

Waiting...

Preacher: Rev. Karen E. Gale

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11:24

Waiting....

Jeremiah 33:14-16 and 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

It is the first Sunday of Advent. The first Sunday where we mark the month long countdown to Christmas.

The season where we prepare the way, we clean our hearts and our homes to welcome the Christ child in...

The season where we acknowledge the miraculous and wait in the ever lengthening darkness until the long awaited birth...

In this season we deliberately focus on waiting, resist the cultural stampede to worship Christmas rather than Christ, and prepare ourselves for a new reality to come forth.

But actually did you know that we are truly in Advent all the time? Every Sunday is an Advent Sunday. Or I suppose more properly we could say that we are between Advents.

We are between Christ's first coming and second coming, meaning we know the story of Christ's life on earth, we know of his ministry, healing, saving ways and call for social transformation, for justice and peace. And we await those things to become a reality in our world now. We are the "people who live between the first and second Advent."

Christ has come, Christ is coming, Christ will come again.

We are perpetually Advent people, waiting people.

Today we read from Jeremiah, a book that mostly consists of the prophet Jeremiah yelling at the people of the kingdom of Judah, half the original kingdom of David, to get their act together, to shape up and start behaving. "This is all your fault," is mostly what Jeremiah says.

But in a few verses he stops and says that righteousness, and a righteous ruler, is coming. There will be a leader who will bring justice and wholeness and healing. A shoot will come forth. Out of devastation, off an old stump, there will be a fresh start, a new beginning.

But in the meantime, the people were waiting. Waiting... waiting. Waiting while the wars raged on. Waiting while their lands were taken and tilled by others. Waiting while their families splintered and spread. While records and names and memories were lost. Waiting.

We know waiting.

I know you know waiting. Waiting for a diagnosis. Waiting for the return of a loved one in the armed forces. Waiting for a teenager to come home with the car. Waiting for a parent who is suffering to die. Waiting for the check to come. Waiting.

Waiting.

Waiting.

We know waiting. We are advent people even when we are not in advent.

We perpetually advent people, waiting on a Christ we know and yet wish for--a baby and a savior. A "not yet" and an "already been."

Waiting.

You at Pilgrim church know waiting. We are in the interim time, where you wait for a settled pastor to come. Waiting.

You all know waiting in your own lives, too. We all do.

I have known waiting in my life. Deep waiting. Desperate waiting. Waiting for the adoption lawyer to call. Waiting for my mom's breast cancer follow up. Waiting for a call to a church. Waiting with loved ones during surgeries.

Waiting.

It grows dark and we are waiting.

And the question is to my mind, what are we doing while we are waiting?

One of my touchstone books that reminds me of the reasons why I am a pastor and what it means in the deepest sense to serve in this way is the book *Here if You Need Me* by Kate Braestrup. She is a chaplain to the Maine warden service and she is called in when people are lost in the woods or there are accidents with snow mobiles or on the roads or when folks are waiting. Waiting for the news, good or bad, of what has happened to their loved one. Waiting.

She is very honest about how we don't always know what to do in these times, even those of us "professionals," and that often we just do the best we can, try our hardest to be conduits for the love and blessing of God in our limited way.

She writes of a time she was waiting with a brother whose sister was lost. The sister had not returned to pick her son up from daycare. She had been depressed, he said. Their parents had died when they were young. And the sister was in the midst of a divorce. It was hard and she had tried everything--therapy, medication, but was slipping, slipping.

Braestrup sat with the brother. They waited. And waited. Waiting.

The news came that the Maine wardens had found the sister, Betsy. And that she had died as a suicide by taking sleeping pills and then wandering off in the woods to lie down in the leaves as the rain fell and quietly slip into death.

The brother cracked and cried and finally asked Braestrup, "Can the church bury her?" She writes, "It actually took him a few rephrasings to get the idea across to me, so strange and alien was it to my way of thinking: "Would a Christian church do a funeral for a suicide?" he asked.

Betsy had gone to a service at a church the previous Sunday, the brother explained. He wasn't sure where but the gist of the pastor's message, according to Betsy, was that suicide was the one sin that God never, ever forgave.

"So it seems like . . . I mean, that the church wouldn't . . . might not let Betsy have a funeral there, or, you know, be buried in their graveyard." He looked carefully at his hands in his lap, as if he were ashamed.

Waiting.

"Um . . ." I said. And very carefully, after several deep and calming breaths: "I don't know that pastor personally. I don't know what he knows and doesn't know about severe clinical

depression. Which is what your sister died of.” But” I said. “Look around.” the brother peered through the rain-washed windshield, up the road toward the blurry outlines of half a dozen green trucks.

“The game wardens have been walking in the rain all day, walking through the woods in the freezing rain trying to find your sister. They would have walked all day tomorrow, walked in the cold rain the rest of the week, searching for Betsy, so they could bring her home to you. And if there is one thing I am sure of—one thing I am very, very sure of—it is that God is not less kind, less committed, or less merciful than a Maine game warden.” (Kate Braestrup, Here if You Need Me)

And with that she wrote down the names of some local pastors who would with compassion receive this family in its agony and give the young woman a loving burial and speak of a God of who can reach into our long suffering souls and bring peace.

That is what we do while we wait. In this in between time. We look for the lost in the cold rain. We sit with the wounded and offer hope and speak of a God of love. We reach out in our best imperfect way.

Paul writes in our other scripture text for today, “Now may our God and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you.”

Increase and abound in love for one another and for all. That is what we are to be doing in this Advent time. Increasing our love for one another and for all.

That is what you are to do here, Pilgrim church. Increase your love for one another in this community. Love, forgiveness, care, encouragement for one another.

And Increase your love for all--for those who are looking for this kind of place, for those who need our time and our good news. For those who need our helping hands and words of advocacy.

This is what we do while we waiting.

Waiting, Advent, is not passive. It is alive with fierce hope. That light will come in the darkness. Meanwhile, we wait with love abounding. Amen.