

THE PEOPLE OF GOD AT WORSHIP

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT ~ NOVEMBER 30, 2008

INVOCATION

*Be with us LORD as we wait in this season of
darkness. Keep the fears and doubts of these
darkening days far from our souls and surround us
with your Love as we wait...
for your presence in this worship,
for your strength in our lives,
for your comfort in our hearts.*

MORNING PRAYER

From the darkness of fear and defeat, from the suffering of fear and doubt, from the pain of fear and abandonment ~ we offer a prayer for your presence to be born in our lives. The ways of the world work to overwhelm the witness of our souls and the dreams of our spirits. Grant us your soul-saving Grace and the eternal Strength of your Spirit for all our days. We ask these things in the Name of the Living Christ ~ Amen.

SCRIPTURE Mark 13:24-37

"But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, {25} and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. {26} Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. {27} Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. {28} "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. {29} So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. {30} Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. {31} Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. {32} "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. {33} Beware, keep alert; for you do not know

when the time will come. {34} It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. {35} Therefore, keep awake--for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, {36} or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly.

And what I say to you
I say to all: Keep awake."

~ SERMON ~

How Shall We Wait?

This Messiah may take longer than we first thought, how can we make use of time?

I don't know about you, but when I first read this passage from Mark, scheduled for this first Sunday in Advent ~ the season that begins our journey to Christmas, my very first thought was:

What in the world do these verses have to do with Christmas?

And now that I have been in the minister / preaching business for a while, I know the proper response is *Really, these verses have nothing to do with Christmas.*

Actually, all of our verses from the lectionary for today have more to do with *waiting*.

And they are important verses for each of us to think about as Christians in the twenty first century.

Why?

Because we humans are simply not very good at waiting; as a matter of fact, we are horrible at waiting.

We forget too often about the times in which these verses were written.

The people hearing the words of the prophet Isaiah, which I will read in a few minutes, were waiting for the Messiah to come.

And the people hearing the words of Jesus fifty or sixty years after Jesus was on Earth, were waiting for Jesus to return and neither group had any idea when that arrival was going to take place.

Today both groups are still waiting for the Messiah ~ Jews are waiting for their first arrival, Christians for their second.

We start the season of Advent today and in four weeks ~ Christmas arrives. In the big scheme of things, that is very little time to wait.

In reality, the only people for whom the four weeks to Christmas is a difficult time of waiting are young children and that anticipation has more to do with Santa than with Jesus.

Real waiting, where we want to see change and we do not know when that change is going to take place ~ well... we twenty first century humans do not do that kind of waiting well.

Western civilization has evolved into a capitalist culture that has instant gratification as its centerpiece.

We want our pleasures, we want our good life, we want our happiness and *we want them all now.*

If these wishes or pleasures or dreams cost money, we'll take out a loan. Of course, in this current climate, we first have to see if the bank has any money.

In the good times, the only mantra we need is

We only go around once and we gotta get all out of life we can out of every trip around the sun.

To that add the sneaky little fact that sits in the back of our minds:
We never really know when we are going to die or what tragedy we might suffer when

*we walk out our front door ~
so we'd better have as much fun as possible... right now!*

These little advertising jingles get caught in our head and we feel we have to get from life while the getting is good.

The problem is so much of that attitude toward life is all centered on the individual. Everyday simply becomes a test to see how much I, me and my personal strength and conviction can accumulate.

All the self-help, motivational books say

*The greater I am able focus my energy ~
(critics would say ~ focus my greed,)
the more my dreams will be fulfilled.*

The only problem ~ actually it's three problems ~ is that the greater the focus on my own personal desires, the greater the distance I place between myself and God, the greater the distance between me and my brothers and sisters and the greater the distance between me and all of Creation. When we focus on ourselves, we end up separating ourselves from all three.

Living our lives in such a huge rush so we don't have to wait for anything, leaves us empty; there is nothing to feed our souls, nothing to nourish our spirits.

Since we are not people who know how to wait, what reminders might we keep before us to help us wait well? How can waiting be a time of wholeness and nourishment?

Waiting patiently is a good place to start. Patience is a good teacher. Patience allows us to stand back and examine who we are.

Patience allows us to see more

than we are able when we are in fly-by mode. The problem here is that ~ too often ~ our prayer to God is something like this:

*Dear God ~
Please grant me patience
and please do it right now...*

This is an ancient problem. You can hear this same impatience and frustration in the following verses from Isaiah 64 which describes the perfectly understandable impatience these ancient people must have felt when they compared the way God intervened into history in the stories in the Hebrew Scriptures and the way God seemed to never intervene as time went on.

In the Torah ~ God talks openly to Abraham and Moses ~ almost conversationally in some places.

Later on, the prophet Isaiah adds his words of lament, or we might say ~ *complaint* ~ about God's silence

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would

quake at your presence-- as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil—

to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!

When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.

From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him.

There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.

Isaiah is saying:

C'mon LORD, give us some of that old time

religion, some of the fire power that made the mountains shake.

We know You are the only one who can do these things.

Don't keep hiding... can we just have a little action so we know You are at least listening?

The reality is this: We need not literally believe these ancient stories of God's interventions; their importance is not in believing they happened exactly the way they were told.

These stories are valuable and true not because there was a real conversation between Abraham and God or Moses and God but because the stories show us how God worked in the lives of these ancient people.

We say these stories teach us about God, but in the end, they show us how these ancient people understood God ~ they do not give us a blow by blow of exactly what happened.

Here's the ironic part: we ask for signs and we say God is not speaking but in reality, the signs of God's presence and actions within Creation are all around us.

God is still speaking daily; we simply need to stop and patiently learn how to listen without literal ears.

I mentioned earlier that our area minister George Norton has a son Matt who is in need of our prayers; Matt's body has rejected the liver transplant that was made earlier in the fall.

These are words that George wrote in his email asking for prayers...

*My experience of the presence of God brings a word of assurance:
"Everything is going to be alright,"
but I don't know if 'everything will be alright' means it will be in*

*the experience of life or death.
When I cling to that word I have
a profound experience of peace,
but I know I must also face and
process the meaning of the
"what ifs" of my own mind and ~
as I do that I feel the weight of
immense grief and sadness.*

*We continue to live in hope-informed
hope-not denial presence of God..*

We pray for a cure, we pray for life.

*We pray for God to be glorified whether in
life or in death. God still loves us.*

God still reigns.

*God still works everything together for good
for those who love him and are called
according to his purposes.*

George Norton and his family
want to know *right now* what the future
will bring for his son Matt but George
and his family cannot know.

He will have to wait in these
hours that seem so dark, and I believe,
from the words George has shared, he
will wait as patiently as he is able.

This wanting to know leads into
*the second way to wait ~ and that is:
without a timetable.*

This is very hard for many
Christians who literally believe the
world is going to end when Jesus
returns coming back to Earth on a
cloud.

Many of you may remember the
Rapture Index, which I have mentioned
before from this pulpit.

The Rapture Index is a website that
calculates a number which is supposed
to help us understand the factors that
may lead up to the Rapture.¹

While the *Rapture Index* does not

¹ <http://www.raptureready.com/rap2.html>

predict when the Rapture will happen,
it is supposed to measure the type of
activities that could act as a precursor
to this Second Coming of Christ.

Whenever I mention the *Rapture
Index*, I always go on-line and check
where the index is and yesterday the
number was 158. This is down from
159 from only a few weeks ago because
gas prices have been declining and
apparently that relieves a little of the
tension.

Anything above 160 is supposed
to be cause for concern.

It seems as though the majority
of these end-of-the-world millennialists
are giving up on the idea of predicting
the exact time of Jesus' return ~ that
seemed to pretty much stop around
January 1st, 2000 when the world went
from December 31st to January 1st
without too much of a hitch.

The End Times folks are now
simply looking for evidence of the last
days to let us know when that end is
coming. I simply cannot believe this is
the right place to put our energies as
Christians.

Personally ~ I simply can't
believe Jesus 1) came to Earth, 2) taught
us all about the Amazing Love of God,
3) gave up his life and then 4) expected
us to sit around planning a Welcome
Home party.

I believe the best way to wait is to
follow the words of Mahatma Gandhi,
a Hindu, who said:

Be the change you want to see.

It is the same as Jesus' message when
He prayed:

*thy Kingdom come, thy will be done,
on Earth as it is in heaven.*

In other words,

*Begin acting right now the way
you want the world to look*

or

*Act today as if the Reign of
God's Love has already arrived.*

And all this simply means *waiting with the Love of Christ in our hearts and in our lives*. In addition to the *Rapture Index*, many of you may also remember the story I told last Sunday in my sermon about the five monks who were at a dying monastery and rabbi told them

The Christ is among you...

All the monks could not believe Christ could possibly be any of the other brothers and no brother would believe that he himself was the Christ but just to be on the safe side ~ that maybe the rabbi was right ~ all of the monks all started treating each other like Christ and behaving as Christ might behave.

You can write the ending to the story. The monastery that was at one point so tired and ready-to-die became, once again, a vital center of spirituality.

Some of you who have heard me preach for a while now, know that I will occasionally use examples in my sermons more than once. And I keep track of how often I use a story so that I don't tell it too often.

According to my records, I have told that story about the monks in the monastery seven or eight times over my twelve years here and that is way more than any other non-Bible story.

I think I love the story because, more than so many, this little fable of the monks and monastery and the rabbi is the essence of what we seek for

Christ in our lives.

Christ is not only in the Bible stories two thousand years ago, Christ is in every person you meet and Christ is in you and me. The story of the

monks in the monastery make that truth real.

To wait around for and plan the arrival of Christ to come again is such a monumental waste of time, it must make the good Lord chuckle at times.

Christ is not "coming back" when the *Rapture Index* gets to 160 or 260 or one thousand and sixty.

Christ is already here in our hearts because Christ was in each of our hearts the day we were born.

You and I are invited to *be* and *serve* the Christ we hope will return.

Saint Teresa of Avila was a 16th century Spanish mystic who may or may not have been in the business of predicting the return of Jesus but I believe she understood very clearly how each of us are called to be and see Christ in all we do. These are her words:

*Christ has no body now
on Earth but yours,
Christ has no hands but yours,
Christ has no feet but yours,
Yours are the eyes through which
Christ's compassion looks
out to the world;
Yours are the feet with which
He is to go about doing good;
Yours are the hands with which he is to
bless men and women now.*

In this season of waiting, you are invited to be still and wait patiently and wait without demanding a set time for God to act. And as you wait, say yes to the Love of Christ in your heart so that you might be the Christ you seek in your wildest dreams.

May it be so for all our days...
forever and forever ~ AMEN

How Shall We Wait?

A Sermon preached by Gary McCaslin on Sunday 30 November 2008 ~ First Baptist, Painted Post, NY