

10th December 2017
Smith

Preacher: Jennifer

Hymns: 169 Come thou long expected Jesus
88 The holly and the ivy (vs. 1-3)
251 Jesus Christ is waiting
172 Hills of the north rejoice

Readings: Isaiah 40.1-11
Mark 1.1-8

Prayer

Holy God, break your word among us as bread for the feeding of our souls. And may the words of my lips and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, o Lord our strength and our redeemer.

Last week on the first Sunday of Advent we reflected on what it is to wait, to watch, to hope – not only for Jesus' birth, but for his coming in our hearts and his coming in judgement in our world, which is nothing more than the full mercy of God, tearing open the heavens. Remember Isaiah's words? Oh how I long for you to tear open the heavens?

How appropriate that today we should hear of John the baptiser in the wilderness, aligning himself with that other command of Isaiah, Comfort my people, in the wilderness prepare a way for God, get up to a high place and shout – the shepherd is come to feed his flock, to gather the young lambs in his arms and gently to lead the parents with young lambs.

And like John, we too have baptised with water. Abigail Nana, one of the small lambs and an inheritor of that promise, with her family.

We are never more connected to the call of John 'prepare the way' than we are in the things we have done today.

While we are waiting. Today a few gentle reflections on waiting – to help us each hear John the Baptist's words and speak the words of comfort our world so desperately needs. We need.

Because friends, in the last week it feels to me as if our public economy, our shared common life, has gone into overdrive with Christmas. Maybe this is a sign of my age, but it feels earlier and earlier to me, the frenzy of buying and seeking, getting and giving. How many trees, how many meters of tinsel manufactured in how many factories by how many hands?

And part of me loves it, the whirl of energy and celebration.

And part of me knows that just under the cheer, at the corner of our public eye is a loneliness – a longing for things that matter and a disquiet about all that is not right.

I observe, that religious or not, there is in our public life yet a deep longing for new life, a grief that again, this year, we are in the state we are in, and tinsel will not cover the iniquity of our world, would that it did.

The words of Isaiah here come from what appears in the middle of the prophet as collected in our Bible, but they come after a break in the text - written to the people who had been taken into exile in Babylon – who had lost everything and were divided from their home and culture.

I think the longing at the corner of the eye of our public life which, in part, drives our public Christmas frenzy is a contemporary face of that exile.

We are a people cut off from our first purpose to be neighbours to one another, religious or not, we are a people seeking restoration – home, belonging. This is why we all weep over those Christmas TV adverts that compete to pull our heartstrings – they speak to this longing, to the loneliness that lurks just out of sight!

While we are waiting.

I have an admission: I don't much LIKE waiting.

I don't much like waiting, because waiting is often about not having something we desperately want or need. How many of us are waiting to heal? Waiting for a doctor's appointment, or a sentence to finally be spent, a debt finally to be paid off? How many of us are waiting to fall in love, or waiting for an answer to a situation that seems all closed doors and difficulty?

The problem with waiting it is not just that we are impatient – some of us are, some are not – but that if you are poor, broken hearted, imprisoned in

darkness, if you are mourning – you are in a situation of pain needing release. Waiting without a promise of relief is not fun.

But we have a promise. And yes, that does not make waiting easier, but it changes it - knowing your someone has finally set off from work to come see you, and will be with you soon, creates a different kind of waiting than not knowing if anyone will even notice whether your curtains are open or shut today – waiting with promise can counteract doubt, fear – punctures public anxiety.

And this too in communities of people – waiting without real hope can lead to great friction and calamity, people played against one another and suspicious of each difference, as if we lived in a world defined by shortage rather than abundance.

Waiting is a creative, also a dangerous time when stories get re-told and we so need good news – folk can turn nasty with pressure for results that end the waiting – be it Brexit agreement or homeland security, or a President waiting to find out how far FBI investigations will reach, taking actions to distract the world and please his base – this week has not been a week of tender speaking to Jerusalem.

I saw an advert that caught my eye, in my facebook feed this past week. It was for a bank, and in the end, it was selling loans. Or rather, selling the mindset of risk and excitement that makes someone like me take out a loan –

‘Don’t Wait!’ It called – it capitalised on the impatience, the disquiet of this season to appeal to adults who had put off a dream – don’t wait to start your cake decorating business, or learn to play the base guitar, or whatever – take our loan and jump the queue!

Waiting is hard, there is little space for it in our public culture.

So what are we to do, while we are waiting?

Well, listen to Isaiah, listen to John – prepare the way of the Lord, in the wilderness make a path for our God!

We are called to be active in waiting, to share the promise. Fight anxiety and despair at every turning, from the heart of the wilderness! What we do while waiting builds the kingdom: prepare the way of the Lord calls the baptiser from across the centuries. Isaiah’s command ‘comfort, comfort the people’ was not a suggestion.

While we are waiting.

One of the best examples of waiting I've seen was done by a nurse who came to visit a doctor friend of mine, after my friend had left for the day.

This was in 2001, in the Methodist Church leprosy colony, outside of a small town called Uzuakoli, in rural south eastern Nigeria. My doctor friend would leave at 7 each day to travel some 30 Km to a tiny hospital which was started with money from the Nigerian Health Care Project – now this tiny hospital, the Royal Cross, is a thriving complex with nursing school, public health, surgery and the rest – your church has done this while we're all waiting to figure out what next.

This particular morning my friend had been gone about half an hour when the hospital nurse arrived, having spent the better part of a week's wages travelling in the other direction on her rest day to visit.

I told her I was sorry, but Jill wouldn't be back until after dark, and I myself was on my way to work.

I wasn't sure she'd understood me correctly: it was half seven in the morning and my friend wouldn't return for some 12 hours or more. But no, she hadn't misunderstood: she settled in and began to wait.

A few minutes later, a man came to see me – distressed - he and his wife were both long time leprosy sufferers: he had lived in this colony, a hovel, since before the Civil war in the late 60s and early seventies. The project I was working on was resettling people in their home villages – a full work of healing – But he was terrified that he and his wife would be thrown out of the home he knew, humble as it was – and his wife was too old and weak to travel – that he would have to leave her. He was in agonies of distress, begging me not to do this. Onyechi calmed him – she had the words to comfort, to reassure that he and his wife were NOT to be thrown out of their home, nor separated.

The morning went on. While she waited, she mediated a fight between a dog and a rather disgruntled chicken, dressed the foot of a nine year old boy who should have been at school, but was hoeing cassava barefoot, and cleaned my house from top to bottom over my protestations.

During the afternoon a group of teenaged girls who were my regular visitors dropped in – supposedly to do homework - Onyechi taught them two songs and how make a particularly lovely pattern of braids, (whenever I came back in the room they'd quickly open books) and then came proudly on a series of calls I thought it wise to make while she was there.

The thing was, she was never busy – she was not just frenetic or trying to fill up her day – she was clear always that she was waiting, and told everyone all day that was what she was doing. Comfort my people, prepare a path in the wilderness for God's coming.

The day passed, and finally my doctor friend came home.

Onyechi threw herself joyfully into my surprised friend's arms. 'I have been so patiently waiting,' she said.

While we are waiting. Waiting is hard work – it often takes us into the wilderness places of our hearts, and of our world – the most inauspicious desert places. Waiting is a time of creativity, can be a dangerous time, especially for vulnerable people like that older man and his wife - as for a community or a nation, when the collective anxiety whipped up by shouting headlines trumps tender speech and we are counselled to divide and protect ourselves - and words of comfort are lost in the rush.

I have not found there to be short cuts through the wilderness, however early we put up the tinsel, there is never a year when the baby Jesus will finally come in a palace instead of a stable. But friends he is coming. And we have a God who will lead us in the wilderness and makes the desert bloom.

So go boldly today into our city, and your part of it - Prepare the way of the Lord! Comfort the people. Let us walk and work while we wait, as if each other's lives depended on it. They do.

Because Jesus waits on us, waits for us to dare to live our lives as if we truly were the beloved children of God, small lambs gathered in the arms of our shepherd.