



“Waiting for Christmas”

Isaiah 61:1-4; Luke 4:13-18

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Third Sunday of Advent

As always, we are waiting for Christmas. Of course, we're waiting for the celebration that arrives Christmas Eve here at the church and breaks out in joy on Christmas morning in our homes. But we're waiting for more – at least if we're paying attention this Advent. We're waiting for the promise of Christmas that seems so real this time of year but is so very, very elusive.

We sing about peace on earth and good will to all humankind, yet when December 26th arrives, it will be back to the real world that is so different from the Christmas promise.

We're still waiting for the promise of Christmas. But if we've been paying attention this season, the Advent songs and texts remind us that God's grace comes to us this time of year often in unexpected, even surprising ways. Small gestures, the touch of the Spirit, music, smiles, each in its own way brings us the joy of Christmas.

Last night Gloria and I spent a couple of hours in the Atlanta airport waiting for our flight back to New York. A young Danish couple with a 20-month-old son sat near us. They'd just flown in from Copenhagen and the little boy hadn't slept for eighteen hours. He was wound up, and the parents were winding down.

The boy, Oliver, entertained us and we entertained him. He was non-stop action. When our flight was announced, we said our good byes and as we walked away the young mother said, "Merry Christmas." That small gesture by a near stranger in a busy airport touched me deeply. That's the way Christmas works. That's the promise for which we wait.

In some ways, all of life is waiting for promised good and grace. If we have children, we are always waiting. We anticipate their growth, small and large landmark events, school, adulthood successes. Parents never stop waiting and watching their children.

Our lives are about waiting. We wait for vacations, weekends away from work, promotions, greater opportunities, new beginnings, the economy to turn around. We spend our lives waiting.

We wait for our hopes and dreams for our nation and the world to be fulfilled. We long for justice, freedom, opportunity, and prosperity for all. We hope and dream that the world and this land will be a better place – and we will be better people.

We spend our lives waiting. We divide time in a cycle of days, months, and years as we mark time – and wait. And most of our ideals never quite arrive. But we keep hoping.

We keep waiting and not always patiently.

Of course, we don't like to wait. Delayed gratification is difficult to master and more difficult to teach to children. But some things demand waiting. It seems that most good things require some waiting.

I learned about waiting during the Advents of my childhood. One of my earliest memories of the Christmas season is the Christmas tree in our living room. Its wonderful smell evoked Christmas longing. I watched the bubble lights on our Christmas tree as they cast a glow across the living room against the growing evening darkness. It seemed time stood still; that Christmas would never come.

One Christmas I begged my mother to let me open just one present early. She said, "No, you have to wait." I didn't stop begging. One day I sat on the steps as she washed clothes and begged and begged. Over and over, she told me no. Obviously she was more patient than I!

Finally one day she relented. Actually, she decided to teach me a lesson. She told me I could open one present the day before Christmas. I picked out a small present under the tree. It was from Mom's friend, Marie, who lived in Holland. With trembling fingers I tore off the wrapping paper and found inside a little wooden shoe made into a bank for coins. I can still feel my deep disappointment. All that begging, waiting for this dumb little wooden shoe! Mom smiled, and I never asked again. Waiting is a good thing.

And some of the best things in life are worth waiting for. The Christmas when I was six years old was a very special Christmas. As usual, I'd waited and waited for Christmas to come. Finally, I woke up and it was Christmas morning. I leapt out of bed, opened my bedroom door, and ran up the hall

Mom and Dad were up and waiting for us. The tree was aglow, and there in front of the tree was a bright red bicycle. The lights from the tree were reflected in the bright red paint, and pure joy radiated from my face. Mom told me often that her favorite memory of my childhood was the look on my face as I ran toward that bike.

That was a lesson in the extravagant grace of Christmas. I didn't ask for a bike. I didn't know how to ride a bike. I'd done nothing to deserve a bike. Nothing I'd done earned me that bike. It was sheer gift. I suspect Mom and Dad were teaching me about the astonishing grace that always accompanies Christmas if we are paying attention.

God's grace comes uninvited, unexpectedly and undeserved. The simple story of the birth of the Christ child holds in itself the extravagant grace of God that comes to us in surprising and life-changing ways.

That Christmas child changed the world and us forever. God loved us long before we were born. God sent Jesus to find us when we weren't looking to be found. God keeps coming to us in the Christmas baby whether we ask for help or not. God just keeps on seeking and saving lost people no matter what.

It's an incomprehensible grace, larger than human imagination or invention. It is God's good news always offered and always available – and incomprehensibly free. We didn't ask for it or expect it. We certainly don't deserve it. God just gives the grace revealed in Jesus Christ all the time.

The great theologian, the late Karl Barth, once said, "Grace that is comprehensible is no longer grace." And so we wait – for Christmas to come once again. We wait for a new edition of God's goodness to come to us in the ancient story that transforms all who will believe it.

Advent waiting stirs up hope for the ancient promise of the prophets that someday God would come and set things right on earth once and for all.

Isaiah 61, our Old Testament Lesson, is a case in point. The prophet speaks to the deepest longings of the human heart. When that great day occurs, the prophet declares, the poor will hear good news – for a change. Broken hearts will be mended and captives set free. God will turn mourning into gladness, ancient wrongs will be made right, evil will be banished, and as the old Christmas carol puts it, “the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”

It is no accident that Jesus’ inaugural sermon in his home synagogue in Nazareth included Isaiah 61. Jesus took the scroll of Isaiah, turned to chapter 61 and said, “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me. God has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. God sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:13-18).

Then he said, “Today this scripture is fulfilled...”

It was only a beginning. God’s promise revealed in Jesus Christ is still being fulfilled – one life at a time. And we wait, offering our lives to the one who sets things right. We believe Jesus was right and that God is at work in the world here and now.

As St. Paul put it in his magisterial summary of the Christian gospel, “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself...not counting our transgressions against us...but reconciling us to God” (2 Corinthians 5:19).

Advent reminds us there is more work to be done in us and in the world. And we wait – patiently for Christ to come to continue God’s work in us. We wait for the kingdom of God to come in our world – the same old world we’ve always known.

I often look over sermons from my early days of ministry. The first Christmas I was a minister, the opening sentence of my sermon was this: “Christmas 1970 dawns on a desperate world.” Then I listed the problems we faced: war (Vietnam), soaring unemployment, rising cost of living (9% that year), drugs, the social consequences of the 60’s revolution....

Sound familiar? The same old world still needs transforming. The world and all of us need Christ to come and set things straight. And God does come. The world is changing as God transforms men, women, and children of faith. The kingdom of God is firmly planted in the world and in us.

Let me tell you a bit about my Mom’s life. When she was in early adolescence she was a local radio and event star in Tacoma, Washington. She had a remarkable voice that caught the attention of talent scouts. She was offered a contract to bring her and her family to Los Angeles where they would make her a star.

But her life suddenly took a turn for the worse. Her mother got tuberculosis. Then her older sister caught the same disease. The family decided my mom needed to stay in Tacoma to help her dad take care of her mother and sister.

Her mother died when Mom was 13, and her sister died when Mom was 15. Her father died when she was 26, a month after my birth. She didn’t get to her Dad’s funeral. It was wartime, and they didn’t have the money or the gas ration coupons to get her home.

During those difficult years, someone told Mom about a God who loved her and who sent Jesus Christ to find her, that God invited her to become part of God’s family. She took the offer, and her life was transformed. Over the years she became a woman of profound faith and a faithful servant of God in the world.

She told me and my brothers shortly before she died that she was very happy. She said, "I've been happy every day of my life! She paused a moment and added, "well, most every day of my life." Then she laughed her wonderful laugh.

Here we are waiting for Christ to come once again. We're waiting for peace on earth and peace in our own lives. We're waiting for the joy of God's love to be born in us again. We're waiting for the kingdom of God to grow in us, in this community and in the world.

And we're here together – a community of faith that knows something about God's love, Christ's peace, and the joy brought by the Holy Spirit. We are being shaped by the grand story of God's love revealed in Jesus Christ. It's a story from beyond ourselves that bears enormous transforming power. We are waiting, to borrow a phrase from St. Paul, for "Christ to be formed in us."

Those who believe the ancient story will never be quite the same. And that is very good news.

Amen.

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