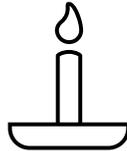


**“Wonder-filled Waiting”
#1 “Waiting in Hope”
Sunday, November 29, 2020
The First Sunday in Advent
Isaiah 64:1-9**

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Introduction

In this season, let us prepare our hearts for the coming of Christ. It’s always hard to wait at Christmas, perhaps even more so this year. We are waiting for so many things: the poor are waiting for food, we are all waiting for vaccines, families are waiting for the chance to be together again. Let us set our hearts on the sort of faithful waiting which God calls us to do in this holy season.



Most years, there is a shift that happens in the church as Advent begins. You can feel it, just the way you can feel a car lurching forward as you round a corner and slip it into a lower gear.

Most years, the church pulses with activity like a racing heart, circulating momentum, action, projects. The church becomes like Lucy in the Charlie Brown Christmas movie. When Charlie Brown comes to Lucy despondent over not knowing the meaning of Christmas, she tells him, “You don’t need meaning, you need involvement” and immediately taps him to be the director of the gang’s Christmas program. That is the church at Christmas – it is a place of involvement, a center of activity, people crisscrossing the narthex Sunday mornings. There’s a line to sign up for poinsettias, and another line to bake cookies. There’s not usually a line to sign up for the Christmas pageant, but you know you better hurry

because no one wants to be John the Baptist in that itchy costume, or worse, “Narrator #4” when you know there’s really only a need for Narrators 1, 2 and 3.

We know that Advent should be a time of quiet contemplation, but with the rest of the world flying around at break neck speed, grabbing up Black Friday deals or Cyber Monday sales, the church quickly falls in line...singing countless verses of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” while secretly hoping that the pastor might give up on the ban on Christmas music in Advent and sing something more upbeat than those dreadful Advent dirges. We trade meaning for involvement.

Theologically, Advent is a time of waiting for God to come – but most years, it is also an adrenalin-fueled month of rushing, buying and baking, of wrapping and packing and partying.

All of this makes our coronavirus-enhanced Christmas so strange.

We have accommodated the strangeness of social distancing, but we do not like it. We understand its importance, but we miss the singing, the shaking of hands, the catching up with each other. But perhaps most of all we miss what can only be described as the sacred, almost palpable sense that here in this place, something is about to happen. What we miss most of all is that sense of anticipation we feel together in worship – the sense of mystery and wonder greeting us at the door, reminding us that here in this place, week after week, something is about to happen.

I look at the beams of light breaking through the stained-glass window, and I hear us sing together, “Here in this place, the new light is streaming, now is the darkness vanished away.”¹ It all feels so strange.

But for that reason, Advent feels so much more important this year. It feels critical for us to sing of God’s hope. It is urgent that as we wait for vaccines and immunity that we also wait for God to come. It is critical that even in moments of isolation and quarantine we climb up onto the hills with Isaiah and sing of the hope the prophet imagines.

Let me ask you, will you sing a carol of hope this Advent?

¹ “Gather Us In,” hymn by Marty Haugen, 1982, GIA Publications, Inc.

As many of you know, for the past two weeks life in my family has been turned upside down. At first it seemed unreal that Carol, Dean, and I all had tested positive for coronavirus. It felt a bit like the stay-at-home orders last spring. But as each of us got sick, and as Carol in particular grew worse, the reality of the danger of this virus settled on us. And there was nothing to do but wait. The waiting has grown harder as Carol continues to be hospitalized, even though she is making progress.

It is hard to sing of hope, and even harder to wait for hope when so much of our lives have been upended...by grief, or loss, illness or separation.

As I have begun imagining what a carol of hope might sound like this Advent, I've been paying special attention to these words from Isaiah 64. These words of lament do not sound as foreign to me as they once did. They are an honest and faithful cry to God in response to crisis. The prophet surveys the broken landscape of Jerusalem, a city burned to ruins. The spiritual center of God's people is now gone. Beyond that, it feels as though God is gone as well.

The lament cries out: "Come down here. Tear open the heavens, make the mountains quake at your presence! Kindle a fire around us so that all would know that you are God."

God's people are in pain: their lives have been disrupted.

We know this to be true today:

- God's people lined up for hours to get food because there are no jobs;
- God's people are in pain: isolated from loved ones who are sick and alone in hospitals;
- God's people are in pain, waiting for hope, wondering when it will arrive.

Our voices join in the lament offered by Isaiah. O God – haven't you seen the thousands and thousands of people in Dallas, Texas, who were lined up for hours to get food for Thanksgiving?

We are waiting...but we do not wait without hope. We wait, and we light this slender candle with the hope of the prophet's deepest prayers burning inside of us. We wait, daring to step forward in faith. We wait, full of fear, but also filled with faith. In his deepest moments of despair, Isaiah dares to take a breath.

The prophet Isaiah leans forward and dares to say, “Yet!”

“Yet O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter.”

The language becomes intimate, filled with the promise of God whose hand dared to get dirty in the moment of creation. It is filled with the promise of the one who dug deep into the soil of Earth and brought forth life, whose hand created a bountiful garden.

Some years ago, a few of my colleagues and I were involved in a continuing education experience at Louisville Theological Seminary. We were invited into the studio workshop of a famous potter. Each of us were given a lump of clay and offered time on the potter’s wheel. It looked easy: in her hands, the clay came alive, it was elastic and filled with possibility. It responded to her touch and suddenly a bowl emerged. Unhappy with what she had made, she started over again, creating an even more beautiful vessel. Meanwhile, all of our creations looked a bit like the results of a second-grade arts and crafts class.

It all looks so elegant, the energy flowing from the hands of the potter into the clay. What you begin to understand is the deep bond between the artist and the clay. There is connection, a deeper communion. It is this bond that Isaiah recalls between God and God’s people. This is the hope for which Isaiah waits – and indeed, it is the hope for all of God’s people. This is the affirmation that believes that with God, nothing is impossible.

Isaiah trusts in the hands of God that are always at work. Isaiah knows that even in the waiting, God’s creation continues to spin, even if the rest of the world is filled with brokenness and pain.



I loved this photo which was posted on Facebook yesterday. It was posted by our good friend Lynn Dull of her late husband, Steve. Steve, she said, loved directing the directing of decorating at Christmas, his big bass voice booming out Christmas carols while the television blared Christmas movies. In the photo, Steve and Lynn are entwined in strands of Christmas lights—and you can almost hear the sound of Christmas movies in the background.

Steve’s face is filled with a grin, one of those famous Steve Dull smiles, even in the midst of ongoing health issues.

That is the face of one who knew the promise for which we wait, a promise that holds fast even in the most difficult moments. It is the promise of Charlie Brown as he seeks to find meaning in the story of Christmas; it is the promise of Buddy the Elf searching for his father in a world where he does not seem to fit; it is the promise George discovers in “It’s A Wonderful Life!” It is the promise Isaiah declares to us this first Sunday of Advent, in the year of our Lord 2020, in the year of pandemics and political upheaval, in the year of our grief and longing: “From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you.”

Amen.