

Sunday, December 12, 2010
Third Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 35:1–10
Psalm 146:5–10
James 5:7–10
Matthew 11:2–11
Year A

I.N.I.

Hymnwriter and poet Susan Palo Cherwien begins her Advent poem called “Three Parts to the Season:

*There are three parts
to this season:
the waiting
and the waiting
and the waiting*

--from *Crossings: Meditations for Worship* (Fenton, MO: Morningstar Publishers © 2003), p 149

I think I’ve spent half my life waiting, waiting for something to arrive, waiting for something better to come along, waiting for everyone and anyone to see things the right way, meaning my way.

I remember as a kid wolfing down Cap’n Crunch cereal so that I could save a box top, then two box tops, then three box tops. Then filling out the form and putting the box tops in the mail until the free cereal bowl would arrive in the mail. The very next day after mailing, I would look to see if the cereal bowl had arrived, each day waited and checked again, for four to six weeks, until I had nearly forgotten about them and a package came addressed not to Dad, not to Mom, but to me. Finally, the trinket I had been waiting for!

I sat with Pat Harvey last Spring while her elderly mother underwent dicey but necessary surgery. Pat had no other family members with her, and she was the dutiful daughter. We noticed the LCD screen on the waiting room wall, color-coded with the last name and first initial of each patient in surgery. We watched for “Moretti, H.” as the name seemed stuck within the field “in surgery.” We prayed, we chatted about any subject we could come up with, we heard thunder clap and torrential rain bang again the brick hospital walls, and waited until “Moretti H.” changed from “in surgery” to “in recovery.” Finally, Hilda was out of surgery!

I remember ensconcing myself in the pastor’s office at Bethesda on a hot and humid day last July, with the air-conditioner unit blasting cool air. I had just preached and presided before this strange and wonderful congregation. I wondered if Bethesda might be a place for my family and me to plot our new phase of life together. There was an air of anticipating, while waiting, with the prayer, “God, is New Haven, Connecticut” what’s next? Can we find you here? Will you

bless this ministry? And then the invitation from Pastor Sinnott came to stand before you in this space and be received as Bethesda's pastor. Finally, the call was real!

*There are three parts
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John the Baptizer is Jesus' set-up man. He is absolutely the pace setter, the road paver, the finger pointer to what comes next. If you were the gospel writer Matthew and you were to draw a line from everything that was past to what is now, the line would reach back to Abraham, then arc toward the prophets, and just near the apex, there would be John. He, the crazy-looking dude with the camel's hair wardrobe and the low-carb diet would be in the last pages of Israel's history book.

John and his groupies knew the prophecies tapped into the longing of every human heart, for something new to overtake the oppressors of the world, something new to come to broken bodies and broken hearts, something new that fills the emptiness that comes from millennia of waiting and watching, and hoping, wondering if all that he thought he was doing meant anything, or if was just a mirage.

Last week we heard John's invitation to come to the desert and make a change. This week we are chapters ahead in the gospel and John is holed up in prison, being snatched up as soon as Jesus emerges from his own baptismal waters. John is in the dark about what's happening.

Jesus, on the other hand, Matthew says "went.....teaching....and proclaiming and curing every disease and every sickness among the people."

Jesus in Matthew says "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets: I have come not to abolish but to fulfill."

Jesus in Matthew teaches "No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak, for the patch pulls away from the cloak, and a worse tear is made. Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved."

Jesus brings in the New Age. Jesus carries the arc that began way back in God's call to Abraham, God's giving the law to Moses, God's finding a way for Israel in exile through Isaiah's prophecy, God in John prepping lost souls to get ready for what is to come.

"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to **wait** for another?" asks John holed up in prison, asking **the** Advent question for everyone who thinks they've spent half their life waiting. And to those who ask, to those who wait, to those holed up in whatever kind of prison you can imagine or experience, the rabbi Jesus answers with fulfillment language: "the blind receive their sight,

the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.”

Jesus comes to those who are empty, who live the questions, and offers something new. The breaking in of Jesus can happen both in the waiting and the filling up. In the New Age of the kingdom, trinkets in the mail, successful surgery in the hands of medical professionals, the call of a pastor to a congregation in New Haven all make a connection to the new thing that God is doing in Christ. In the New Age of the kingdom, being stuck, feeling weak, wondering what good can come out of this trouble, God offers strength in weakness, as in the child born, as in the one strung out on the cross, as in the one who brings life from death.

Nothing is too little or too big for God to bring newness out of or into.

The desert can blossom like mad with a little rain.

\$4.5 billion dollars from child nutrition legislation can be released even as Congress goes into a lame-duck session, which has been done.

The company of those with you here can offer a song when you are unable to.

God can find a way after John the Baptist begins his good work and is stuck in prison, as Jesus fulfills the good news in word and deed, as we still hear and see God breaking through, in God’s advent, and as we continue to watch and wait.

*There are three parts
to this season:
the waiting
and the waiting
and the waiting,
Waiting for the Christ child to come,
to be sure,
who we know already came.
Waiting for the burning coming
of the Christ in our hearts,
for the I-am-with-you-always.
Waiting for the great coming
of the reign of God
when each table is a banquet
And bread lines are no more.*

*There are three
Comings to this season,
and three waitings,
and three yearnings.
And God the answer
to them all.*