11-28/29-20 What Are We Waiting For? Rev. Amy Haines

Isaiah 40:1-11

How many times and in how many places have you eagerly waited for a loved one to arrive?

Maybe you were hanging out in baggage claim at the airport, wondering how long it takes for a full plane to disembark. Maybe you were pacing in the maternity ward waiting room, excited to see if the latest family member would be a boy or a girl. Maybe you were a kid watching out the front window for Grandma’s car to pull in the driveway. Maybe you were a parent listening for the car door of a teenager returning home from a date.

Three times in the past sixteen years Ken and I spent Thanksgiving at home because we were eagerly waiting for our children to be born. As we waited, we prepared the nursery and made plans for maternity coverage at the church. We picked out names and rested, knowing our lives were about to change again. That our waiting happened during the church season of Advent gave new meaning to that season.

In Advent, the four weeks leading up to Christmas, we are called to prepare ourselves for the arrival of Christ at Christmas.

Too often, however, we find ourselves preparing for Christmas more than preparing for Christ. We decorate. We bake. We party. We shop. By Christmas Eve, we are exhausted from always being on the go.

In order to prepare for the arrival of Christ at Christmas, Advent invites us to a season of expectant waiting. Advent invites us to pause, to ponder, and to prepare for the One whom we are waiting for.

This type of waiting is hopeful and expectant, not wishful thinking or passive resignation.

This type of waiting is active, anticipating what is still to come.

Yet this waiting is not easy. We are impatient people. We want immediate results. We want instant action. We want to clearly hear the Word of God spoken to us. We don’t want to dwell in mystery and uncertainty.

How often are we like Abraham, who, impatient for God’s promises to be fulfilled, tried to take matters into his own hands? How often are we like Thomas, who was a pragmatist with little patience with mystery and miracle?

Vickie Schad once shared her impatience waiting on a tree to bloom. She wrote:

…A few years ago I bought a red flowering crabapple tree and carefully planted it in our yard.

But it didn’t exactly thrive – in fact, one by one the leaves started dropping off!

My husband failed to see the urgency of the situation. “Give it a little time,” he murmured.

The next spring it did a little better – it had swelled buds and leaves, but no flowers.

“That does it! I’m getting rid of the flowering crabapple!” I sputtered.

Jim surveyed the scraggly branches.

“Maybe this isn’t the flowering kind. Some of ’em never blossom, you know.”

“But the tag says: Flowering, Crabapple, Red!”

The third spring came. Still no red flowers. But this time Jim took me outside and showed me some tiny clusters of red balls nestled in among the leaves.

“Blossoms?” I asked, incredulous.

“Blossoms!” he said.

Now, as I watch the little red tree become brilliant with color, it reminds me of how impatient I can be with other things in my life.

-Vickie Schad, preaching.com:patience

Our human nature, combined with the pace of our culture, doesn’t like to wait. Yet, every Advent, God invites us to wait, and in the waiting, to reflect on and listen anew for God’s good news at Christmas.

The good news that the baby born in the manger is God’s response to the cries of God’s people.

The good news that the baby born in the manger is Emmanuel, God with us.

The good news that the baby born in the manger grew up to show us the ways of God as well as offer us the gift of salvation and the promise of eternal life.

The good news that the baby born in the manger will one day return, to fully usher in God’s kingdom here on earth.

When we wait in the season of Advent, we are waiting for God’s promises to be fulfilled.

And we are not the first to wait, nor the last to see those promises fulfilled.

Between 598-587 BCE, the people of Israel were conquered by the Babylonians, Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed, and the brightest and best were carted off to exile in Babylon.

For fifty years, the people of God waited on God to free them. They struggled to cling to hope.

They struggled to cling to faith. They struggled to believe that God was still with them.

In the book of Isaiah, the first 39 chapters are the prophets’ words of judgment and exile.

He reminded the people of God that the exile was punishment for their sins, especially the sin of turning away from Almighty God. They had been impatient with God’s ways, and desired their own ways. The consequences of their sin included the destruction of Jerusalem,

demolition of the Temple, and the agony of the exile. The leaders of the Jews grew weary of listening to Isaiah’s prophecies of doom and gloom. They yearned for God to free them, to save them, to offer them a new start, yet with every year that passed, in every year they waited, their hope dimmed.

Then, the miraculous occurred. Isaiah’s hope aligned with the promises offered by the Persian king Cyrus, who overthrew the Babylonian empire in 539 BCE. A year after his conquest,

the King encouraged any Jews who were living away from the Promised Land to return home to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple.

The prophets of Israel saw God’s hand in Cyrus’ invitation. Beginning with the 40th chapter in the Book of Isaiah, the prophet now offered hope instead of doom. Comfort instead of judgment.

Our passage today is a good word from the Lord, a word of reassurance and restoration.

Just in these 11 verses there are four different prophecies of hope offered to people waiting in exile.

The first prophecy is a word of comfort. They are not forgotten and their sin has been forgiven.

This is not the comfort of a lazy boy or the comfort of good food, but the comfort of trust in God’s power to do what God says God will do. God still cares for them! God has forgiven their sins, and given them hope for a new future!

The second prophecy is a call to active waiting. They were to prepare the way of the Lord.

A return from exile would take time. The restoration of Jerusalem would take generations to complete. In the meantime, they were to prepare their hearts and minds for the changes that were to come.

The third prophecy is a word of reassurance. Even as people and nations and seasons come and go, the word of God will endure forever. God’s promises will be fulfilled. Maybe not in the time they expect, but they could trust God’s word and God’s timing.

The final prophecy is a cry of victory. God was still with them, caring for them as a shepherd cares for his sheep. God would restore Jerusalem, and continue to be present with them.

This was good news to be shouted from the mountaintop.

These prophecies were hope offered to a people long tired of waiting. They were assured that their sins were forgiven, God was still with them, and restoration was a promise being fulfilled.

These prophecies did not negate the reality surrounding them. They were returning to a community literally in ruins. They were a remnant of what they used to be.

Yet they were still God’s people. And God’s people live by hope that what God says will be fulfilled.

This Advent, we, too, may feel like a people in exile. Nothing is as it has been or ought to be.

We miss seeing loved ones and friends. We miss gathering together as the body of Christ.

We struggle to see God in our midst. We struggle to believe the promises of God.

We wait on a vaccine to combat this virus. We wait on a return to civility to combat the divisive around us. We wait on a revival that calls all people to God’s love through Christ.

Yet even in our waiting, we are called to follow our ancestors and live by hope, faith and trust.

When our faith ancestors found hope, they remembered God’s faithfulness to countless generations. They trusted in God’s presence in times of despair as well as times of joy.

They clung to God’s promises of redeeming grace. When they opened themselves to hope,

they oriented themselves to what God wanted to do with their lives. No matter what happened to their land, they recognized that their home was beyond a specific location; rather, their home was in a specific relationship, with God and God alone.

God still yearns to comfort us today. God still seeks to remind us through the gift of Jesus that we are not alone; we are loved, our sins are forgiven, and we are restored for new life.

God still offers us the gift of God’s Word. Yes, the seasons change. The cycle of life and death and life after death continues. But God’s Word is forever. Reminding us of who and whose we are. Inviting us to an eternal relationship with God, through faith in God’s Son Jesus.

God still offers us hope for the future. God is not done with our world yet! God is still restoring the church, and through the church, restoring the world around us. We have no idea what the future looks like, but we can trust God will still be fulfilling God’s promises. We can trust that God is shaping us now for the new future ahead.

Even in this season of Advent, God still calls us to active waiting. As we wait, may we prepare our hearts and minds. May we delve deeper into God’s word, and lift up our world in earnest prayer. May we find the ways we can intentionally serve our neighbors, and reach out by phone to those around us.

Waiting is not passive. Waiting is a time of preparation for what is yet to come.

Yet, as Lewis B. Smedes once said, “Waiting is the hardest work of hope.”

--thepastorsworkshop.com: hope

May we live by hope as we move into this Advent season. May we journey through Advent

open to what God has to teach us in this season. May we recognize that the One we are waiting for is God’s gift for each and every one of us.

There is good news in this Advent season, and good news at Christmas! Let us journey forth in faith, in hope, and trust.

May it be so. Amen.