

Waiting

Jeremiah 33:14-16

First Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, NC

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The other day I found myself trying to explain Advent to someone who had never heard of it and I was reminded how difficult it is to explain. The response to my first attempt was: why are we waiting for something that has already happened? which is a logical response and impossible to reply to in a satisfactory manner.

When I was young I felt the anticipation of Advent and enjoyed the waiting because there was a concrete thing to be waiting for: December 25th/Christmas day and all it meant about birth but also great food, family and presents. It was easy to make a connection between the joy of waiting and what was worth waiting for.

And then after Christmas it was back to school, back to real life. The waiting was over.

Now as an adult I see the waiting does not end, not the waiting and the longing for peace on earth. The joy of opening Christmas presents doesn't overshadow the pain of cancer, war in the middle east, and a deep sense of loneliness. Any or all of these things come when they wish and shiny packages don't undo their harm.

The waiting does not end but now and then I remember that advent isn't about waiting. It's about catching a glimpse, like a tinted window on a train car that drops down for just a minute every now and then for us to see where we're headed, a reminder that this is about the journey to a destination which cannot be fully known or understood while still on the journey. Advent is when that window drops for a moment and we look longingly into the horizon to see what God has in store.

That journey, that train ride, is this life we are given. And what is on the other side of that window is the kingdom God is actively bringing in.

But from this seat we have when the windows are closed, things often look bleak.

Despair comes to us in global sized waves; war, terrorism, famine, economic destruction. We worry about what will come, what we might have to face, how to recover or restore what once was. This is exactly the situation the Israelites were in when Jeremiah first wrote these words. Babylon was about to deliver the final blow to Jerusalem and the destruction would be complete.

Despair also comes to us in deep and personal ways. Illness, loss, regret. This kind of despair is also very isolating, it brings the shades down and can make us think we are the only ones feeling this way and we are the only ones who can make ourselves feel better.

Despair hinders our ability to imagine something better and that is exactly what Advent calls for – something better. We think of it primarily as waiting - and for something that has already occurred – there is no need for creative thinking if the future has already happened. But that is precisely what God is offering, a chance to dream and to give witness to that dream.

Because this call to imagine is not just to make ourselves feel better it is to give voice to what is possible and that giving voice intersects with the Spirit's work and God's own lamentations. And that is when change comes.

Cristal Logothetis (logo-thet-is) caught a glimpse of hope through the despair on the news. Cristal is a mother and businesswoman in California who saw the image of the little 3 year old Syrian refugee whose body washed ashore in Kos, Greece. She wanted to do something, as so many of us did, but something stirred her imagination in the simplest of ways. She saw so many refugees carrying their children in their arms, and as a mom, couldn't imagine making that journey carrying her small child the entire way. Having in-laws in Greece she thought could help so she started a campaign to collect baby carriers for refugees making the long trek to freedom. Initially hoping to collect a couple hundred carriers, over 3500 have been donated and 2500 hand delivered directly to the refugee families by volunteers. The volunteers, mostly moms themselves, wait for the refugees on the shores and in harbors in Greece and Turkey. They often only have a few minutes to teach them how to use the carriers before the families have to move on. Cristal saw only despair initially, but also caught a glimpse of what could be and she created the now named nonprofit: "Carry the future".

To carry the future, that is Advent. It is not a stagnant posture of passive waiting. It is catching a glimpse of what God has in store and carrying it towards us into the now. No one articulates this better than Walter Brueggeman, author of the book, *The Prophetic Imagination*, he writes:

"The prophet engages in futuring fantasy. The prophet does not ask if the vision can be implemented, for questions of implementation are of no consequence until the vision can be imagined. The imagination must come before the implementation. Our culture is competent to implement almost anything and to imagine almost nothing. The same royal consciousness that make it possible to implement anything and everything is the one that shrinks imagination because imagination is a danger. Thus every totalitarian regime is frightened of the artist. It is the vocation of the prophet to keep alive the ministry of imagination, to keep on conjuring and proposing futures alternative to the single one the king wants to urge as the only thinkable one."

Here is the good news: We are Easter people, the most imaginative emancipating act has been accomplished. There is no reason we should allow ourselves to become captives to the regime. The regime takes many forms, and we give it many forms. King, terrorist, cultural imperatives, poverty...it has many names.

The Advent seasons always starts with a glimpse towards the future "the days are surely coming"...it says in the gospel text for today. These words are a helpful and opposing flip to everything else American culture tries to do in the lead up to Christmas... foster nostalgia. The stress of the holidays is often a result of trying to re-create something that we think we remember

we once had – perfect family, perfectly set tables, perfect gifts, beautiful memories. Each Christmas we try to create a past worth remembering.

But that is not the scripture call for the season. The scriptural call is to envision what our future could be in God's hands, not to focus on what was.

As Christians that's what we're called to do – challenge the old ways, challenge anything that hurts the vulnerable, incites hate or violence, limits opportunities to freedom. We work for the future. We are not nostalgic people - we are imaginative people because God is an imaginative creator. We worship a God who breaks the yoke of oppression, who refashions instruments of war into instruments of harvest. Swords into plowshares.

God is not in the South park mall Christmas tree or the perfectly addressed holiday cards. God is in Crisis Assistance Ministry and Room in the Inn, and God is in the well stocked community food pantry, and the letters to sponsored children in Haiti. God is in the communion brought to hospital rooms and retirement homes. God is in the prayers spoken across prison bars by chaplains, God is in the voice of the one who says "I can see a different way, a way not bound by fear or security or economic sensibilities". As Bruggemann would say: we are called to hear the prophet's voice not as a commercial break from our regular programming but as the overture "playing in real time" to stir in us a sense of the aria about to break forth." (Deborah Block)

This is not a wait it out scenario. This is a catch a glimpse moment, a time to perk up your ears and get tuned into the Spirit's music. Advent is an invitation to look despair in the eye and imagine something bigger and more powerful.

Dale Mullenix is the executive director of Urban Ministry Center and was recently named a Charlottean of the year. In an interview with Charlotte magazine he described a powerful lesson he learned as a ten year old during the funeral for his twelve year old brother. During the funeral he realized all the mourners were there out of love, and he said:

All of a sudden it occurred to me that the feeling of being loved was more powerful than the grief I was feeling. That was my first-ever theological conclusion, the first belief system of thought I ever had: Wow, the feeling of being loved is more powerful than the worst grief I ever could have imagined.

That has shaped my life ever since.

If we can create an atmosphere of people being loved here, that's more powerful than the worst addiction and the worst homelessness there is. Dale Mullenix

Love is stronger than grief. The future is stronger than our present. Because of what God is doing. This is good news.

<http://www.charlottemagazine.com/Charlotte-Magazine/December-2015/Charlotteans-of-the-Year-2015-Dale-Mullennix/>