

*Hope for Those Who Wait*

First Sunday of Advent

December 1, 2013

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Texts:       Isaiah 2.-15;  
              Psalm 122;  
              Romans 13.11-14;  
              Matthew 24.36-44

There has been great anticipation in our home for the season of Advent to begin. We picked up our Advent devotional last Sunday and it has been sitting on our table taunting eager children. Can we start today? No six more days until Advent. Let's get the Advent wreath out. Can we light a candle? Oh there's no question that for children part of the allure is all of the anticipation of Christmas and presents that come on the other side of all this waiting. But as I have listened to the Advent chatter in our household and around these halls it isn't all about the presents. Even the children understand that this season has its own character - its own gifts for us.

I shared a piece a friend of mine wrote for Advent at a ministry meeting recently. In it she reflects on what she learned about Advent from the experience of losing her sister as a teenager just nine days before Christmas. There is an image in her piece that captures for me one dimension of the character of this season. It has to do with hope and with waiting. She writes: "One vivid memory I hold about the time of my sister's dying is the memory of kneeling on the living room couch with my little brothers, all of us with our noses pressed up against the cold picture window, watching in the dark for the headlights that would signal our parents return from the hospital with news about our sister."

That image of sitting side by side peering into the darkness watching for light that you know will come and hoping for some good news....that is a part of what the season of Advent holds for us. On the Reign of Christ Sunday, last week, we stood together in this sanctuary and we affirmed with the faithful of all time that in Christ ALL things hold together. We make that claim in faith -- it is a conviction of things unseen. So much of

our lived experience points in completely the opposite direction. We can call to mind the original goodness and beauty of creation. We've seen enough glimpses to imagine that goodness and that beauty. There are moments when the reign of Christ breaks in and reveals itself. But more often than not what we can trace in our lives – what we see – what we can point to and touch is the unraveling of creation...the breaking of trust, the falling apart of carefully laid plans, the breath taking, heart stopping fear when it looks like no one and nothing is being held together at all. As my friend wrote in her piece, ours is an "Advent-shaped life" where we sometimes stare into total darkness and then out of a sense of hope (maybe faith too but mostly hope) we light a candle and watch and wait for more light to gather.

The texts before us today guide us whenever we find ourselves in Advent; whenever we find ourselves in the dark waiting, watching, longing for light. The passage from Isaiah gives us some clues about where the light will ultimately lead us: into a community where diverse people from all over come together to learn the ways of God, to walk together in the paths of God, and for peace to become so deeply engrained in our way of life that we no longer need the weapons of war. It's a beautiful sentiment isn't? But it isn't now. It isn't here. So how does this lovely but unrealistic prophetic passage guide us for where we live and what we face right now?

This passage comes from the book of Isaiah; a remarkable book that initially spoke to the Hebrew people over several hundred years of history. And has been spoken and recorded and recited and sung for hundreds, thousands of years since. Walter Brueggemann in the introduction to his commentary on Isaiah claims that prophetic literature is best understood as "a re-description of the public process of history through which the purposes of (God) are given in human utterances."<sup>1</sup> In other words, the prophet takes what is happening, or what is about to happen, and retells that history from the perspective of God's purposes. In looking back and in current assessment, the prophet often speaks in terms of judgment. Looking forward, the prophet often speaks in terms of hope. What's interesting to note here is that in the course of just two chapters, the

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998, pg. 2.

prophet has done both. The headings for the opening chapter of Isaiah are “The Wickedness of Judah” and “The Degenerate City” and then this passage “The Future House of God”. You begin to recognize as you move through this prophecy, we aren’t dealing solely in linear time.

We often talk in terms of fulfillment when it comes to prophecy. There is a great deal of interest for the writer of Matthew, for instance, to show how the birth of Jesus is the fulfillment of these ancient hopes for a Messiah. We read these prophecies today and recognize that we are still waiting for their fulfillment. That is the strange space of Advent. We aren’t waiting for the birth of Christ. That happened long ago. But we are still waiting. Christ has come but the reign of Christ is not yet fully here.

I was helped this week by a meditation I read on this whole idea of fulfillment.<sup>2</sup> As you read through the gospels you realize that the birth of Jesus is not the end. Each stage of his life and ministry brings another level of fulfillment, so does his death, and his resurrection, as do the gift of the Spirit and the formation of the church, each new chapter bringing another level of fulfillment. And still the fulfillment is unfolding to this very day.

Where is the hope for those who wait? Hope is found as we sit side by side looking out into the darkness watching for the light that we know will come. Hope grows in the telling and retelling of the biblical story and our stories with an ear for where God’s purposes are being fulfilled. Sometimes we have cautionary tales to tell, stories of judgment and failure; stories of being picked up and redirected onto a new path. Sometimes we have astonishing stories to tell of courage and healing, of insight and joy.

Hope was palpable in this sanctuary on Wednesday night, during our Thanksgiving Eve service. People who walked through all kinds of dark places this past year and some through incredible light, but all sharing their gratitude for the places where God’s purposes and grace were found.

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Turley, and Jana Norman *Awaken: The Art of Imaginative Preaching, ACE 2013-2014, Year A* (Grove Heights, MN: Logos Productions, 2013, pg. 2.

Prayer after prayer after prayer was pointing all of us toward the light of Christ - the presence of God among us.

So maybe a better question for us in Advent is not *when* the promises of God will finally be fulfilled. Maybe a better question is the one I read in this meditation: "How are we fulfilling - present tense, right now - the dreams and visions of old?"<sup>3</sup>

Find a place where a little bit of light is shining and go walk in it.

That is where we will find some hope.

As the season of Advent begins, "Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord."

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Turley, and Jana Norman *Awaken: The Art of Imaginative Preaching, ACE 2013-2014, Year A* (Grove Heights, MN: Logos Productions, 2013, pg. 2