

December 6, 2015

“What Are We Waiting For?”

[Advent 2C: Communion: GN: Immanuel Presbyterian Church, Los Angeles, California]  
Zephaniah 3.14-17

Philippians 1.3-11

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Advent is a time of waiting. But what are we waiting for? We don't dare ask our kids or grandkids for what or for whom? Christmas! Santa Claus! A new doll, a computer game, and so on. If we say, “We're waiting for Jesus,” we may be reminded by them, “But you told us he was already here!” And so he is. He's here, right now. And like Elizabeth Barrett Browning speaking of love, let us count the ways. Jesus is here in our worship, in song and scripture, sermon and sacrament, and in us, the faithful, the church.

We praise Christ's presence in our hymns and songs. The word of scripture is the Word, *ὁ λόγος*, as Jesus is so designated in John's gospel, the Word of God speaking to us, conveying love and grace, mercy and forgiveness, and he's proclaimed in the sermon as well. Certainly Jesus is present in the sacraments, in the Lord's Supper we celebrate today. It's his meal in which he promises to be with us, to sustain and bind us to him and to one another. Yet there's more.

Christ is also here in our neighbor. And our neighbors, as we've already told our kids, are more than just the folks next door. Christ is especially present in the one who's hungry whom we feed, the homeless whom we shelter, the sick whom we help heal, the loveless or lonely whom we visit or befriend. For God is love and where love is God is—love given and love received. Jesus is also here in one more place. Again we tell our children, Christ is within us. The church is a building we call God's house but each of us is really a house of God or what St. Paul calls the temple of the Holy Spirit. Yes, Jesus, is already here. We may remember the saying of the 17<sup>th</sup> century mystic Angelus Silesius, “God is at home. It is we who have gone out for a walk!”

So what are we waiting for in Advent if Jesus is already here? For an anniversary, a birthday party, a celebration of when Christ first came in the flesh—

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into our flesh, into our world? Yes, but more needs to be said: we're waiting for a fresh coming of Christ into our lives, to be spiritually renewed. Paul writes today in a way that shows he knows Jesus is present now but is still to come.

Paul speaks to his beloved Philippians and says he longs for them with the very love of Christ Jesus. Yet he also speaks of "the day of Christ," a future day when Christ returns and all things will be complete. This is similar to what he says in I Corinthians (13.12) that "now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face." Or then with clarity—and in glory—a glory that now we can only dimly perceive.

On that day when all things are complete, on the day of Christ Jesus Paul speaks of, the day Christ returns to us, we will remember the words in our lesson from Zephaniah, "Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! The Holy One has taken away the judgments against you and has turned away your enemies. The sovereign of Israel, the Holy One, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more."

"You shall fear disaster no more." Israel knew a lot about disasters. Zephaniah was a prophet during the reign of King Josiah of Judah in the second half of the 600s B.C. Over the centuries ancient Israel had been divided into two kingdoms, Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Then Assyria, at that time the great power in the Ancient Near East, had destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel and now forces Judah, which continues the traditions of Israel of old, to cede territory, pay tribute and adopt Assyrian customs and practices.

Zephaniah's prophecies begin at a time when a scroll of the book of Deuteronomy is found during the renovations Josiah has had made in the Temple. Upon reading it Josiah then initiates a series of religious and social reforms. Here we have the rare situation in the long history of Israel where prophet and monarch

are working toward the same goals according to the word of God.

Zephaniah decries injustice and corruption in Judah, the neglect of the poor and the arrogance of the wealthy. He condemns Judah's enemy, Assyria, and other nations that take advantage of her weakness. He declares that "the day of the Lord is at hand," when the sins of the nation and its people and all Judah's enemies will face divine judgment and the punishing wrath of God.

While "the day of the Lord" is a time of judgment, Zephaniah declares it is also a day of salvation when the Holy One will be with God's people, transforming and saving them. Our lesson today is a song of rejoicing and hope and it concludes, "you shall fear disaster no more." We're told that the Holy One rejoices with God's people and leads them in a joyous procession, promising in the very last words of prophecy, "I [will] restore your fortunes before your the eyes." Those who were once weeping will now rejoice! And Zephaniah's words now sound like those we would associate with Paul's "day of Christ!"

"You shall fear disaster no more." Life is certainly not all weeping but, at the same time, life today seems to involve more than the trials and many woes that cause us to weep. Paris, Mali, Colorado Springs, San Bernadino . . . The list of disasters and tragedies, of terrorism and shootings seems endless and the simple reading of place names now brings horror, disbelief and grief to mind. We can easily imagine God weeping on almost any day over a world where people hate and destroy each other—and often in the name of a grotesque distortion of an historic faith. While God does weep over human tragedy, God also rejoices with people who dance in the streets with exultation!

The faith of Israel and of Jews today is the parent of Christianity. The Hebrew prophets prepared the way for the coming of Christ. At a point in history, in the fifteenth year in the reign of Tiberius Caesar, the last of the prophets comes

on like a trumpet blast and tell us that the long awaited one is at hand. John the Baptist proclaims that the promised day of the Lord is right on our Advent doorstep! Get ready! he declares. “Prepare the way for the Lord, clear a straight path for him. Every valley shall be filled in, and every mountain and hill shall be leveled, winding paths shall be straightened, and rough ways made smooth; and all humankind shall see God’s salvation (Luke 3.2b-6).” Unlike the Hebrew prophets who declare it’s coming, John proclaims that the day of the Lord has come!

And Jesus comes, Immanuel comes into that incredible interval in time that the Church has used to divide all human history, those handful of years in which Christ—God with us—lives our life, a human life with all its joys and sorrows, fulfillments and frustrations, hopes and disappointments, life in its fullest and death in its finality. Yet it’s only with the resurrection when Jesus defeats our final, ultimate enemy, death, that the coming of Christ, the fulfillment of the long Advent of human hope, makes a difference!

If we read through the letters of Paul we discover he’s a person of many moods. We’re accustomed to them, where he’s sometimes lecturing, or occasionally the stern pastor upset that his beloved people have forgotten so soon what he’s taught them—like Moses and the prophets with Israel!—forgotten about communion as a sharing or Jesus’ insistence on the cross as part of discipleship, about humility and servanthood as being the key qualities of his disciples—the first shall be last and the last shall be first and Jesus having come to serve us so we may serve one another and so on.

But look at the image of Paul in our lesson today. Now we see him as “*el buen Pastor*,” the good pastor, loving the people with whom he has labored and for whom he prays from his prison cell in Rome where he writes his letter. What is Paul’s prayer? “That your love may overflow more and more, with knowledge and

full insight to help you determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.”

Paul is insightful here. We may study the Bible and read theology all of our lives, but it’s that other school—the school of life, or of life itself—that finally gives us the conviction that Jesus and the Gospel do, indeed, give us the faith we seek, the faith that gives us hope, faith that enables us to carry on, despite the disasters life brings us. Paul also prays that the faithful in Philippi, and we, will learn to value the things that really matter.

To learn to value the things that really matter. This should be our Advent hope as well—our personal hope and our common hope—as we prepare to celebrate Christ’s coming and birth once more and anticipate his coming again. But, still, what are we waiting for? Our answer may focus on the beauty and wonder of Christ’s birth and it may remind us that he will come again, descending in power and glory. What really matters, though, is what we say to our children who ask the innocent but fundamental questions, what we truly believe ourselves and, indeed, what we truly long for in why we wait: the presence that really matters—the renewed presence of Christ right now, right here among us.

Behold, Immanuel, God is with us, with us in the Spirit, with us in the sacrament, with us in the church, here in each of us, here in all of us together, and here in our neighbor! What are we waiting for? In Christ, God is here!

*AMEN!*