

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 Luke 21:25-36 November 28, 2021

First Sunday of Advent

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

THE WORLD HOLDS ITS BREATH

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Here's how Frederick Buechner describes Advent in his book, *Whistling in the Dark: An ABC Theologized*:

“The house lights go off and the footlights come on. Even the chattiest stop chattering as they wait in darkness for the curtain to rise. In the orchestra pit, the violin bows are poised. The conductor has raised his baton.

“In the silence of a midwinter dusk there is far off in the deeps of it somewhere a sound so faint that for all you can tell it may be only the sound of the silence itself. You hold your breath to listen.

“You walk up the steps to the front door. The empty windows at either side of it tell you nothing, or almost nothing. For a second you catch a whiff in the air of some fragrance that reminds you of a place you've never been and a time you have no words for. You are aware of the beating of your heart.

“The extraordinary thing that is about to happen is matched only by the extraordinary moment just before it happens. Advent is the name of that moment.

“The Salvation Army Santa Claus clangs his bell. The sidewalks are so crowded you can hardly move. Exhaust fumes are the chief fragrance in the air, and everybody is as bundled up against any sense of what all the fuss is really about as they are bundled up against the windchill factor.

“But if you concentrate just for an instant, far off in the deeps of you somewhere you can feel the beating of your heart. For all its madness and lostness, not to mention your own, you can hear the world itself holding its breath.”¹

For years, I have appreciated Buechner's description of Advent, the way his words make you sit on the edge of your seat, the way his images stoke the anticipation of the extraordinary, the way he locates Advent in the busyness and rush and humdrum of daily life. Last week, I lived out Buechner's description of Advent when Nancy and I were in New York City for Thanksgiving. Wednesday night we went to see “Porgy and Bess” at the Metropolitan Opera House at Lincoln Center. It was almost exactly as Buechner described, as the house lights went off, the footlights came on, and the chattiest stopped chattering as we waited in darkness for the curtain to rise. We heard the Salvation Army bells clanging. The sidewalks were crowded. There were plenty of exhaust fumes from the downtown Manhattan traffic. Everybody was bundled up against the high temperature of 46 and the low of 30.

However, you don't have to be in New York City over Thanksgiving to find it difficult to concentrate in the midst of a mad, maddening, and lost world. On top of every-

thing else that demands our attention day-in and day-out, we have added the ongoing challenge of an almost two-year old pandemic, and the rush and long to-do lists of the next four weeks to get ready for Christmas.

But that's why the season of Advent is important. If we take it seriously and pay attention during these next four weeks, perhaps we will be able to concentrate and far off in the deeps of us somewhere we will feel the beating of our hearts. The beating of our hearts is the longing we have — a longing for God's hope, peace, joy, and love to be as real in our lives and in this world as the clanging of the Salvation Army bells and the cold temperatures and the hectic schedules of our lives. That sense of longing and yearning at a heartbeat level is expressed in so many of our Advent hymns: "O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear. Come, thou long-expected Jesus, born to set thy people free; from our fears and sins release us; let us find our rest in thee . . . dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart. While we are waiting, come. Jesus, our Lord, Emmanuel, while we are waiting, come."

I wonder, though, if the whole world really holds its breath during Advent. Certainly we are holding our breath for many other reasons: the latest reports and recommendations about COVID-19; the results of medical tests; the current economic news; events overseas that directly affect us and the rest of the world; deep political, social, and racial divisions in our country; reports of the next mass shooting or natural disaster; and the list goes on.

Except for the specifics, not much has changed in the last 2,000 years when it comes to holding our breath. When Jesus talked about the coming of the Son of Man, he talked to people who were holding their breath about what Rome would do next, about where their next meal would come from, about being faithful in a hostile world. When the gospel writers told their stories, they were addressing Christians who were holding their breath about what would happen if they stayed true to their faith in Jesus Christ, about what life would be like when Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed, about the pressing needs of caring for their families day-in and day-out. To them and to us, Jesus's Advent message is a call to stand up, raise our heads, be on guard, and be alert — "because your redemption is drawing near."

Listen again to Jesus's final warning in today's gospel text: "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day [of the coming of the Son of Man] does not catch you unexpectedly." (Luke 21:34) If today's gospel reading from Luke 21 sounds familiar, it's because I preached from Mark's parallel passage in Mark 13 two weeks ago. I ended that sermon talking about how the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) wrote "A Brief Statement of Faith" in the 1980's following reunion of the northern and southern denominations. I said the affirmation at the end of that faith statement clearly conveys the message of confidently hoping and watchfully working until the Lord returns. This morning we are going to use a portion of "A Brief Statement of Faith" as our Affirmation of Faith:

*In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,
we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks
and to live holy and joyful lives,
even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth,
praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"*

And so Advent reminds us to watch and wait in a world that constantly demands our attention, saps our energies, and can even shatter our hopes and dreams. Most of us aren't very good at waiting — if our Amazon package takes longer than a day to arrive or we have to sit through more than one cycle of the traffic light or our Internet connection is a little slower than usual. How, then, are we to wait on God and God's purposes to be fulfilled, especially when so many things around us tempt us to think that God's promises might not be all that trustworthy after all?

In a book of Advent devotions published twenty years ago, the writing for November 28 is "Waiting for God" by Henri Nouwen. He writes, "Waiting is active. Most of us think of waiting as something very passive, a hopeless state determined by events totally out of our hands. The bus is late? You cannot do anything about it, so you have to sit there and just wait. It is not difficult to understand the irritation people feel when somebody says, 'Just wait.' Words like that seem to push us into passivity.

"But there is none of this passivity in scripture. Those who are waiting are waiting very actively. They know that what they are waiting for is growing from the ground on which they are standing. That's the secret. The secret of waiting is the faith that the seed has been planted, that something has begun. Active waiting means to be present fully to the moment, in the conviction that something is happening where you are and that you want to be present to it. A waiting person is someone who is present to the moment, who believes that this moment is *the* moment."²

A waiting person who believes that this moment is *the* moment is a person who is holding his or her breath for God is about to do. Remember what Frederick Buechner said? "You can hear the world itself holding its breath." We might think he meant everybody in the world, and you have to wonder about that sometimes. But what if it means so much more than that? In his letter to the Christians at Rome, the apostle Paul wrote about future glory and said, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not

hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.” (Romans 8:18-25)

Throughout life, and especially in this Advent season, we hope for what we do not see. Our Lord calls us to wait for it with patience. When the existential threats or just the ordinary demands of everyday living threaten to extinguish our hope, not only for the future but for the present, Jesus calls us to “stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” (Luke 21:28) This Advent, may we slow down and take the time to concentrate, feel our heartbeat, and listen for the whole world holding its breath.

Years ago my mother gave me and Nancy a book of Advent and Christmas devotions by Ann Weems called *Kneeling in Bethlehem*. Every Advent I pull it off of my bookshelf, thumb through it, and re-read some of her poems. The first section of the book is about Advent. The first poem in the book seems especially appropriate for today’s Advent message from Luke 21. It’s called “The Coming of God.”

Our God is the One who comes to us

in a burning bush,

in an angel’s song,

in a newborn child.

Our God is the One who cannot be found

locked in the church,

not even in the sanctuary.

Our God will be where God will be

with no constraints,

no predictability.

Our God lives where our God lives,

and destruction has no power

and even death cannot stop

the living.

Our God will be born where God will be born,

but there is no place to look for the One who comes to us.

When God is ready

God will come

even to a godforsaken place

like a stable in Bethlehem.

Watch . . .

for you know not when

God comes.

Watch, that you might be found

whenever

wherever

God comes.³

Let us pray: Righteous God, to you alone we lift our souls; in you alone, we place our trust; for you alone we wait all day long. For you are the God of our salvation, abounding in mercy and steadfast love. Help us remain alert and watchful for the coming of your promised one — the one who comes with power and glory, the one drawing near to bring our salvation. Amen.

NOTES

¹Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark: An ABC Theologized* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988), pp. 2-3.

²Henri Nouwen, "Waiting for God," in *Watch for the Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), p. 31.

³Ann Weems, "Waiting for God," in *Kneeling in Bethlehem* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1980), p. 13.