

Watching and waiting are a part of life. Such times challenge us, and they reveal a great deal about our character, the strength of our love, and the depth of our faith. To describe the act of waiting and watching, theologian Belden C. Lane uses the term ‘liminality,’ which comes from the Latin word for ‘threshold’ (limen). It’s an apt description: to watch and wait is to stand on a threshold, poised betwixt and between. It is to exist in an interim status, to feel suspended between what has been and what will be, to confront and affirm new meanings that take us beyond cherished opinions and familiar points of reference. A sense of such threshold is sometimes experienced in the context of jet air travel when, within a matter of a few short hours, we are transferred from recognizable settings to unfamiliar locales, cultures, and time zones among strangers who speak a different language. While in the air we are poised between two worlds, straddling two thresholds.

Advent is one of life’s liminalities, a threshold, a season of passage and discovery, a time of watching and waiting. Advent celebrates the coming of God, the entrance of the Holy One into human history in the person of Jesus Christ. He came 2,000 years ago into the Greco-Roman world of Caesar Augustus and was born a child in Bethlehem of Judea. He also comes now into our world and meets us as Risen Lord where and when we least expect him. He will come again when God brings this world and human history to its conclusion. Christ’s coming always creates a threshold, for through him God opens new horizons, inaugurates a new age, and so unsettles our thoughts and feelings that we experience a new life. In this new life we leave what once was and we venture forth to what is yet to be fulfilled.

This coming of God into the world, and to the Hebrews as God’s chosen people, comprised a recurring theme of the Hebrew prophets. God’s divine intervention had blessed and judged the Hebrew people in the past. God made covenant with them and gave them the Law. God raised up King David and his successors on the throne as “anointed ones” to guarantee the peace and security of the people. Surely God would visit them again through the human figure of the Messiah (the anointed one), a *righteous Branch springing forth from David, who would execute justice and righteousness in the land* (Jer. 33:15), bring the people back from exile, restore the nation, and secure Jerusalem once more as God’s holy city. But the timing of these mighty events, sometimes called “The Day of the Lord,” was unknown. These things would occur in God’s time and at God’s initiative, which meant that the faithful were enjoined to wait and watch in hope.

So the prophet Habakkuk declared: *I will take my stand to watch, and station myself on the tower, and look forth to see what [God] will say to me, and what I will answer concerning*

my complaint. And the Lord answered me: “Write the vision; make it plain upon tablets, so he may run who reads it. For still the vision awaits its time; it hastens to the end – it will not lie. If it seem slow, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay. (vv. 2:1-3)

The prophetic hope of God’s coming in the messiah was fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the anointed one. In Jesus the promise became flesh, and through Jesus, God opened the kingdom of heaven and the final chapter of human history. But Jesus, when he spoke of how the end would come, reiterated the prophetic emphasis: *But on that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Take heed, watch; for you do not know when the time will come...And what I say to you I say to all: Watch!* (Mark 13:32-33, 37). Yet, despite certain initial signs from Jesus, the exact timing always remains with God.

Watching and waiting continue to be threshold experiences in our spiritual quest and our journey of faith, even as they are part of life itself: no one can avoid them. To each of us come experiences and intersections where we must watch and wait. We wait for the answer, the verdict, the outcome. We wait for school to begin, for weddings to occur, for babies to be born. We watch for the mailman and for the plane’s arrival. We wait for the telephone to ring, for Christmas morning, for the doctor’s diagnosis, for the word of our promotion, for the storm to pass, for the pain to ease, and for the light to come.

Scientists wait for the results of the experiment. Farmers wait for the harvest. Astronauts wait for the launch and for orbit to be reached. Photographers wait for the right light and the right composition. Novelists wait for words that will develop characters and delineate plot. Bakers wait for dough to rise and, in lonely forest lookout towers, rangers watch for the first sign of a fire. Children wait for summer and teens wait for their driver’s licenses. Parents wait through all kinds of vigils and crises. And sometimes we even wait to die.

Watching and waiting are part of all human life, and when we keep these vigils we are better prepared for the answer or the meaning when it comes. That is why waiting expectantly prepares us to receive the revelation of Advent. Knowing how such revelation occurred in the past makes us anticipate its happening again. Such awareness is why we enter into the Advent season. During Advent we look back to God’s coming in the Christ Child born in Bethlehem and we are better awakened to God’s coming among us now. We look back with wonder and at the same time are thrust forward with hope to God’s final

coming in glory. As Henri Nouwen put it, “By conserving the memory of our Christ’s birth, I can progress to the fulfillment of his kingdom.”

During Advent we look back and behold the light that shattered the darkness at Jesus’ birth, and we then follow him as the light of the world, assured that he will lead us out of our darkness and shadows. By looking back and beholding the love that God wrapped up in the Christ Child born at Bethlehem, we are moved to receive God’s love in Christ now, to make him the center of our lives, and to let divine grace color our relationships. Looking back at God’s salvation promise in the mystery of the Incarnation, we claim that promise for our own salvation now and live into hope with courage and dignity, even in the face of evil forces that would violate and destroy, distort and exploit human life.

Albert Schweitzer proclaimed the importance of expectant waiting: “So I tell you, don’t let your hearts grow numb. Stay alert. It is your soul which matters...” Schweitzer spoke the truth. We must take care not to let the world’s deceit lead us to think otherwise. Too much is at stake. We must watch and wait. We look back with wonder in order to live now with courage and to look forward with hope. We ponder the mystery of God’s coming and ask, “Why did God come? Where did God come? How did God come? Why did God come then? What does God’s coming mean for me and for the world?” We keep vigil at Bethlehem, that we may hold God’s light in Christ against the present darkness, that we may stand for truth, share his love with those who have given up on love, and live in eternity’s sunrise. To be ready, to be on alert, to be expectant, and to be spiritually alive, we enter into this holy season and keep the feast.

Prayer: Lord, the calendar calls for Christmas. We have traveled this way before. During this Advent season we would see what we have never seen before, accept what we have refused to think, and hear what we need to understand. Be with us in our going that we may meet you in your coming. Astonish us until we sing “Glory!” and then enable us to live it out with love and peace. In the name of your Incarnate Word, even Jesus Christ. Amen.

Donald J. Shelby. *The Unsettling Season*. Upper Room Books: Nashville, TN. 1989 (Pg. 15-23).

Watching and Waiting Expectantly

November 30, 2014

1st Sunday of Advent

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Habakkuk 1:1-5, 2:4

Mark 13:32-37



Do you remember Jessica McClure? She was the eighteen-month-old child who fell down an abandoned well shaft in Midland, Texas. It took rescue workers over two days to free Jessica: during that time, the whole nation held its breath. During that vigil we all watched and waited.

We ached for her parents as they peered into the black shaft that encased their baby, as they listened to her hum verses from a Winnie-the-Pooh song. We wanted to be there with the oil-field workers and other rescue and medical experts as they drilled and clawed their way to the child, overcoming one obstacle after another in a race against death and time. Television cameras recorded the anguish, concern, and determination on faces. When the breakthrough moment finally came and a paramedic emerged with baby Jessica in his arms, the eyes of the nation filled with tears and voices let out a cry of gratitude to God.