

“Waiting and Yearning”
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby
Central Presbyterian Church
First Sunday of Advent
December 2, 2007
Scripture: Isaiah 2:1-5 and Matthew 24:36-44

John Winner recently wrote,

Those who watched . . . *The War*, a documentary about World War II by Ken Burns which aired on PBS this fall, could feel the horror of battle with a foot soldier from Mobile, Alabama; understand the pressure on a newspaper editor in Luverne, Minnesota, who worked as if victory depended upon him; and feel the anxiety of a mother coping with the government’s rationing program.

Above all, viewers sensed how, for soldier and civilian alike, the war involved a lot of waiting – longing for a letter from a beloved young man in harm’s way, gazing each day at a picture of a faraway sweetheart, yearning for that great homecoming when the war would finally be over.¹

So much of life in those years of World War II involved waiting. Waiting for a battle to begin, waiting in fear of receiving dreaded news, waiting for the war to be over, waiting for soldiers to return home. Waiting. Maybe this waiting shaped what Tom Brokaw coined “The Greatest Generation.” They knew that good things take time. And gratification delayed was better than gratification rushed.

We are not so good at waiting, are we? We want things now, right now. And to a large extent, we can get whatever we want as soon as we want it. The threat of a snowstorm sends us rushing to the store to stock up on milk and other essentials, but doesn’t that prove the rule that on normal days we can get whatever we want whenever we want it?

There are some signs that our culture based on instant gratification is in serious trouble. The obesity epidemic may be related to our ability to eat fast food wherever and whenever we want it. Americans have a serious debt crisis because we spend more than we earn, we can’t wait to buy things after we have the money, so we put it on our card. And the subprime mortgage crisis has some connections to interest-only loans and home buyers wanting to use home equity as soon as it accumulated, and gamble that the mortgage principle could be paid later.

We are not good at waiting, and so the season of Advent comes as a shock to us. Walter Brueggemann writes

Advent preaching is about *hope* in a culture that attempts to fend off its despair by frantic self-indulgent busyness that is determined to work itself into a frazzle; that frazzle serves

a) to keep from hoping and b) to keep us from the hopelessness that saturates our common polity.”²

We stay in a state of frantic busyness that keeps us from hoping, yet staves off hopelessness. Do you often respond to the question “How is it going?” with an answer like “I am swamped!” or “I am so busy!”? Our culture, Brueggemann says, tries to fend off despair by frantic busyness that works us into a frazzle that keeps us from hoping. But Advent, our entire faith, really, is about waiting and hoping. Today we lit the first candle on the Advent wreath, the candle of peace, next week hope. Listen again to some of the words from the prophet Isaiah:

There will be a day, the prophet says, when wars cease and God shall

judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more (Isaiah 2:4-5).

We are in the midst of one of the longest wars in our American history, but have we allowed ourselves to be so busy that we can no longer hope for an end to war? In this season of Advent, we listen again to old words, old promises, that inform our hope. Words that shape our faith, words worth listening to again and again. This is why we need to take a breather from the Christmas carols already bombarding us at the malls. So we can hear prophetic words and remember that this is a time for hope.

So in Advent, we do a lot of hoping. Hoping that the promises of God will come to fruition. Hoping that our words and deeds will in ways large and small participate in creating goodness in the world. Hoping that Jesus will once again enter our world of frantic busyness and bring order and peace and meaning and justice.

Advent – a season of preparation. As we unwrap the Christmas ornaments, and get out the holiday plates, and shop for that perfect present, our very salvation is at stake. That is the message on this first Sunday in Advent.

I had trouble understanding this as a child, and still do on some days. That we begin Advent with Jesus talking about his return. As Ted Wardlaw puts it, “the One Whom we most properly await in Advent is not the baby born in a barn, but the son of Man Who is coming to meet us at the end of time.”³

Now the birth of a baby brings a lot of surprises. Some things you just cannot prepare for. But we wait for a return that refuses a due date.

But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. . . Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour (Matt 24: 36, 42-44).

Matthew was retelling these words of Jesus decades after he had walked among them. And they had been waiting for his return. Waiting. Every time they thought things could not get worse, that Jesus would have to come soon, they were disappointed. Don't speculate about the day, Jesus tells his followers, but be prepared.

Waiting is hard work. You can see why we prefer frantic busyness that keeps us in limbo somewhere far from hope and yet too busy for hopelessness. But Jesus urges us to stay awake.

And maybe the best we can do to be prepared is to tell and retell the stories. We light candles and unwrap ornaments – each one that brings to mind a person or a story or a particular year.

In little towns in France, those preparations took place. And each year Rev. Trocme would study the Bible for the perfect story to tell on Christmas morning. He had a way of taking obscure characters in the gospels and bringing them into the Christmas story. The donkey was one of his favorites – he loved how a donkey brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem to give birth to Jesus. He loved how a donkey helped them escape to Egypt and avoid the wrath of Herod. He remembered that the Good Samaritan put the wounded stranger on his donkey. And Trocmé imagined that it was the same donkey in each case. In two weeks, our youth will be reenacting a story that features Rabbi Nicodemus, the one who came to Jesus late at night deep into his ministry. Trocmé imagines that Nicodemus also sought him out at his birth.⁴

And it was through his retelling of the stories, shaping the imaginations of young and old alike in Le Chambon, that the people then were able to live out their faith, to act with heroic bravery, to rescue Jews and other strangers persecuted and imperiled.

Those stories shaped their morals. They were waiting and hoping for Jesus to return, to bring about an era of peace when nations turned swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning-hooks, but it was not to be at that time. In fact, it was a time of such unspeakable evil and horrors that many faithful people felt nothing so much as the absence of God. Jesus did not return in those days – but the people of Le Chambon and others who resisted had heard the stories, and did not let their waiting turn them passive. They did what Jesus had taught: fed the hungry, clothed the naked, welcomed the stranger, resisted evil laws.

Their Advent preparations brought the love of Jesus to life for those most in need. In Advent, we wait, and as we wait, we retell the stories, and kindle imaginations and hope. May it be so here this Advent season. Amen.

¹ John R. Winner, "Agony in Advent: Lessons From a Father's War Journal," in *The Christian Century* 27 November 2007, 8.

² Walter Brueggemann, "Advent: Departure and Homecoming," in *Journal for Preachers*, Advent 2007, 11.

³ Ted Wardlaw, "Preaching the Advent Texts," in *Journal for Preachers*, Advent 2007, 3.

⁴ This play has been adapted by Jessica Jones and will be performed with the permission and blessing of Nelly Trocmé Hewett, who edited the book *Angels and Donkeys: Tales for Christmas and Other Times* by Andre Trocmé, translated by Nelly Trocmé Hewett (Intercourse, Pennsylvania, 1998).