

Sermon For December 11, 2016 - "What We Need to Wait"

Third Sunday of Advent
December 11, 2016
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
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What We Need to Wait

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

"Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord", we're told in our second reading today. Advent is the season of waiting, a time to practice patience with God, with ourselves, with others. We're told to "be patient" as we wait for Christ to come again, as we wait for new life. Yet patience can be so hard. And, how often do you find it helpful to have someone else tell you to be patient? "Be patient kids, it isn't time to open presents yet." "Thank you for your patience, your call will be answered in the order it was received." "Oh, just have patience, it will all work out soon I'm sure." We rarely like to hear those and similar statements. Hearing the instruction to "be patient" can make us anything but. Patience doesn't come easily when we're eager for a joyful holiday, when we're estranged or separated from loved ones, when we're facing health struggles, when we can't see an end to all the demands, when justice and change is long delayed.

Even John the Baptist, the great prophet, seems to struggle with patience in our Gospel reading today. He sends a message to Jesus from his prison cell asking, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" John has spent his life preparing the way for Jesus to come and make everything right. But now the oppressive ruler Herod has thrown John into prison and Jesus hasn't done anything about it. John seems to want to know why Jesus isn't living up to his expectations. "Are you the one Jesus, and if so, why don't you do something." John gives voice to the questions that permeate much of our waiting. When will things get better? Why must we still wait? How long, O Lord? These are important faith questions expressed in the Psalms, the prophets, and the church - especially in Advent.

Asking them doesn't mean we're impatient and unfaithful; it means we're doing what the church does together - questioning, lamenting, searching and praying. As we do this, we find what we need to be patient. It's not that all our expectations are met, all our questions answered. Instead, through prayer, the community and the Advent scriptures, our eyes are lifted up from a focus on our own expectations to a larger picture of what God is doing.

So often when we have to wait, we get fixated on what we think will make everything better: if only they would call, if I could just get a break, if we could have a peaceful Christmas or a more harmonious country. We focus so much on our expectations and begin to think they are our only hope. When they are met slowly or not all, we despair. Yet in Advent we see that God is more about transformation than meeting expectations. God is in this for the long game rather than the quick fix. God is about waters breaking forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert, about the eyes of the blind being opened, and the tongues of the speechless singing for joy. God is bringing new life for each of us and all of creation.

Our second reading today tells us that we are called to be farmers, cultivating the fields where this new life will take root and grow. The same reading that begins, "Be patient, therefore ..." doesn't just tell us to be patient. It also gives us the image of a farmer as an example of how to wait with patience and hope. Farmers don't passively wait for things to meet their expectations. They labor and work and watch and wait for the growth that is beyond their control. This is how we're called to work and wait for the new life God is bringing. We are to plant and tend seeds of hope. We are to watch for signs of life and nurture them as they appear. We are to wait expectantly, keeping our eyes lifted to the horizon rather than fixated on our small plot of ground.

Patience is hard, waiting is hard. Yet in Advent we are given what we need for waiting. We are given a community - a community that knows how to lament and question and struggle together as we wait. We are given visions that help to lift our vision and expand our horizons. And we are given examples of how to wait actively, with hope, like pregnant mothers laboring to birth new life, like farmers tending a field. These gifts transform all our waiting for we wait as people with a hope beyond expectation, and hope does not disappoint.

Thanks be to God.