

First Sunday of Advent – November 30, 2014
UNEXPECTED GIFTS – Hope

Texts: Isaiah 11:1-9 and Luke 1:39-55

We Presbyterians observe the season of Advent, which means, unlike much of the rest of our culture, we do not proceed straight from Thanksgiving turkeys and pumpkin pies to Christmas trees and "Jingle Bells" — a transition which feels more and more each year like one consumer feeding frenzy pressing hard into the next. While we have decorated for Christmas, we won't plunge ahead just yet.

Instead, we will pause these next four weeks -- to prepare our hearts for receiving Christ. The world of consumption has begun buying gifts ad nauseum, yet we will consider the unexpected gifts of the season -- gifts that we have received from God, gifts that help us expect the coming Messiah.

The Advent season reminds us that we are waiting.



Waiting is not a very popular pastime, not something most people think about with great sympathy, but rather think it a waste of time. Some people would describe waiting as an awful desert -- between where they are and where they want to go. And people do not like such a place. It makes them feel anxious.

We touched on this last week a bit when we considered Jesus' words on worry.

Waiting is made more difficult because we are fearful. So many people are afraid – afraid of inner feelings, afraid of other people, and also afraid of the future. Fearful people have a hard time waiting, yet that is what faithful people are called to do.

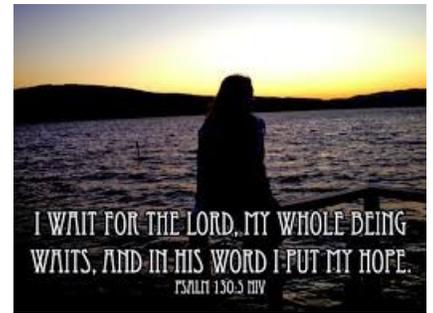
All the figures who appear on the first pages of Luke's Gospel are waiting. Simeon and Anna, who were there at the temple when Jesus was brought in, are waiting. The whole opening scene of the good news is filled with waiting people.

And right at the beginning all those people in some way or another hear the words, often on the lips of an angel, "Do not be afraid. I have something good to say to you." These words set the tone and the context. Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary, Simeon and Anna are all waiting for something new and good to happen to them.

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The psalms are full of this attitude: “My soul is waiting for the Lord. I count on his word. My soul is longing for the Lord more than a watchman for daybreak.”

My soul is waiting for the Lord – that is the song that reverberates all through the Hebrew Scriptures.



Mary, along with Elizabeth and Zechariah, Anna and Simeon have been able to wait hopefully, to be attentive, to live expectantly. They cherish this hope as a precious gift.

But what is the nature of this hopeful waiting? How do they do it, and how are we called to appreciate this gift with them?

Three things we can learn from the first pages of the Gospel, highlighted for me by the late Henri Nouwen in a little essay:

First, we see waiting with a sense of promise. “Zechariah, ... your wife Elizabeth is to bear you a son” “Mary...Listen! You are to conceive and bear a son.” People who wait have received a promise that allows them to wait. They have received something – a gift – a gift that is at work in them, like a seed that has started to grow.

This is very important. We can only really wait, if what we are waiting for has already begun for us. So waiting is never a movement from nothing to something. It is always a movement from something to something more. Mary and Elizabeth, especially, were living with a promise that nurtured them, the promise itself growing inside them!

Second, waiting is active. Most of us think of waiting as something very passive, a hopeless state determined by events totally out of our hands.

[IMAGE – Waiting for Bus]

The bus is late? You cannot do anything about it, so you have to stand there in the rain and just wait for it. It is not difficult to understand the irritation people feel when somebody says, “Just wait.” Words like that seem to push into passivity.



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But there is none of this passivity in scripture. Those who are waiting are waiting very actively. They know that what they are waiting for is growing. The secret of waiting is the faith that the seed has been planted, that something has begun. It involves nurturing the moment, as a mother nurtures the child that is growing in her.

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Elizabeth and Mary were very present to the moment. That is why they could hear the angel. They were alert, attentive to the voice that spoke to them and said, “Don’t be afraid. Something is happening to you. Pay attention.”

But there is more. **Waiting is open-ended.** **Open-ended waiting is hard for us** because we tend to wait for something very concrete, for something that we wish to have. Much of our waiting is filled with wishes: “I wish that I would have a job. I wish that the weather would be better. I wish that the pain would go away.” We are full of wishes, and our waiting easily gets entangled in those wishes. For this reason, a lot of our waiting is not open-ended. Instead, our waiting is a way of controlling the future. We want the future to go in a very specific direction, and if this does not happen we are disappointed and can even slip into despair.

But Elizabeth and Mary were not filled with wishes. They were filled with hope. Hope is something very different. Hope is trusting that something will be fulfilled, but fulfilled according to the promises and not just according to our wishes. Therefore, hope is always open-ended.

Sometimes we have to let go of our wishes and start hoping. Only after we are willing to let go of our wishes can something really new, something beyond our expectations happen. Just imagine what Mary was actually saying in the words, “I am the handmaid of the Lord...let what you have said be done to me.” She was saying, “I don’t know what this all means, but I trust that good things will happen.” She trusted so deeply that her waiting was open to all possibilities. And she did not need to control them. She believed that when she listened carefully, she could trust what was going to happen.

What happened when Mary received the words of promise? She went to Elizabeth. Something was happening to Elizabeth as well as to Mary. But how could they live that out?

They came together and enabled each other to wait. Mary’s visit made Elizabeth aware of what she was waiting for herself. The child leapt for joy in her. Mary affirmed Elizabeth’s waiting. And then Elizabeth said to Mary, “Blessed is she who believed that the promise made to her by the Lord would be fulfilled.” And Mary responded, “My soul proclaims that greatness of the Lord.” She burst into joy herself. These two women created space for each other to wait. They affirmed for each other that something was happening that was worth waiting for.



Here is a model in miniature of Christian community. Our church can be, should be a community of support, celebration, and affirmation in which we can lift up what has already begun in us. Mary and Elizabeth show us the way – how to form community -- to be together, gathered around a promise, affirming that something is really happening in us.

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Together we keep the promise of God alive among us and take it seriously, so that it can grow and become stronger in each one. We have received the unexpected gift of hope.

But it's a gift to be shared. Hope compels us to enable each other to live with courage, trusting God's Spirit in us, allowing us to live in this world without being seduced constantly by despair, lostness, judgment.

And we give hope away to others, hope is a gift not just to be received, but to be given.

Thursday, while most of us were enjoying Thanksgiving Dinner with our families, there were many in our region who had no families or resources with which to celebrate.

Four of our East Union members helped serve a community meal in Arnold. They gave the gift of hope. They took pumpkin pies they had baked at the church on Wednesday and added them to the Thanksgiving feast. Dave Nichols, Bev Schubert, Darlene Fryer and Ted Barsolo spent Thanksgiving sharing hope.

The morning after Thanksgiving wasn't Black at all here at East Union. Tim, Joey and Julia Resciniti were joined by several East Union friends as they loaded up the Christmas gifts you purchased for the children six hours away in an Appalachian outpost called Cabwaylingo. When the vehicle was finally packed tightly, Tim, Joey and Julia began the journey of hope to West Virginia. They were delivering gifts of hope.



This Advent, we are invited to WATCH...to embrace the gift of Hope...to wait and worship and serve in the knowledge that God is coming to us. Let us be people of hope, watching alertly together, helping each other spiritually... so that when the Word appears it can become flesh in us!