

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Luke 1:26-38, 2:1-7 *"Patience & Hope"*

Advent ought to teach us something about patience - we who are so bad at waiting! Isaiah announced *"Unto us a child is born... and the government shall be on the shoulders of this Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace..."* (Is 8), but would wait almost 600 years to see that fulfilled!

Mary & Joseph waited 9 long months to see Gabriel's "annunciation" fulfilled - time enough to go through with a planned marriage that was now the talk of the neighborhood, time to deal with the whisperings of promiscuity on her part, and weakness and family shame on his. Their wait concludes with the doubtful validation of some shepherds! And when "the Son of the Most High" is born, they have to wait 30 years for him to start his ministry! (Maybe a small prod to those of us who can't wait for our 20-somethings to become adults and not overgrown teens!).

1) *Waiting For Christmas*

Waiting is hard; we imagine it might have been easier in the slower pace of the ancient world, but it is like torture for us. Advent is too long, we want Christmas! In our consumer society, merchants can't wait for "the holidays" to begin - so our local drug store put out its Christmas wares on the day after Halloween - even Thanksgiving doesn't act as a buffer any more!

There is now a local race to see whose Christmas tree is the first in town to be lit: it used to be ours at the Congregational Church, after our Pageant; then the Chamber of Commerce introduced one up-town which they light a week earlier; and then *they* were outdone by a new one outside the new bank, which this year was lit before Thanksgiving! And of course our churches have fallen into the same thing - on the First Sunday in Advent we decorate fully for Christmas! Even the gifts we give to needy people now have to be in before mid-December, so they can reach their recipients in time! It's little wonder that some families are exhausted by celebrating "Christmas" long before it even arrives!

2) *Waiting For Anything*

But of course it's not just Christmas. In our society, we can't wait for anything. Our children have to mature fast so they can start competing in the big world. By their teens, they are accomplished musicians; champion sports players before they finish high school. If they're not, there's no chance to start these things in their college years! No wonder some of them drop all sports when they reach college. No wonder so many of them drop out of college - did you know the average college graduation rate is only about 60%, and that it takes most students 5-6 years to get their Bachelor's degrees? No wonder some of them are trying to recapture their

teen years in their 20s and 30s! If you have done everything by the time you're 18, what do you do after that?

Then there is the issue of waiting to buy things. There was once a practice called "saving," which meant waiting until you had painstakingly accumulated the money you needed to buy new clothes, or new furniture, or a piece of equipment, or a car, or put a deposit on a house. But then someone invented a small plastic card that you could hand over to the merchant, sign your name, and "pay later" (with interest, of course). And soon nobody waited for anything any more, "saving" became unknown, and was replaced by something called "credit" - a fancy name for your supposed ability to pay off *debt*.

Today the average American family owes \$15,000 in non-mortgage debt. The credit card companies are now telling us that *one* late payment by us allows them to raise the interest rate on our debt to 29.99% - and that on-time payments for 6 months after that *may* get our rate reduced again on *new* purchases; but the 29.99% will remain in effect on all our *existing* debt! This is "credit" at the consumer level - who knows what goes on at the level of corporate and government finance!

But we want what we want, and we want it now! So on the morning after Thanksgiving, when stores were opening at 2am or 5am, a man was *killed*, trampled to death, by a crowd of shoppers who *could not wait* to get into a Wal-Mart to buy a reduced price plasma TV. And to put that in perspective, you have to know that one survey showed that 80% of shoppers on "Black Friday" were not buying gifts for their loved ones, but *for themselves!* We can't even wait for people to give us Christmas gifts; we have to go out and buy what we want for ourselves, and

then tell our families "here, you can give me this - wrap it up for me!"

3) *Why Wait?*

Will we ever learn to wait again? Why should we? If we are headed for another Great Depression, maybe we should grab all we can while we can! Who wants to wait?

But at another level, maybe at a more Christian level, we know this can't be the answer. Perhaps *this* recession is going to teach us how to slow down, how to prioritize our time and money, how to wait. Maybe we would all enjoy a slower pace of life - though it would take some getting used to. If you ever watch old movies, even from the 70s, you're struck by how slow-moving they were! Today, multiple images flash across our screens in tiny fractions of a second, and we think waiting 10 seconds for a web page to load, or 30 seconds for a computer to reboot, is intolerable!

So maybe we need to rediscover that from God's perspective, anything worthwhile takes time. For him "a thousand years are like a day." And that's not because he's old-fashioned and slow; it's because of the materials he is working with. The truth is, they are fragile, full of faults, holes, weaknesses. It takes time and patience to put them together into something good and durable.

That is the truth about our world. Everything we make is shot through with weakness, with frailty. That's true of our relationships, of our families, of our own inner lives, just as it is of our society and our manufactured hardware. There are no perfect cars, or TVs, or homes; just as there are no perfect marriages, or children. That's what it means to live in a fallen world. In fact, anything that comes out well is a gift of grace!

So we have to relearn that pride in what we have made or achieved has always to be tempered with the recognition that these things are not perfect and will not last forever. That is very hard for the kind of perfectionists many of us have become! But it's easy to convince ourselves that we have created something really good – a career, a home, a family, a church, a nation – and then to be destroyed when we discover that it is in fact imperfect and fragile. How many marriages fail because one partner expects a level of perfection that no-one can provide? How much load do we put on relationships that they cannot possibly bear? How many children are driven to distraction by the “helicopter parents” who hover constantly over their heads, and break out into wild behavior as soon as they leave home?

We live in a fallen world, and we work with fragile materials and imperfect people – including us! And the only recipe for sanity in a world like this is to learn patience; to recognize that the good we have striven for may not even come to fruition in our day; that our children may become mature and make their marks in the world when we are long gone; that we may not see the Promised Land, but like Moses, get a glimpse of it from a distance, while another generation enters in.

I read recently a book loaned me by a member of the congregation by an author who talks to people about faith and life on an NPR radio station in the mid-west. She reminded me of these biblical ideas about the frailty of our world, and she evoked theologian Reinhold Niebuhr who in the 1930s-50s insisted on this perspective in the face of the overly optimistic social agendas and liberal theology that prevailed then.

Echoing Niebuhr, she says there is only one way to deal with this human frailty: to look at the world realistically, see it as God sees it;

and then embrace his forgiveness and by his grace receive two gifts: *patience and hope*. Patience allows you to see that nothing we make is perfect, that time and effort and care are needed – and that we will have to *wait* for perfection. Hope makes us see that the imperfections are not the whole story, and that in God's grace, things and relationships can become *good enough* to be of real value – but that this too takes time.

Seeing the world as God sees it, says author Krista Tippett, means by grace being gifted with “*patience that the culture cannot sustain, and hope the world cannot imagine.*” Patience and hope, patience and hope, patience and hope. Waiting for God's timing, God's rescuing, God's perfecting, God's establishing. Patience and hope; waiting in faith and trust.

May our Advent be a time of peace and reflection; of patience and hope, as we await the coming of our Lord.

Let us pray...