

## Advent 2B: What are we waiting for?

The definition of Advent if you look beyond its association with the way Christians have defined the time before we celebrate Christ's birth it is defined as something which is coming, the arrival of something. You might have heard the word used describing the advent of the modern age, for example. It is interesting that although we focus on this time as preparing to welcome Christ, it is a welcome we usually center in our thoughts around the nativity scene—the announcement to Mary, the journey to Bethlehem, the birth in the manger and the proclamation to the shepherds keeping watch by the angels. This is not truly something that is coming; it is a remembrance and celebration of God's gift of redemption to us. Surely, a cause for celebration, but counting down the days to a remembrance is really waiting for an event to come. When this period came to be known as Advent on the church calendar the past was not the focus of those first believers. This season grew out of an understanding that preparation was need for that event which was still coming, but not yet. Church history tells us that those who began observing this season adopted this time before celebrating Christ's birth as something to be set apart sometime during the 5<sup>th</sup> century. The Latin root of the word used to name the season was *adventus*. This was a translation from the original Greek word which also had the same meaning of coming, of an expected arrival. In the Greek that word was *parousia*. You probably recognize that word as the one we often use to refer to Christ's second coming. So in this Advent season of preparation for Christ's coming, what are we in the 21<sup>st</sup> century really waiting for? Are we just counting down the days until presents placed under a decorated evergreen tree are opened? If that is what we are waiting on, then our preparations are likely to be centered on shopping, on glitter, or perhaps just on the fellowship we have with others who also gather socially this time of year. From the very earliest gatherings of those who followed Christ there have been three perceptions about the coming of Christ anticipated during Advent. There is the coming of Christ in the flesh at Bethlehem, there is the coming of Christ to dwell with our hearts daily, and there is the coming of Christ in glory at the end of time. Our texts during the Sundays of Advent offer us the opportunity to share in the ancient longing for the Messiah expressed in Hebrew Scripture as well as the opportunity to consider the state of our alertness as we wait for his second coming. The texts are paired in this manner. When we look around at the events happening daily in our world, the Hebrew text can speak loudly to us about the yearning which infuses the Isaiah texts. We can experience the same longing to see God's presence again breaking into our broken world to heal and restore that those exiled Israelites felt. With Isaiah we proclaim that the word of our God will stand forever, yet the glimpses we have of the promised reign are few and often dim. The birth of the infant Jesus was God entering into human history in a very unexpected way, but the nearness of God's kingdom seems more distant than present. God came and dwelled among us, but the promised kingdom of righteousness and justice—the doing of God's will on earth as in heaven—did not extend beyond the One who came down to redeem the world. Because God's word and purpose will be fulfilled totally, although we rightly celebrate that in breaking which redeems us, that was God's initiative—God's activity that we receive as a gift—not much in the way of preparation is needed from us. The gospel text from Mark is one which describes a coming event for which preparation is required—the preparation of repentance. The text from Mark calls for the preparation of the way of the LORD. John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness

proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Mark begins by telling us his narrative is the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God. When this text was written the infant Jesus has already become the risen, crucified One. Yet still the peaceful kingdom of Isaiah has not come. Plowshares are wielded as swords, and the poor get poorer, hungrier. The wages of sin still stalked the world—just like today. These early believers had an expectation of God's imminent return, of God's ultimate deliverance. This expectation is especially prominent in the Markan gospel with its use of immediately and at once so frequently in the unfolding of the good news he has to share. It is easier to wait with an end in sight. It is much harder to endure the command to wait some 2,000 years later. The end that has been promised by Jesus and elsewhere in our Scriptures has never arrived as expected. The return of Jesus has been delayed—it seems to us as indefinitely. As time passed we have the epistle of 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter written to those questioning this delay, telling them that there really isn't a delay—it's just that God's time and our time are not in sync. That equation of 1000 days here only being a day in God's kingdom is a way of explaining this wait that seems so long to us. The wait only appears so long because God is patient with us, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter warns that during this wait we are expected to live in the ways taught by Jesus. Yet there is still the temptation to put off the preparation for standing before the throne on that last day when Christ comes in glory and in judgment. We are told to wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. Looking around, it is easy to see that hasn't happened—that is a vision which we are still awaiting. The connection of that vision of our world as a place where righteousness is at home to the wait we have before us before Christ comes again seems to fit well with a season of Advent—preparation for ushering in the kingdom of Emmanuel—God with Us. That connection brings us back to that third perception long associated with the season of Advent: that daily in dwelling of Christ in our hearts. The present and real experience of Emmanuel: God with us. When John spoke of the baptism which Jesus would bring, it was a baptism of the Holy Spirit—of fire, not water. Our task, not just during seasons of preparation, but in all this in-between-time where our lives are lived, is to live lives of discipleship—lives which are empowered by the Holy Spirit—so that we can practice being those who are at home with righteousness. Perhaps the answer posed by the title for this sermon is that we shouldn't be waiting at all. God answered the hope expressed throughout the Hebrew Scripture through the birth of Jesus—Emmanuel. That coming of the Messiah, God's anointed one did not happen as expected. Those early followers of the risen, crucified One also were disappointed in their expectation of his immediate return. After all, if Christ is returning immediately bringing the kingdom envisioned by the prophets, the time is short—you only have to be faithful to Christ's teachings for a brief span of time. It is much more of a challenge to love God with all that you are and love all your neighbors, even those you name enemies as Christ commanded—especially if it is a daily, weekly, then yearly injunction about how life given to Christ and directed by the Holy Spirit is to be lived. But because God chooses to redeem, chooses that redemption shall be available to all as a gift, we not only have the hope of Christ's return, we have the peace which comes from knowing the good news of which Mark spoke—that the narrative of Jesus Christ, the Son of God was just the beginning of that good news. That the words of Isaiah about the Messiah as a shepherd who would feed his flock, gather them in his arms to carry and gently lead was fulfilled with the coming of the Holy Spirit to dwell within and guide us. In the sure and certain knowledge that

God fulfills God's promises we have the peace of Christ. The really good news of Advent is that all this time, while we thought we were waiting on God, it is in fact God that is waiting on us—waiting for us to invite Christ to come into our lives and transform us so that we grow closer to being what God created us to be. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.