

“Hope-filled Waiting”

(Isaiah 11: 1-10)

We begin the season of Advent today and I am struck by the realization that this season is at once confounding and comforting; it is a four week journey where we find ourselves at one moment frazzled by a frenzied pace only to be suddenly stilled by the words of *Silent Night* or a card from an old friend tucked in-between a credit card offer and an electric bill. The well worn pathway that leads us to a drafty, dusty, dark stable is familiar. The cast of characters does not change from year to year: John the Baptizer, Mary, Joseph, shepherds and angels, wise one and Herod and of course a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes; they are all waiting for us but each year seem just a little different than what we remember or maybe we are different this year. It is a bit like when Gina and I return to the Twin Cities where we met and were married we at once struck by a sense that the place feels familiar but different. We pass by the hotel where we had our wedding reception and ask each other when did that Home Depot go up? Or we drive by our first apartment and wonder was that house always there? What confounds me more than any other part of Advent this year is how the two twin themes of this season: prepare the way and simply wait sit side by side not the least bit troubled by the presence of the other. Each year we are given these two themes of preparing and waiting as though they don't contradict each other, the preacher usually doesn't offer a wink and a nudge, nudge, we just sort of expect that this is what we are supposed to hear this time of year.

To be sure, I think we resolve some of the built in tension of Advent by embracing the idea of preparing the way fuller and easier than waiting. After all there are cookies to bake, parties to attend, trees to decorate, shopping to be done, presents to wrap, and did I mention there are only twenty-five more days left. The constant motion that is the month called December makes it seem like we are always preparing for, cleaning up after or collapsing in bed in a restless slumber before getting up the next day to do it all again.

Waiting is different. To be sure the word “waiting” evokes something within us that is in no way emotionally neutral. Wander into a waiting room where there are patches of worn carpet from pacing and tattered magazines are scattered about, watch the body language of people in-line at a store tapping their toes incessantly and letting out audible sighs adding to the anxiety in the air, or notice how your own shoulders tense the moment the annoying Muzac comes over the phone while you are on hold only to be occasionally interrupted by a recorded monotone voice telling you to please be patient as your call is important. Perhaps there are too many negative feelings this single word awakens within us, too many obstacles to overcome especially this year to embrace waiting as an important part of our Advent experience in 2009.

And yet, I am not quite willing to let go of waiting and rely solely on the image of preparing the way and inadvertently release the creative tension between the two. The implicit, underlying message of Isaiah this morning is about the sacredness of waiting and about being aware of the mystery of God revealed in our midst. The green shoot that springs forth from the stump, the image of life coming out of a place thought to be cut off and left to rot, new life in a place of death, a sign of hope in a small stump thought to be devoid of such a possibility; friends this is a powerful image especially this year. When job loss and economic anxiety and strained family relationships make headlines day after day, here in our community it can feel like we are wandering in a time when the forest has been clear cut.

Searching for the slightest sign of hope is futile and folly some say. And yet, the practice of waiting reminds us that the small green shoot takes time to germinate and break forth from brokenness. Ask any child who has ever taken a Dixie cup, packed it with dirt, stuck a seed in the middle, carefully added a few drops of water and placed it in the sunlight and he will tell you, waiting is necessary within nature. Creation does not have DSL, it does not instant message, have a face book page or twitter; creation's pace moves in rhythm with and response to its surroundings. We saw this in our own garden this year as we waited and watched eagerly for our tomatoes to ripen or I remember the corncob David Arndt brought to Consistory last month to tell us it was better to let nature take care of the moisture than use a drying machine; life in creation moves at a different pace than most of us do today and nature moves especially at a savory pace compared to this time of year. The shoot, Isaiah proclaims that will spring forth from the stump is not, I assume, of the bean stock variety that blooms over night as our hero Jack slept in the well loved fairy tale of my childhood. The green leaf takes its own time to grow, inch by inch.

This image, it is helpful to remember, is offered to the Israelites at a time when they felt very much like that stump. They had been captured by the Babylonians, cut off from the land, carted away to a foreign place, the lineage of Jesse, who was the father of King David, in one fell swoop seemed irreparably and forever destroyed. The temple lay in ruins. Like Chicken Little, it seemed the sky was falling and the people were heartbroken. This resonates with me. All around us the anxiety of this year makes waiting that much more difficult. We want to move, we want to do something, even if it is bake cookies for the pastor. Moreover to even venture that this season could be about hope-filled waiting seems like naïveté at best. And yet, if Isaiah could journey with a people who felt cut off by the experiences of daily living, if in the midst of destruction Isaiah could wait and watch, if Isaiah foresaw a time in God's future when new life would spring forth from brokenness then perhaps there is no better time for hope-filled waiting than right here and right now.

To be sure, growth we hope to see takes time. Growth means waiting. Growth means being patient. Growth also means being watchful and observant. On Tuesday this past week was Ethan's fifty-fifth day of school...only a couple more thousand left before graduation. It has been an adjustment for us all. But as I look back to that bright day in September when I first dropped him off, I am amazed at how much he has learned. To be honest, I did not always see this day in and day out. Sometimes in the midst of waiting, to use an appropriate pun, we cannot see the forest for the trees. But if we are intentional, over the next twenty five days, as we wait for the birth of Jesus, there can be moments of new life and growth.

You see, preparing the way and waiting need not be in tension with each other, but can compliment and bring out the creativity of the other. Sometimes preparing the way in the midst of the holiday pace is to stop, sit still, stare at twinkling lights on a tree or listen to carols, pick up your Bible and catch up on the Jesse Tree readings or eat a cookie you bake using your grandmother's recipe that with the first bite instantly transports you back to her kitchen. Sometimes, simply waiting means being aware and alert and prayerful. Waiting can open us to God. And yet, too often I fall into the trap of perpetual motion to fill the discomfort that can come from waiting. I've noticed this more and more in my life recently. You see, I find myself in the messy middle of waiting for news about something very important. About a month ago, I sent in an application for a doctorate of ministry program at Luther Seminary in the Twin Cities. I did everything I could to prepare the way to be accepted, poor Gina must have read my essays twenty times. And now, I wait. I await word about whether I am

accepted into the program or not and I know the news will not come until late February. If one trap of waiting is an overflowing calendar, another trap would be to wait alone. Isaiah would have us do neither this Advent. Waiting, intentional and prayerful waiting can connect us deeper to the One who is Emmanuel, God with us. Waiting, intentional and prayerful waiting is best done with others. You see, there is no plan B for my doctorate program and so it might be better to keep it to myself or in the confines of Consistory least I don't get in. But friends, I don't sense that is the best way to wait nor does it feel like the most faithful.

Waiting and preparing can be two sides of the same coin; these two themes will travel with us throughout Advent. And so, this morning, I invite you to think about places where you are waiting. Waiting for news about your health. Waiting for news about a neighbor's job. Waiting for the grief of spending your first Christmas without someone you love to subside. Waiting for the Christmas program of a child or grandchild. Waiting for a relative to come home in a few weeks. Wherever, whatever, however you find yourself waiting right now, I want to invite you to come forward and offer that place of waiting as a prayer and be anointed. And while you wait for your turn, we will sing to each other. We will sing about Emmanuel, God with us, who comes to us and shares with us in all the goodness and fragileness of life. And may that truth help us live into and experience hope-filled waiting throughout our Advent journey this year. Thanks be to God and let the people of God say, "Amen!"