



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT, DECEMBER 2, 2018
JEREMIAH 33:14-16; PSALM 25: 1-9; 1 THESSALONIANS 3:9-13; LUKE 21: 25-36

THE WOMB OF WAITING

Luke 21:25-36 [*Jesus said, "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. 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. "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."*]

My great-grandmother was as saintly a woman as I have ever known. Born in the late 19th Century, and dying just three years shy of the 21st Century, I am sure she sinned her fair share; I just never saw it. She was the matriarch encouraging everyone in the family to get along; she was always respectful and playfully light-hearted. But in the summer of 1988, I

spent four weeks with her on the homestead while I did a rural practice rotation in a town nearby, and over light dinners of cornbread and pork bits, I listened to her stories of a long-lived wisdom.

She had remarkable tales!

Knowing that I delivered babies at that time, she shared tales of serving as the

county midwife decades earlier. She had given birth to five children herself, four lived, and with no formal education beyond the sixth grade, this courageous woman helped bring hundreds of babies into the world.

One evening we were talking about hunger in the world, as we ate a simple but farm-fresh meal, and she paused, looking off to a point in the same room where I suspect she had sat fifty years earlier, and she just held a memory in the air, then turned to me and said that she had never stolen a thing in her life, but the one certain thing she knew about her experience of the Great Depression is that she would not have thought twice about stealing food to feed her family, when what they raised on the farm is all they had, and it was not clear there was ever enough.

It struck me as odd that this woman whom I respected so much would make such a declaration with earnest resolve. It was clear she was making a penitential confession that she was not perfect while also acknowledging that she yearned for the world to be different, to be a place where children did not suffer.

Hunger is a deeply held yearning for what is missing in life. It is rooted in the experience of the prolonged absence of nourishing food, and its effects strike at the core of our existence, affecting every cell in the body, when all else pales in the face of that yearning, that excruciating wait for the need to be filled.

But we can speak of hunger metaphorically as well—to describe the longing for anything that is missing in life. In the longing is the waiting, which is hard. A longing for life partner, or a child, or for restoration of one's health, or for a life-giving job, or for peace in the strife-strangled world.

We all know such hungers, such yearnings, when we are waiting for something new to unfold, and the waiting can be so painstakingly difficult.

This season of Advent is designed as a time of intentional waiting—the yearning, the longing, the deep hunger for the gift to be born anew into our lives. It is a time of waiting for the hunger to be assuaged.

Sam Wells once wrote that what the world often presents to us are readily accessible but superficial distractions from this deep

yearning. He describes it as going wide in its diverse attempts to keep us busy, but like a wading pool it remains shallow and unsatisfying in its goal to quench the yearning for something more.ⁱ

Advent, on the other hand, is an invitation to go deeply—in, down and through, on a spiritual journey that holds the period of waiting as a time of hopeful anticipation that down deep there is something more satisfying, more enriching, more meaningful.

For more than 1500 years, Advent has been, for Christians across the globe, a time of intentional waiting, of resting with the hunger and hope for a new world. For much of that time, Christians were invited to fast during Advent, to heighten the senses in their anticipation for the Christmas feast.

It was St. Bernard of Clairvaux who said Advent oriented us to the three comings of Christ: the birth of baby Jesus, the coming of Christ into our hearts daily, and the coming of Christ the King of kings, in the fullness of time.ⁱⁱ This third element is why we hear the apocalyptic scriptures this morning, anticipating the

reign of God in all its fullness of peace. We hope for it—Come, Lord Jesus, Come.

The rituals of Advent invite us into the deep dive of waiting—the lighting of candles one by one on the wreath, the wrapping of gifts placed under the tree to open in the fullness of time, the rhythms of daily Advent devotions, the changes in our music here which give voice to the visceral experience of waiting.

The world might want us to skip across the shallow end of life's busyness and elide to Christmas as if waiting will not teach us anything of import, or worse—that waiting is for the weak.

But Advent invites us to hold the space, to feel the deep meaning in the yearning for God to come into our lives, to touch us once again, tenderly, gently, meekly, as Christ Child, in the nighttime of our fears, and as Prince of Peace, who yearns for this world to turn into its God-given goodness.

We are not there yet, and it is worth noting that Advent carries within it a penitential tone, inviting us to acknowledge we are not perfect.

But remember that in Hebrew, the words “womb” and “mercy” have the same root. In the womb of waiting is the placental mercy of God pulsing a steadfast connection and lifeblood to our truest selves and to the relationship with a God who has chosen to dwell with us here.

Advent acknowledges our hungers, our longings, our disappointments and dreams, and says in the diving deeply there is hope, and mercy, and meaning, too, because God is not finished with you

https://www.faithandleadership.com/samuel-wells-never-mind-width?utm_source=albanweekly&utm_medium=content&utm_campaign=faithleadership Much of the thematic content of this sermon is drawn from a sermon preached by Wells at Duke University Chapel in 2011.

yet, nor is God finished with this world yet.

So hold the space this Advent—for a moment, or an hour, or a day, or the season—whatever you can muster, take the risk to go deeply, light the candles, say the prayers, make your daily devotions, and wait, wait for the flicker of the Christ light that burns brightly inside you as it warms your heart and soothes your soul till you know in your bones that Christ dwells with us, Emmanuel. Amen.

ⁱⁱ Pfatteicher, Philip H., "Journey into the Heart of God: Living the Liturgical Year", Oxford University Press, 2013 ISBN 9780199997145



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