert M. Herhold put it: ‘Come, Lord Jesus. Come quickly! We don't understand what this means, but don't let that stop you.’”

In a dream, God told a man to go outside and push against a huge boulder in his front yard. So every morning for the next few weeks, the man went outside and strained against the rock. He pushed and groaned and prodded and shoved, but the rock never budged.

Finally, in a fit of exasperation the man fell to his knees and lifted his eyes to heaven. “What were you thinking, Lord?” he cried, wiping sweat from his brow. “You told me to push this rock, and I've been pushing it for weeks, yet it has not moved an inch!”

A voice from heaven rumbled among the clouds, then whispered in the man's ear. "I told you to push the stone," God said, "I didn't tell you to move it. I'm the only one who can move it, and when you're ready, I will. By the way, look at your hands."

The man looked at his hands. They had grown callused and tough with the work, and his arms bulged with muscles. Though his efforts seemed fruitless, he had changed. He had grown strong; and now he was beginning to grow wise.

Maybe Jesus had pushing a rock in mind when he told the parable of the servants left to tend the house while the owner was away. The waiting that was done was active waiting, hopeful waiting. If the servants thought that the owner wasn't returning, their behavior would have been much different probably something like everyone for himself and open up the liquor cabinet and let's start the party!

Notice how Jesus never said the word *wait* in today's reading. Instead, he says, watch, be alert, be awake. Notice the reign of Christ around you. Notice those who would overthrow the reign of Christ too. Notice the distractions but don't be distracted by them. Notice the wars and fight for peace, notice the consumers and strive to be a healer instead. Notice those who claim they know the only way and share with them the gospel. Notice, Jesus says, those who deny me and love them anyway.

Most of all, Jesus says, notice the light coming up over the horizon. Notice the kingdom breaking into your world. Notice that I am with you always to the end of the age. Don't wait for me, idly sitting, letting the world go by, dozing on a seat like your plane is delayed. Instead watch for me as you go about my work. Act with the authority I gave. Trust in the words of the prophets and be awake. Watch for the light, the opening of hearts, the sharing of the gospel, and know that a new dawn, aka the Kingdom of God, is coming, that I am near.

Labor rooms are hard, but labor rooms are also busy. This Advent we wait. *This* Advent, the waiting seems particularly hard. This Advent it feels as if we are push the rock of justice, love, compassion, stewardship and peace or just pushing, waiting for God to come in with a bang. But this Advent, let us also watch. In the watching is our hope. We watch for the sun/Son to rise in this pre-dawn time. Even as we rejoice in a baby born long ago, this is not the end of the story. We wait, we watch for the story to continue to unfold and the end of the story that is still to come. But look for the rays of light have already started to shine from the horizon.

PRAYER OF INTERCESSION

God of grace, thank you for this season of waiting and watching. Thank you for the beauty of the sleeping earth waiting for spring's new life. Thank you for the joy of children waiting for the excitement of gift giving. Thank you for the gift of familiar carols, whose joyful music touches waiting hearts. Thank you for far-flung family and friends that we can't wait to see. Thank you for the gift of Jesus Christ; we have been waiting for a Savior.

We pray for all who are waiting this morning; people who are waiting for an end to violence because they have known too much war; people who are waiting for healing because they live with sickness and pain; people who are waiting for good news because they are weighed down with sorrow.

We pray for all of the earth that is waiting--creatures who are waiting for protection because their environment has been destroyed; waterways that are waiting for renewal because they have been contaminated; lands that are waiting to be redeemed from pollution because we have forgotten that God called the land good.

Throughout the world, in and on and under it, waiting happens, waiting grows and gathers, the earth is pregnant waiting for redemption. In eager expectation we wait for the revelation of the Son of God. "How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given! So God imparts to human hearts, the blessings of his heaven, no ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Lord enters in." Amen.

HYMN #384 Soon and Very Soon

1. Soon and very soon we are going to see the King. (repeat 2 more times)
Hallelujah, hallelujah, we're going to see the King!

2. No more crying there: we are going to see the King. (repeat 2 more times)

Hallelujah, hallelujah, we're going to see the King!

3. No more dying there: we are going to see the King. (repeat 2 more times)

Hallelujah, hallelujah, we're going to see the King!

4. (repeat verse 1)

BENEDICTION

Be alert! God is all around us! Be ready to joyfully serve God in ministries of peace and justice through Jesus Christ our Lord. Go in peace and may the peace of God always go with you. Amen.