

November 27 – First Sunday in Advent

“Waiting on God”

Impatience

Isaiah 64:1-9

The theme of Advent is waiting. We are reminded continually through the scriptures that God’s timing is not our timing. We are to wait on God. This waiting causes a multitude of emotions. Over the Sundays of Advent we are going to look at some of the feelings that waiting engenders in us. Today we look at those times when waiting causes impatience. When things are not going well we want God to come right now and fix things. Hear again how this section from Isaiah begins. “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!” Most Biblical scholars believe this part of Isaiah is from the time after the exile. The people of Israel had been allowed to return to their homeland after many years. They were trying to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Their neighbors, who did not want them to get re-established, were constantly harassing them. They were sick of it and wanted God to intervene in some dramatic fashion. To their way of thinking, it would be great if God would do something to scare their enemies so they would be left alone. This would also let everyone know that they worshiped the one true God. They didn’t want to hear any promises about what God would or might do someday. They wanted relief and they wanted it now. After all, God had done spectacular things in the past for the people of Israel so why not now?

We have all been there, haven’t we? We have wanted God to get to work fixing problems in our lives and we do not want to hear anything about waiting. When a loved one is desperately ill and we are praying for a miracle of healing we want it now. When a child or grandchild is unemployed and seeking work we want God to intervene now. We do not need to feel guilty about having these kinds of feeling. They are a natural part of life. When we are experiencing feelings of impatience we need to remember that we are like a child waiting for Christmas.

Have you ever thought about how different the perspective is between a child and an adult at this time of the year? The child hears there are 28 days until Christmas and greets the news with a long face. That seems like such an intolerably long time to

wait. Adults, on the other hand, hear the news with panic. You mean there are only 28 days to get everything done!!

What do we do with our childlike impatience when it seems God or life or people or programs are moving way too slow? For the writer of Isaiah, their feelings of impatience didn't last. After recalling all those dramatic acts of God in the past and wanting God to do it again they also began to remember all the times they, as a people, were less than faithful. God continued to be faithful even when they were not and so impatience moved to gratitude for what God had done. This caused the writer of Isaiah to realize that they had no right to demand anything of God. After all God had done for them, even to being with them in the exile and returning them to their homeland, they should be celebrating God's actions in their lives. Their poor response to God, he realized, is a reoccurring theme of Israel's history.

This is something we need to remember. Whether we want to hear it or not, God doesn't owe us anything. There is no, "if you are faithful I will save you from all the problems of life" clause in our faith commitment. We have no right to demand anything from God. Instead we need to remember and celebrate the fact that God has always been active in our lives and place our trust in God as we move through this difficult time. Think about the people of Israel. Ultimately, the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt, crops were planted and life returned to normalcy. There was no dramatic intervention by God but they did move forward and other nations came to respect their dependence upon God.

This acknowledgment that God does not owe us anything should not lead to despair but instead to an utter dependence upon God. The writer of Isaiah uses the image of the potter and the clay. This is an image used often by the prophets to help people move from impatience back to trust. If God is the potter then it means that God does care, that God is involved and even if we do not see it or feel it at the moment we are not abandoned.

There is a Taoist story of an old farmer who had worked his crops for many years. One day his horse ran away. Upon hearing the news, his neighbors came to visit. "Such bad luck," they said sympathetically. "May be," the farmer replied. The next morning the horse returned, bringing with it three other wild horses. "How wonderful,"

the neighbors exclaimed. "May be," replied the old man. The following day, his son tried to ride one of the untamed horses, was thrown, and broke his leg. The neighbors again came to offer their sympathy on his misfortune. "May be," answered the farmer. The day after, military officials came to the village to draft young men into the army. Seeing that the son's leg was broken, they passed him by. The neighbors congratulated the farmer on how well things had turned out. "May be," said the farmer.

We do not know the big picture. When we are impatient we might be like a child waiting for Christmas thinking it will take forever to get here. Whereas God sees it as an adult would view the situation. God is involved, that is the good news of our faith, and so we must trust the potter and give thanks for the care God gives us. Every time we feel impatient we need to reflect on what God has done for us.

At this season of Advent we are called to look forward to the message of Christ with us, Emmanuel. Think of the people of Israel. They had heard the promise of the Messiah spoken by the prophets. Yet years and even centuries passed. The words seemed a mockery and yet one day a young woman named Mary hears the news, "You shall bear a son." This is our hope. God is at work, does listen and cares and in God's time things will happen.

Whenever I think of this I recall times where I was impatient instead of trusting. My first year of seminary was spent in Atlanta, GA. I was able to get a job as a youth pastor at a large church in the suburbs. As I was ending the first year of school I applied to the North Georgia conference requesting that they consider me for a student pastorate. In the period of about a week I heard that they had turned me down because the senior pastor had not recommended me. He also let me know that I would not be continuing as their youth pastor because he could not trust me. He felt I had gone behind his back in applying for a church. Even though I had a year contract that was ending he had wanted me to get his permission. On top of that I learned that my scholarship would not be renewed. You can imagine my prayers at that moment. I was angry. I wanted God to fix things. I was discouraged and you can add in all sorts of other emotions. There was no trust in God. Yet in a very short time I was offered an intern position that was a wonderful growth experience. This led to my changing seminaries and my serving two churches while I was in school. This experience was a real blessing

to Jenny and I. God was faithful and with me. I am not saying God directed that senior pastor to act in ways that I felt were uncharitable but I do say that God was there and once my impatience was set aside and replaced by trust I saw many good things happening. This has been my experience more than once.

So this season I am remembering how much God loves us by sending us Jesus. It is one of the ways we find trust and conquer our impatient feelings. So forgive us our times of impatience and fill us with trust as we wait.