

Wait with Hope
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“Wait With Hope” Pilgrim Church UCC, November 29, 2015, Advent 1 (Luke 21:25-36)

A few weeks ago I attended the first two services at Glastonbury Abbey (a Benedictine Monastery) in Hingham. Vigils begins at 6:30 AM and Lauds follows at 7:45. Now it's hard for me to concentrate in the morning—my thoughts are all over the place. On that Friday morning they ranged from: did I actually turn off the coffee maker to is that monk wearing crocs right now? Being at the Abbey is wonderful because observing set times of prayer with other Christians can help leave distractions behind to be centered in God—even if it takes work to get there! Being in the present moment may come naturally to some of us and for others it can be a real struggle. So knowing spiritual practices that bring me back to the present and to God with us in the present can make all the difference in living out one's Christian faith.

Now it's the First Sunday of Advent. Advent is about being centered in this Liturgical Season of hopeful waiting for the birth of Jesus Christ into our midst and all that his birth means. Advent is about pausing and not sprinting ahead to Christmas. No matter what you hear on the radio or the Christmas specials you see on TV or Santa hanging out at the mall. Advent is about waiting and trusting in the promises of God.

How does one get centered in a season of waiting? Not easily. Our culture does not thrive on waiting, and certainly not waiting with any level of patience. If you're out with your people and someone asks a question that no one knows the answer to—someone is likely to take out their phone and turn to Google right away. If you pause for a few seconds when the light turns green around here—you're likely to have the person behind you laying on their horn. If you work in retail or other occupations—you may not even have all of Thanksgiving to be with those you love because Black Friday begins as early as Thursday afternoon. Even here at Pilgrim Church, we've sometimes heard from people who want to hear Christmas hymns in the middle of Advent. We'll relent and sing some on Advent 4 because Dan is much nicer than me. But the point is that we don't wait well as a culture. We want everything right now—instant gratification.

Though in some ways not waiting well is not just our modern culture, it's part of the human condition. Think back to the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. God tells them not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Everything else in this Garden is fair game. But don't go there, please, for your own well-being. And what do human beings do? Succumb to temptation and go for that very thing God told them was off-limits. Maybe if they had listened and actually waited, God would have taught them the knowledge of good and evil eventually. We don't need to interpret Genesis literally to understand that it's a timeless story about how human beings operate. If you tell us not to do something, we want to do that very thing you just told us not to do.

Let's say that beautiful Christmas Cookies are set out during coffee hour and we're told eat anything you'd like but not that one special plate of cookies over on that table. Won't those be the Christmas Cookies we probably want to eat the most, especially after you just told us not to? Sometimes people have trouble with authority, we're stubborn, we think that we know best, we want instant gratification, and we'll want to do the very thing that we're told not to do. I'm not convinced that it's just modern people who are that way—people are that way.

Human beings struggle with waiting. We want that cookie and to sing those Christmas hymns in the middle of Advent and to possess those Black Friday specials and to get where we need to go as quickly as possible and we want an answer to our questions right now. We're just not very good at waiting, and that's why Advent is so fantastic. Waiting is hard, and waiting can be important and character-building in the end. So thankfully we have a couple weeks before Christmas to explore the spiritual discipline of waiting and trusting in God as we wait. It's not easy, but it's good for us.

This season of waiting begins with apocalyptic readings—showing us a potential future of chaos, destruction, and judgment. Imploring us to stay alert and be watchful as we wait for Jesus' return. This waiting for the return of Jesus was not always deliberate and patiently observed by the early Christians. In the Gospel of Luke, this passage is called the Little Apocalypse—the sun, moon, and stars showing signs, earthquakes, crazy seas, the heavens shaking, and then the Son of Man coming to judge the people. Luke wrote: “Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”[1] Except that generation of the early Christians (who may very well have taken the Little Apocalypse literally) waited and waited and waited some more. But this apocalyptic moment didn't come to pass as they may have hoped that it would.

Apocalyptic writing is best interpreted metaphorically. Jesus was, is, and shall ever be Emmanuel—God-with-Us. So this idea of the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory misses that the presence of Christ never disappeared. The world was full of injustice during Jesus' time period. The Romans occupied many lands and the people were oppressed and it seemed like the good folks never won. So perhaps in these later generations of believers it seemed that Christ was no longer present. Apocalyptic thinking was meant to give people who were waiting for justice some hope. God is on your side. Sometimes there are events that are beyond our comprehension or control, though ultimately we're not in charge. God keeps God's promises. Just hang on awhile longer and you will be vindicated one day.

The moral of the story is to be alert, keep awake, and be good people all the time because you don't know the day or the hour when Jesus will return (if it's going to happen like that anyway or not.) Luke writes: “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life.”[2] In other words, don't give up hope no matter how bleak life seems. Wait with hope and trust in God.

Looking around today, Luke's story still holds deep meaning and it's still difficult to heed these warnings. We can't let our hearts be so weighed down that we succumb to despair for the world. Though sometimes that's easier said than done. Maybe our job in these chaotic times is to wait with hope knowing that we do the best we can with what we have wherever we are to shine some light into our world with God's help.

Here's what waiting with hope can look like—there was a story about a mosque that got vandalized outside of Austin, Texas recently. When little Jack Swanson heard about what happened he got his piggy bank and scraped together \$20 that he personally delivered to the mosque's leaders to help with their clean-up. Faisal Naeem whose on the Islamic Center's Board received Jack's donation and said, “It's 20 bucks, but coming from Jack collecting his pennies, it's worth 20 million bucks to me and to our community . . . this gives me hope, because this means it's not one versus the other.”

Through social media, Muslims across America found out about Jack's kind donation. Arsalan Ifikhar (an international human rights lawyer) got in touch with Jack's mom who shared that he had been doing chores for months to save up for an iPad. Jack gave all that hard-earned money away to the vandalized mosque. A package arrived at the Swanson's home with a note

enclosed from Ifikhar that read: “Dear Jack, you had saved \$20 in your piggybank for an Apple iPad. But then a local Islamic mosque was vandalized. So you donated your \$20 to this local Texas mosque. Because of your amazing generosity & kind heart. Please enjoy this Apple iPad with our sincere thanks :-). Love The American Muslim Community.”[3]

How does one fight the darkness that is Islamophobia? By seeing one’s Muslim neighbors as human beings worthy of respect and standing in solidarity when people dehumanize and paint everyone with a broad brush. Perhaps we can also turn to the Jewish tradition to get at what waiting with hope looks like. In the words of the Talmud: “Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.”

It ends up that Christians are to be about God’s compassion now. It ends up that Christian discipleship is about living in these in-between times—aware of Jesus always with us and waiting for Jesus to help us truly mend the world. The world can be a scary, chaotic place. Though somehow, some way we’re not supposed to let our hearts be troubled, we’re not supposed to let our hearts be weighed down by the worries of this life. Why? Because Jesus is Emmanuel—God-With-Us. We’re not in this world alone and we can’t ever forget that. We can wait and we can watch with hope in our hearts and we can do justly now, love mercy now, and walk humbly now. This sentiment of compassion unites the religions of the world. Small acts of kindness do make a difference. \$20 can feel like \$20 million when that gift is given out of love. So let us wait and let us trust in God and let us shine some light into our world with everlasting hope in our hearts. Thanks be to God, and may it be so with us. Amen.

[1] Luke 21:32-33.

[2] Luke 21:34.

[3] Alison Lynch, “Little boy who donated his piggy bank to vandalized mosque gets special thank you from Muslim community,” November 20, 2015, <http://metro.co.uk/2015/11/20/little-boy-who-donated-piggy-bank-to-vanda...>