

SERMON**SECOND
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH**

460 East Main Street

Lexington, Kentucky 40507

Waiting Filled with Wanting
Zephaniah 3:14-20; Philippians 4:4-7
December 16, 2018
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I am not a patient person, especially if I don't know what exactly I'm waiting for. Even if I order something online and can track it's every movement, I am still a little impatient. And in that instance, I know exactly what's coming. But when it's a bit of a mystery, my lack of patience gets even worse.

Like when we were waiting to hear on news from the PNC on who we might be meeting for the Head of Staff position, it was giving me anxiety. Was it a man or a woman? Someone who was older or younger? Did they still have kids at home? What was their leadership style? How long had they been a pastor? What was their personality? Did they have a sense of humor? (That last one was particularly important.)

So it's a little bit ironic that my favorite season of the year is Advent, a season of anticipation and preparation, where everyone seems to get excited and there is a buzz in the air about what's coming next. It is a season full of possibility and hope. But how do we live into that idea of hope?

What does it mean when we say "I hope..."? What do we believe Hope actually is? I wrote this in many of the Christmas cards I sent out this year, hopes for people in this holiday season and in the coming year. My "hope" was, and is, genuine, but I don't think it's the same type of hope we see in the scriptures that we read today, the hope that the Hebrew people in exile had, or that the Jews had when they were waiting for the Messiah.

It's like the difference between the hope an 8-year-old has that they will get a bike for Christmas and the hope that a parent has that a donor match will be found for their child who is dying. They are both genuine, but very different. There are different implications of those hopes, and very different results if those hopes aren't met.

One of the key factors in hoping is that you are waiting for something. But not just waiting like you're waiting for your bus to arrive or for the line at the grocery store to move. You are waiting for something that you deeply desire, something that could potentially change your life. Something that would be able to lift you up out of that life that you're currently living and bring you to a new place of joy.

That's the idea behind having joy as one of the themes of Advent. And having it as the third week of Advent. The themes of the different Sundays in Advent build on each other. The first week was Hope. When we hope for something, we wait with anticipation, with longing. We desperately want whatever it is that we are waiting for. This was the waiting that the Israelites experienced for centuries while they waited not only for the restoration of their nation but for the Savior, the Messiah, who would be the one to deliver them.

The next Sunday in Advent is Peace, which seems like it would be more fitting at the end of Advent. That makes sense to us: We are waiting for something amazing, the birth of Christ, and once we get it, on Christmas, we would then find ourselves at peace, right? While this makes logical sense, that's not quite how we need to understand it. The peace that is emphasized and that we are asked to focus on during Advent is complex. It isn't an absence of conflict or a time where everyone is happy and everything is perfect. In fact, the peace we are talking about, the peace that Paul mentions in Philippians, is a peace that passes any sort of our understanding.

It is a peace that we receive and that we rest in when we have given ourselves over to God and the plan God has for us and for the world. However, it's a challenge to give away our feeling of control, even if it's to the Creator of the universe.

Human beings are stubborn, and we like to think that we always have an understanding of how everything works and why things happen and how everything should go. And when we don't, we still try to figure it out anyway. But this idea of peace that Paul talks about goes against that stubbornness, because it is God's peace, and it is beyond our understanding.

It comes from believing and trusting in the love of God, the salvation of Jesus Christ and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. God is with us and for us and within us and around us. Accepting and embracing that, no matter if we can make total sense of it or not, is what brings us peace. And when we have that peace, then comes the joy. Joy in the love of God. Joy in the miracle of grace. Joy in the fellowship that we have in the community and life of the church.

We rejoice in the Hope and Peace that we have already spent time with during Advent, the ideas that help to build the anticipation and excitement for what is to come. It is the week of Advent that is a little less preparatory and a little more celebratory.

Our lectionary texts are a little bit more about triumph and appreciation for what God has promised. It's sort of like that feeling you get on Christmas Eve night, when you're so excited about what is coming that you can't sleep.

In fact, the verses from Zephaniah are ones that we might relate more to our experiences on Easter morning, trumpets sounding and choirs rejoicing. For the people who were hearing Zephaniah's prophecy, they were reassured that God takes notice of us and our lives, that God desires for us to feel secure and loved. The joy coming in those words, that prophecy, is almost overwhelming.

It can almost seem too good to be true. This season of excitement is incredible, but for many people, that joyful peace and hopeful anticipation is difficult to find, and even more difficult to hold onto. With all the excitement, can also come anxiety. There are a lot of

expectations stuffed into all the traditions of Advent and Christmas, and for some people it is actually the most anxious time of year.

And for those of us who already struggle with anxiety, it can send our minds into overdrive. With the hopeful anticipation can also come the fear of “what happens if it doesn’t work out exactly right?” The calming peace of being in the presence of God can also trigger a fear of “what will happen when this ends?” And with the explosion of joy can come the concern of “Well this is great, but when is the other shoe going to drop?”

Even in the midst of my favorite season of the year, this is me. I have struggled for years with depression, and lately, especially since my car accident, I have a lot of anxiety added on top of that. I get overly concerned about small things, constantly wonder how things are going to turn out, and blame myself when things seem to go wrong. And I truly believe that the Holy Spirit had her hand in things when Tom and David and I made the preaching schedule months ago. I was meant to preach on these texts and this week because I needed to hear a message of joy.

Not only did I need to read more about patience, but also about the waiting that is filled with wanting and the importance of giving things over to God in order to find peace. I needed to struggle with the words from Zephaniah and Paul’s familiar instruction to the Philippians, thinking to myself, “Rejoice in the Lord ALWAYS?? Really? ALWAYS, Paul? Seems like a pretty tall order.”

And it is a tall order. Because when we aren’t in a place of joy or hope or peace or love it’s difficult to rejoice in the Lord and what God has given to us. So why should we still try? Why CAN we still rejoice during troubling or difficult times? (Wait for it, the answer’s a good one!) Jesus Christ.

Yes, as most people would say, it’s the Sunday School answer, but it’s true! What more do we need in our lives in order to live with purpose and joy, with thankfulness and appreciation? We have knowledge of Jesus Christ, our Savior, the Savior of the world, and in that life of devotion to Him, we will always have cause to rejoice.

Will there be difficult and trying times? Yes. Will we feel discouraged and at the end of our rope? Yes. But so was Paul. He was writing this letter to the Philippians from jail, held in chains, awaiting an unknown fate.

And yet he instructs the church in Philippi to rejoice in all things at all times. He reminds them that happiness is not the end goal of our lives. Living a life that is devoted to and dedicated to God is the end goal. Happiness is a by-product of that life.

As Winston Churchill once said “If you’re going through Hell, keep on going.” When we hear it we might chuckle to ourselves and think, “I know how that feels.” But then a question lingers in our minds: How do we actually keep going? Is it really just a time where we have to have a stiff upper lip, or as a counselor once told me when I worked on staff at summer camp, “This is where we simply say, ‘Suck It Up!’”? Do we really just have to grin and bear it? Sometimes, yes. But I would add one more step to that: Pray.

Joseph Jeter tells a story about Alberta Lunger, a prominent society member in Fort Worth and beloved Christian woman who was the wife of TCU professor Dr. Harold Lunger.

He says “She once told a group (of people that) her life had been crumbling and she could think of nothing else to do other than pray. We asked her how long it took her to get through. ‘Twenty years,’ she said. She taught many of us how to pray, encouraging us to never give up.”

Is that our attitude when it comes to prayer in hard times? Is that our level of dedication when we are facing struggles that seem to never end? Do we fully embrace that “never give up” idea that we witness so often throughout scripture? Abraham never saw his descendants become more than half a dozen, even though God had promised him that they would be more numerous than the stars in the sky.

Martin Luther King, Jr., spent his life advocating and fighting for racial equality and justice, but never lived to see many of the fruits of his efforts, and we still have miles to go in that area. Susan B. Anthony dedicated her entire adult life to Women’s Suffrage and Abolitionism, but never lived to see the day when women were legally given the right to vote in this country, and even 100 years later women are still often thought of as less than men. But we keep going.

That sort of dedication is difficult, sometimes seeming impossible. What hope did Paul possibly have to hold onto while he was in prison? The answer is both beautifully simple and frustratingly complex: Hope in Jesus Christ. So simple, right? But we struggle with the simplicity of it. We say to ourselves, “Well, yes, Christ gives us hope. But I need something a little more concrete than that, Paul.”

And here is where that patience comes around again. The idea of patience can easily be turned into the thought that we have to resign to the way things are or simply stop doing anything to try and change our situation. Patience is not resignation or inactivity. Patience is waiting that is filled with longing, and with a healthy dose of trust in God and in God’s desires for our lives.

Even in those darkest of times, those times where we have been beaten down by various things in our lives, if we find that glimmer of hope then things can turn around. It may take a long time to find that glimmer, years or decades, even. But we find that hope in God, and God puts that hope into us. It doesn’t make things “all better”, but we begin to see the way through the darkness, even if it isn’t completely clear at the time.

We find that promise of hope in the final words of Zephaniah’s prophecy to Israel, words that come from God as a comfort to the people because the promise hasn’t been fulfilled YET. “I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time, I will bring you home.” (Zephaniah 3:18-20)

That Promise was fulfilled in Christ, and that promise became one for all people, not just Israel. And we can find even more joy because the promise isn’t at an end. When we believe and accept God’s grace and salvation through Jesus, we are saved from the punishment of sin. That miracle is what we anticipate during Advent. We wait expectantly, joyfully, for the birth of Christ, knowing that it is Christ who made all this possible.