

# Sermon for Sunday, December 15, 2019 - "Hope Beyond Expectation"

Third Sunday of Advent  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Decorah, Iowa  
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[Click here to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

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

Advent is the season of waiting. It's a time to practice patience with God, with ourselves, with others. In Advent scriptures, like our second reading today, we're told "be patient" as we wait for Christ to come and make all things new.

Yet patience does not come easily. And, how often do you find it helpful to have someone else tell you to be patient? "Be patient kids, it's not time for presents yet." "Thank you for your patience, your call will be answered in the order it was received." "Oh, just be patient, it will all work out soon, I'm sure." Hearing the instruction to "be patient" can make us anything but.

Patience is especially hard when we're longing for a joyful holiday, when we're estranged or separated from loved ones or facing health struggles, when we can't see an end to all the demands, when justice and change are 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, Herod has thrown John into prison and Jesus hasn't done anything about it.

John has been expecting Jesus to bring in God's kingdom as a direct challenge to the oppressive Roman Empire - expecting him to come and destroy Rome and puppet leaders like Herod that Rome has set up in Jerusalem.

Instead, Jesus shows up and cares for the blind, the lame, the lepers, the deaf and the poor. These are not the movers and shakers of the day. These are not the people who are going to topple

Rome. Why is Jesus focused on them? Why isn't Jesus coming to help John?

So John asks, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another? 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 Christian worship - 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, praying.

Asking these questions draws us more deeply into a relationship with God who gives us what we need to wait with patience and hope. It's not that all our expectations are met, all our questions answered. Instead, through seeking, lamenting, worship and prayer, our attention is drawn away from our own narrow expectations and towards what God is doing in the world.

So often when we have to wait, we get fixated on what we think will make everything better: If I could finally get a break, if we could just have a peaceful Christmas or a more harmonious country, if only my prayers were answered and a miracle happened. We focus so much on our expectations and begin to think they are our only hope. When they are met slowly or not at all, we despair.

Yet in worship and prayer, we are shown that our hope is in God, not in things working out as we envisioned. We're shown 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 the kingdom of heaven breaking in- to our world in ways that we don't expect and often don't recognize.

God's kingdom comes in Jesus in subversive, undercover ways. God's power is revealed in weakness and mercy. God has chosen to be present in places of need and vulnerability: in Jesus born in a manger, in Jesus who brought good news to the downtrodden, in Jesus who emptied himself on the cross.

We meet Jesus in the midst of our own brokenness and need as we lament and question and struggle. We meet him in bread broken and wine poured out, we meet him among those the world considers last and least, and in the wilderness places of our world. Jesus comes in these unexpected ways to shape us into people who can yearn and hope and work for God's kingdom to come on earth - for that future glimpsed in our first reading today.

In God's promised future, all the wilderness of this world will flourish with new life. We and all of creation will obtain joy and gladness; sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

In the meantime as we wait, God calls us to be like farmers cultivating the fields where 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 harvest, they tend to the growth, but know full well that the growth is beyond their control.

This is how we're called to work and wait for the future 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 attentively, keeping our eyes lifted to the horizon rather than fixed 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 Jesus' presence in bread and wine, word and song. We are drawn into a community that

knows how to lament, question, and struggle together as we wait. We are given visions of God's promised future that lift up our eyes and expand our horizons. And, we are given examples of how to wait actively with hope like a pregnant mother 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. We wait for Christ Jesus, the hope of all the earth.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.