

1Corinthians 1:3-9
November 27, 2011

South Plains

waiting with the Christian hope of God's advent; God's coming into our world.

From Whining to Hoping

When I chose the title for this sermon, I was looking at the Isaiah reading which is a lament, a sorrowful cry for help that descends into whining before the prophet finds hope. However, as I thought more about the people I know, I realized that I don't hear very much whining today. There is sadness certainly, and there is anxiety, but not much whining, except of course among the politicians. Instead of whining, most of us are waiting. Admittedly, we often wait impatiently, and occasionally we wait angrily if the delay seems unreasonable. But, we wait anyway.

Because Advent is the season of waiting, as we wait for the coming of the Messiah, our challenge is to have the wait transformed into hope. My dentist's office is outfitted with comfortable chairs and a stack of good magazines because patients often must wait for the dentist to finish with the previous appointment. That kind of waiting is called 'cooling our heels' or 'twiddling our thumbs.' There's not much hope sitting in the dentist's office. But when a runner has lined up on the starting line to wait for the gun, it is a different kind of waiting, charged with anticipation, excitement and hope. We celebrate the season of Advent during the four weeks before Christmas in order to spend this time immersed in

There's a lot of anticipation in scripture as the people of God look forward to divine intervention in their history, whether it be salvation from their enemies, rescue from the famines that savaged the Holy Land, or healing from disease. Their faith led them to anticipate God's help. For some of us, this is such a period in our personal history. Not only are we waiting for the national economy to improve, some of us wait for healing, others wait for a better job, and all of us wait for the international conflict with our enemies to settle down to a dull, background roar instead of the surprise attacks that all too often create a sense of dread when we travel.

I suspect the whining we hear in the Isaiah reading grew out of weariness with conflicts with other countries that had left Israel on the losing side. Since we're also trapped in conflicts that we can neither win nor lose, it may help to look briefly at the Isaiah passage. The prophet begs God to tear open the heavens so the enemies of Israel will know that they have made themselves enemies of the Lord God Almighty. Because the Lord has not come to their rescue, the people commit sins and Isaiah says, "there is no one who calls on your name (64:7)." In his despair the prophet says their sinning is God's fault: "because you hid yourself," he accuses the Lord, "we transgressed (v. 5)." Ever since Adam pointed his finger at Eve for eating the forbidden fruit, the human tendency is to blame someone else for

our sins, even God. “God made me this way. I can’t help myself.” It’s true; we cannot help the way we are. We do have the freedom, however, to respond to our gifts and our disabilities for good or ill. In the end, Isaiah’s lament acknowledges to God, “You are our Father.” That relationship puts us in the Heavenly Father’s care. The whining dies with that affirmation.

The Corinthian Christians, half a millennia later, may have been a little more like us than like their Old Testament forebears. Like South Plains, the church in Corinth had a lot of well-educated members. The city was famous for its sophistication. But, all their learning and their cosmopolitan experiences did not protect them from temptation and sin. If you have ever read First Corinthians all the way through, you know they must have practiced some kinky and contentious Christianity. Most of this letter and Second Corinthians as well is Paul trying to straighten them out. By the way, if you’ve ever wished the church in the twenty-first century could be more like the early church, then you need to read First Corinthians. I should thank God every day I was not their pastor.

Despite all their troubles, Paul loved them. He knew they were waiting expectantly for the second Advent of Jesus. Some of their troubles were caused by a misunderstanding of how they should be waiting for the second Advent, the second coming. In two words, Paul tells them and us how to wait: Be thankful!

He leads by example, introducing his letter with a prayer of thanksgiving: “I give thanks to my God always for you.” He is grateful for a church chock full of selfish sinners who fight with each other. Why is he so grateful for them? “Because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus.... You are not lacking in any spiritual gifts as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ (1:4, 7).” Paul is thankful for them because they are gifted spiritually.

Now we might wonder just how sincere Paul is about thanking God for their gifts. The Corinthians were so proud of their sophistication that they looked down on brothers and sisters in the church who were poor and they fought with anybody who did not agree with their ideas. Nevertheless, the church really did have some smart, talented people. They were gifted.

Very subtly, Paul is reminding them and us that all our gifts come from God. We are not well-spoken or comfortably fed this holiday because we worked hard to capitalize on our native abilities and opportunities. If we have a good education, we did not develop our minds de novo, out of thin air. Behind our work, behind our understanding lie the gifts and opportunities that come from none other than God. Behind our groaning Thanksgiving tables lies the bounty of a God who blessed us with a prosperous land.

The reason we're waiting for Christmas is because someone told us about Jesus. The faith in our hearts, great or small, rich or poor, active or somnolent, was seeded by the Spirit of God and took root in our lives by grace. We wait for faith to bear fruit with hope in God's good time. This does not mean we do nothing to live into that hope. Indeed, when we look carefully at the lament of Isaiah, we see that his anguish is so sharp because he recalls the past deeds of God:

You came down, the mountains quaked at your
Presence.

You meet those who gladly do right.
We are all the work of your hand.

As one preacher says, "There's nothing wrong with hope in the not yet, but it begins with gratitude for the already." (Christine Chakoian in *Christian Century*, 12.15, p. 21)
Simple gratitude prepares the way for hope.

This holiday season, more than any other celebration in the church year, will stir up the memory of unfulfilled hopes:
People no longer sitting around the table.
Dreams of prosperity shattered.
Homesickness.
Relationships that ended unhappily.
Illness putting a damper on holiday spirits.
It may be something as simple as a broken toy that casts a shadow across the celebrations.

Those laments are real. Most will go unspoken because we do not want to seem like we're whining. Nevertheless the hurt is often deep and permanent. We are waiting on God.

To follow the example of Paul's letter, we can fill the time by giving thanks, as we remember blessings from the past, rehearsing occasions when God did help us, and especially reminding ourselves that the reason we call upon God in our sorrow is because God called us – called us his own in Christ Jesus.

The promise inherent in the gospel according to Advent is twofold: God has come to us in Jesus Christ, and God will come again. That is our hope. In the meantime, the time in between, we celebrate what we know from the past and what we believe by faith will be the future.

That future is not secured by our efforts to do the right thing, as important as that is. It is surely not guaranteed by the possessions we accumulate, as comfortable as they make us, nor by the people we know whose relationships we value. No, the future we have with Christ is coming because God is trustworthy. The promises are good. Christ has come. Christ will come again. God is faithful.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.