

Active Waiting
November 30, 2008
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I think we all have some questions as we enter into this Advent season. I know I do. Some of the questions are pretty trivial, such as, “How come we can’t seem to get that big tree in the Sanctuary to stand up straight, and why do the lights seem to be missing in that one area?”

I happen to know the answer to that one. The very bottom of the tree is bent a few degrees and bending it back to straight doesn’t seem to be a very wise idea. Why is there a hole in the lights? That just happens!

Another of those trivial questions might be, “I wonder when I’m going to write that Christmas letter?” Not quite as trivial I suppose.

Another, “I wonder what Lynn, my wife, is going to get me for Christmas?” Or I wonder what I’m going to get Lynn for Christmas...that is not trivial either.

Of course, some of the questions are much more serious, like, “Will there be something this year that breaks the shell of skepticism and doubt about what Christmas has become?”

Or maybe the question for some will be a haunting one, like “What will Christmas be like this year...now that my spouse is gone?”

What will it be like this year?

We’ve all got our own questions as we enter into the Advent season.

Would you pray with me?

O God may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts and minds help to carry us through the days to come. Amen.

Active Waiting

Growing up, the beginning of the Advent season, which we just naturally assumed was the Christmas season, was the time when my brother, sister and I would get out the Sears or JC Penney Catalogs and go through those things with a fine tooth comb looking for things to put on our Christmas list. I would look at the BB guns and hunting clothes, Footballs, Bicycles and toys. Oh, it was exciting and sometimes if one of us were really bold, we would turn the corner down on a page where we saw something we wanted in hope that someone would notice.

Did you ever do that? Go through those catalogs? And then it seemed like December 25th would never come. December would just drag out day after day. The weekends were bad enough but the weeks in school...interminable torture.

Inevitably, sometime during the month of December, my family would pack up the Green Ford LTD Station Wagon, my brother and sister and I would squeeze into the back seat and we'd make the three and a half hour drive to Sioux Falls to do our Christmas Shopping. Oh it was a glorious day. Three and a half hours of anticipation. I don't know if that's what my Mom and Dad thought about it, but that's what we thought!

I never even knew there was an Advent season back then...It was just Christmas. Sometime, I don't even know when, I suddenly became aware that there was this other season that the church was trying to tell me was important and it was called Advent.

Advent is that time before Christmas that Marilyn Brown Oden calls, "a time of longing for life to be different, a time of waiting in hopeful anticipation...for the birth of the Christ child in the world and in our own hearts."

My brother and sister and I, we were all atwitter with hopeful anticipation. But the hope then was mostly just in whether or not we would get what we thought we wanted.

That kind of hope is different than what the church is talking about.

There are things that array themselves against Hope. That dissipate Hope.

I know you couldn't help but be shocked and appalled by the report from Long Island where a Wal-Mart employee was trampled to death by Christmas shoppers (no doubt many of whom were Christian) who couldn't wait to get into Wal-Mart for the bargains. I watched a report on CNN from the police there, who said that when they finally were able to get to the man and begin to attend to him, the Police were still being jostled and shoved by the shoppers going into the store.

Unbelievable. Is that what Christmas is?

Yesterday, I read that the amount of money spent on candy alone during the Christmas season is greater than the annual budgets of the American Cancer Society, Habitat for Humanity and the American Heart Association combined.

Candy? Is that what Christmas is?

Of course there was the terrorism in India and all those deaths and injuries and terrible hunger in places like Zimbabwe. My son told me that he'd heard a report on NPR this last week that people there were searching through the feces of animals to find undigested seeds and kernels to eat.

It knocks the wind out of you. Is that what Christmas is around the world?

There are the stories in the local papers telling us about the increasing numbers of people who are needing resources from the outreach organizations like Jeffco Action Center and the Arvada Food Bank.

Is that what Christmas is like this year?

And so here we are at the start of Advent and you came just hoping for some good word, something that will lighten the mood, turn your thoughts and minds to something positive, something hopeful. And here is this scripture...

“But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.”

Oh man. That's rough. It doesn't sound good does it? This section of the gospel of Mark is called the Little Apocalypse. And if there's one thing we Methodists aren't very good at it is Apocalypticism. End times stuff.

We're good at Grace, and sanctification, and openness, and inclusion but Apocalypticism? We'd just as soon give that over to some other denomination thank you very much.

And this Apocalypticism is about Jesus coming back, and about keeping awake while people are waiting because they thought Jesus was coming back any minute.

This scripture gets to the heart of the kind of waiting that goes on.

There is a difference between waiting for Christmas and waiting for the Christ. We all know when Christmas is going to be here. Some of us have that date circled in red on our calendars. We know exactly when Christmas is coming.

What we have difficulty with is waiting for the Christ to show up. What's that supposed to look like? What will be doing when that happens, what will that feel like?

Waiting for the Christ is going to require some different kind of waiting than waiting for Christmas.

I think that's what the passage is getting at...what to do while you are waiting.

Recently, I was in Golden to get a motorcycle permit. I went to the DMV, and that, as many of you know is an exercise in waiting. I took the test and passed and then was told to wait until my number came up. My number was 128, I looked at the board and it said 35. I didn't bring a book, I didn't bring anything, I just sat there, like a bump on a log. What could I do? Stuck. Passive waiting.

But some waiting is more active. Connie Koenecke is the Church Administrator, Her daughter, Kelly and her son-in-law Mike had a baby a couple of weeks ago. Connie was not waiting passively for that baby. She was buying outfits at the KDD clothing sale, she was helping Kelly get the

room ready and making sure they had all the things you need when you have a baby in the house. There was nothing passive about her waiting.

I have a feeling that the second kind of waiting, the waiting that Connie was involved in is closer to what is expected of us.

Oh it's different. It might end up in us ringing those Salvation Army Bells or grabbing some tickets off the boards in the Narthex and the Fellowship Center. It may be volunteering down at the Food Bank. I don't know what it might look like. You probably have an idea of what it might look like. I suspect you do...

Amen.

Hope always stands in contradiction to what we are experiencing. Teilard de Chardin said, "The world will belong tomorrow to those who brought it the greatest hope."