

"Waiting for the One"

Third Sunday of Advent
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

10:45 a.m. Sunday, December 12, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 35:1-10; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

Let's pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord. Amen.

My husband Randy and I were married on June 4, 1988, in his home church in York, Advent Lutheran. It was large enough that I could invite all the parishioners of the congregation I was serving at the time (Christ Lutheran Church, Duncannon), but unlike my church, Advent Lutheran was air-conditioned. An eminently practical choice.

Advent Lutheran has a beautiful sanctuary, and behind the altar is a 3-panel painting that powerfully depicts the second coming of Jesus Christ into our world. He is standing victorious—well, not exactly standing, but floating in the air—as the central figure in the center panel. Light radiates from him and his face is illuminated.

In our wedding photos, you can't make out much of the artwork, except the figure of Jesus Christ bathed in light. Perhaps that's just as well. Had I studied that painting in its entirety on my wedding day, I might have thought it a rather odd painting to grace an altar wall.

Now, it's not odd to have Jesus as the figure of art in a worship space. In my childhood congregation, it was Jesus praying at the Garden of Gethsemane; in my first parish in Duncannon it was Jesus knocking at the door; here at Trinity in our nave it is Christ the King. However, there are elements of this artwork at Advent Lutheran Church that are unique. Jesus is not alone in the painting. He has returned to earth, and much is happening on earth when he comes.

The lower portions of the three panels are all darkness and shadow. Look at the bottom of the central panel and you see the outline of an army tank; the shattered façade of a building. Look at the lower portion of the right panel and you see a shadowy figure moving away from Christ, holding a revolver in his hand. Look at the lower portion of the left panel and you see another shadowy figure, again turning away from Christ, with a bag of money in his hands.

It depicts in utter truthfulness the world into which our God has come, and into which he will come again. The reality is that when Jesus first entered our world as a baby, it was a world fraught with political intrigue, violence, oppression, misery, poverty. When he comes again, that will not have changed. For all our social progress, all our enlightened minds, the world, sadly, will look much the same on that day as it did when Christ came 2,000 years ago.

The painting tells it like it is. Even while goodness and love abounds among faithful people, there will be sin. There will be both light and shadow; belief and unbelief; a fervent striving to follow God's will and an incorrigible faithlessness in human beings.

Well...and Merry Christmas to you, too, Pastor Easton, you might be saying under your breath.

I'm not trying to cast a pall on our celebration of the Advent and Christmas seasons, but our lessons today have us face reality as much as that three-paneled painting. These readings call us to hope and wait for Christ in a world where his love and power are desperately and daily needed. These lessons call us to hope and wait for Christ, even when hoping and waiting can be difficult.

Look at John the Baptist. Surely he wasn't surprised that his words and deeds would land him in jail. He prophesied boldly about the coming Messiah. He demanded nothing short of a change of heart from the people. He denounced the unrepentant—even those in high places. And he baptized the One he'd predicted would come. John did precisely what God called him to do, and he ended up in prison. Which was precisely when he realized nothing, nothing seemed to have changed at all. Herod was still ruling locally (and would eventually have John's head); the Roman emperor was still ruling globally; the religious leaders in the Temple were still self-serving; and John remained in prison.

John's words in our Gospel lesson could sound as if he has lost all faith in God—and in this Jesus of Nazareth. John sends word to Jesus: *Are you the one who is to come, or shall we wait for another?* John doesn't ask for release from prison. He simply asks if, after all that has happened, after all he has done, is Jesus really and truly the One he has been waiting for. I don't consider those words of doubt, but rather, words of deep and yearning hope, words of wistfulness that God's promises will be fulfilled, that God will complete his work of redeeming and restoring creation. Even if John behind prison walls can't quite see it.

Isn't that where many of us are some days? Waiting for Christ, hoping God is at work in our lives, redeeming and restoring us, even if we cannot quite see it? Struggling to understand God's presence with us in the midst of challenging times? For example, for some folks, this time of the year is problematic, and they may strongly resonate with John the Baptist, feeling as if they are behind prison walls, too. For while many of us eagerly anticipate Christmas festivities and family gatherings, there are those who do not have such cheerful anticipation. They will experience an empty chair beside them. They know the empty chair is coming—a relationship has ended, or someone is far, far away, or a loved one has died. The empty chair comes as no surprise—just as John the Baptist was not surprised to land in prison—but the empty chair will still bring fresh grief.

Prison walls come in all shapes and sizes.

Jesus' words do not bring release for John, but they do offer the truth. He reminds John what's been happening in Jesus' presence: *Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.*

So while Jesus isn't the warrior with the winnowing fork in his hand, bringing about judgment the way John envisioned ...Jesus is the One who walks among the people, reaching out to their deepest yearning, bringing healing, bringing mercy, bringing a wholeness to fractured lives. John learns that the Messiah has come, after all, showing the power of God in ways John simply hadn't expected.

John does not have to wait for another to come. But he learns he does have to wait.

James, in his letter to fellow Christians, writes the same: *Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient.*

They will have to wait. So will we. Easier said than done when, like John, we're looking out prison windows. Easier said than done when our expectations of how God ought to act in our world are not met. We're not very patient. We're not very good at waiting. Need I provide us with countless examples of our rush—rush—rushing around, whether it's the holidays or not? We seek and demand instant access, instant gratification, instant results in nearly everything!

Now, if we cannot be patient over little things, everyday things, how can we possibly be patient for the fulfillment of all those yearnings deep inside of us—the hopes we have for healing in our lives and the healing of the world? How can we not end up like John, asking rather wistfully "Are you the One who is to come, or shall we wait for another?"

But if we dare to ask John's question ourselves, we must be prepared for Jesus' answer. For his answer remains the same. We hear his answer every time we come to worship—through Matthew, Mark, Luke and John we hear what people experienced and witnessed in the presence of Jesus: Nothing less than the gracious kingdom of God has been made visible in him! We hear his answer when the bread and wine touch our tongues—and in spite of weak hands and feeble knees, we are once more strengthened by his life in us. We hear his answer in our prayers and our continued fellowship here—and he encourages us to live together in joy-filled anticipation of his transforming rule to come.

When you take another look at the artwork behind the altar at Advent Lutheran Church, you'll find that the shadowy images do not overwhelm the painting. As I said, what you notice is the light radiating from the victorious Christ come to earth. The women and men and children look up to him from that center panel, and their faces are radiant. They reflect his radiance, don't you see? They reflect all that he

is! They are people, like you and me, preparing for a future, and living in the present with patience and hope. That was to be John's calling. It is our calling as well.

Come, Lord Jesus. **AMEN.**