

What Are We Waiting For?

Gospel of Matthew 3:1-12

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In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Gospel of Matthew 3:1-12, NRSV

This is the second Sunday in Advent, which, as you know, is the season when we celebrate the incarnation. The season when we celebrate our sheer humanity as it is shared by God for the very first time. It is the season when we celebrate our mortality. And by the transitive property of divinely created featherless bi-peds, it is also the season we celebrate our human dignity. In fact, above all else, this is truly the season of human dignity. It is the season that marks the watershed in our salvation history when God etches God's own image on God's own heart. It is the season when God's good *giving* ramps up a notch and becomes God's redemptive *sharing*. God goes from bestowing human life to experiencing human life. For the first time, God becomes intimately invested in the full compliment of the human condition. Now God is truly with us, as God is truly one of us...with all the bells and whistles and murmurs and shouts and groans and sighs and laughter and cries that mark our humanness; that separate us from mere Cabbage Patch Dolls.

And, this second Sunday in this season of the incarnation, we will baptize sweet Ella Deane, 14 days old today. So Jess and Andy, you could not have chosen a better time to offer your precious daughter to God's mission of love and compassion than this day, smack in the middle of this season of Advent, this season when God's own self is about to be born onto this mortal coil. This is the perfect time for a baptism. For baptism is all about the incarnation. It is all about experiencing each other's lives, about standing in solidarity with each other's hopes and joys and challenges and suffering, about loving each other for nothing more or less than our shared human dignity. Baptism is the inauguration of a life's mission that shares Jesus' mission to stand with and for each

of us no matter what. Baptism is the formal acknowledgement of our calling to love each other with all our might as God loves us, unconditionally. I will remind you, that the birth of Jesus is only recounted in two of the Gospels. His baptism is recounted in all four. That suggests that in this season of the incarnation, what we await is more than a mere birth, it is a monumental mission. A mission of solidarity with each other, ordained by God in God's own flesh. John the Baptizer tells us this very thing in this morning's Gospel of Matthew – I will baptize you with water, but the one who will baptize you with the Spirit is on the way. So, Ella you are being inaugurated into this great mission of love with your baptism into the spirit, and at just the perfect time. And so as of today, dear one, you will wait with us, your new community, in this season of waiting that we call Advent.

But, you may ask (we may all ask), what exactly *are* we waiting *for*? And what is so different about this season of waiting than every other season of waiting? Because waiting is a year-round human endeavor. Life often seems like one big extended season of waiting. Usually waiting for something better than...whatever has already arrived. Waiting for a better job, a better house, a better car, more money, less weight, higher test scores, lower taxes, waiting to get in, or waiting to get out, to remember, or to forget, to be accepted, or appreciated, or encouraged, or employed....to find love, or justice, or peace, or a miracle....we spend an inordinate amount of time waiting for things to change for the better. Waiting for our prayers to be answered to our liking. Waiting for our vision of what we want and need to be realized. Waiting for things to be made "right." But, knowing what we know about human beings, the season of the incarnation does not seem to jive with the notion that a quick fix is on the way. For this human condition is a very dicey endeavor. It is very difficult to imagine that a season that celebrates the fullness of our flesh, the manifestation of our mortality, can be grounded in any sort of expectation of all things being made easy or "right" by the blink of an eye, or even the birth of a child, or any single event - short of a massive divine do-over that rewires and rewrites all of humanity.

But a do-over does not seem to be God's final answer. For this is the season in which God joins humanity, not the season in which God reworks, repairs or reforms humanity. It is the season when God steps into the mire, the messiness, the muddle, the muck of human existence. It is not the season when God erases the human condition. It is the season when God embraces the human condition.

Okay, but what does *that* mean? **What, then, are we waiting for?** My dear brother, who is a fundamentalist Christian, tells me that we are waiting for the birth of Christ, God in the flesh, who will forgive all sins and save the whole world (read: the whole world of believers) retroactively

from the beginning of time to the end of the age by the blood sacrifice of God's own flesh; a once and for all divine sacrifice for universal human (read: Christian) salvation. This is what we are waiting for in this season of Advent says my earnest and sincerely-concerned-for-the-salvation-of-my-soul younger brother. We are waiting for the arrival of the One who will, by his very birth and death, save us from our own mortal sin. We are waiting for our Savior (read: magic bullet), who will by his very existence as the Lamb of God make all things right with the world. Full stop.

Okay. But, I respond, Jesus has come and gone and all is NOT right with the world. So what's up with that? That, says my younger sibling, is why we need to prepare and wait for Christ to come again...we are waiting, then, for the second coming.

This, of course, sparks a laundry list of additional questions that swirl furiously around my buoyant brain, but the one that tops the list is: *Why* does God want us to *wait*? Why doesn't God put us out of our misery *now*? **If God loves us, what is God waiting for!!!!** So many of us are suffering so desperately. And the rest of us would be so much happier if God Almighty would just use some of that Almightyness to deliver the goods, as it were. Peace would be good. Justice would be good. An end to greed and hate and fear and poverty and war and AIDS and cancer and mental illness – all of these gifts would be very good. And humanity would be very appreciative. And I am pretty sure that God has the power, has always had the power, to deliver each and every one of these goods and more; to create a perfect world, or at least what would seem to be a better world than the one we seem to live in.

So why hasn't God responded to our suffering and our weakness with any sort of constructive systemic change in the nature of our humanness? Why hasn't God responded to ages and eons of human failures and flaws and pain by just designing a better human; a kinder human, a more compassionate human, less selfish, more sensitive, less fearful more accessible....Clearly God knows how to do it. After all, this is the season when we await the birth of just such a human being. The one who is practically perfect in every way...oh no, that's Mary Poppins. Our brother Jesus is *absolutely* perfect in every way. So why is he the only one? Why can't we all be like Jesus? Why isn't the watershed in our salvation history the birth of a new sort of human being? Why is this watershed so much less...comfortable? Why has God chosen to experience rather than eradicate human suffering? Why has God chosen to share rather than lighten the human load?

What are we waiting for? And what about those of us who simply cannot afford to wait. Many of you know that I have a dear, dear friend and spirit-mate in Australia who is battling stage 4 brain cancer. Janet is her name. Janet and I have been constant companions for many years. We

connected on a visceral level the minute that we met. I embraced my calling to the priesthood in the Australian outback with Janet's help. And she has been both a spiritual beacon and a spiritual anchor through a wilderness of transition and transformation that has marked these last few years for me. She is one of those rare friends and holy companions who lift us on the strength and beauty of our own wings.

Janet had a tumor removed from her brain about ten years ago, and has been cancer free until a few weeks ago when a routine MRI showed the re-emergence of her disease. This time, however, it has come in a much more insidious form – small star-like tumors populate the fabric of her cerebral milky way. Last Saturday she had surgery to remove the largest bits in the constellation, but the vast majority will be tackled by an aggressive regimen of chemotherapy and radiation which will begin over the next few weeks. The prognosis for this condition at this stage is sooo not good. Barring a medical miracle (which could happen), a year or two or three is the best guess of the time that Janet has left in her mortal frame. And to add insult to injury, that time will necessarily be marked by massive doses of treatment that will ravage her body and very possibly retard her mind. Because of the placement of the tumors, her personality and memory will likely be the first casualties of the treatment that is necessary to save what is left of her life.

So here is the question that I can't get out of my mind: **What is Janet waiting for?** Is this season of Advent, this season of waiting, not meant for her and others in her shoes? What if they don't have time to wait for Christ to come again? What if they don't even have time to wait for the bus to come again? What are *they* waiting for?

Over the last week or so Janet and I have spent a lot of time talking about the many callings that we have answered, or tried to answer, in our lives. And we have been noting the similarities between the ways in which we are called to do God's work and the way in which the great prophets of our Western tradition have been called to do God's work. The ways in which we have been beckoned as Moses and Abraham and Sarah, Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ruth, Mary and Joseph were called into the wilderness of God's work in this world. Our callings from God seem to have very similar features. First, they seem to come not when we are willing but when we are ready, even if we do not want to be ready. And, our callings tend to beckon us not to places we would choose to go but to places where we are needed to be. Our callings pull us out of our comfort zones and force us to re-vision our values, our top priorities, and our bottom lines. They often turn our lives upside down. And finally, our callings are out of our hands. We don't ask for them. Often we don't feel well suited to them. And many time times we do not want anything to do with them. But there they are. Full-fledged opportunities for transformation that we resist at our spiritual peril.

Opportunities that are the vehicles for God's hopes and dreams for us, and through us, in this world. Janet is called to such an "opportunity" at this moment in time. And so are we who love her.

That is not to say that God purposely inflicted her with this illness. I do not believe that God controls the circumstances and details of our lives any more than I believe that God sent his only Son for the sole purpose of being brutally sacrificed on a cross for the sins of the rest of God's unworthy children. But I do believe that we are called to live into whatever opportunities grace our paths (even the devastatingly painful ones), and to pick up the crosses that necessarily come with our human lives, and to carry them with love and compassion in the knowledge that God will always walk with us....as God has walked with us in God's own flesh since the birth of God's own humanness in that Bethlehem manger 2000 years ago.

Janet's is only one of several such experiences that I have shared with friends, neighbors and parishioners over the last couple of years. Terminal illnesses are horrendously long and arduous roads for everyone concerned. And yet, in the most dire times and circumstances, I have watched the most incredible examples of human compassion unfold, the most genuine exchanges of care and affection, the most mutual connections of hearts and hands and lives, the most gracious offerings of selves, one to another, that God could ever have hoped for in our human condition. These are the moments that God has longed for since the beginning of time. These moments when friends and family members rise to such devastatingly difficult occasions and opportunities in magnificent and miraculous ways; rising willingly and sacrificially to God's call to them to surrender themselves to each other (and thereby to God), in ways that God has been asking humanity to embrace for millennia. Rising to the witness and the legacy of our beloved brother whose coming we await this season, this morning.

Our entire salvation history is littered with the failure of humanity to put aside our own agendas, our own power, our own self-centeredness, our own arrogance and to simply embrace pure love. Love without a payoff beyond itself. Love without end. The Bible is chocked full of the human failure to let go of everything except our love for one another. But here, in these seemingly hopeless circumstances of suffering and sadness, I have witnessed the most profound hope for humanity; an abundance of pure love; in the flesh. Often in the most powerless and destitute among us, and yet with the most amazing grace.

And it is a part of that deep mystery that surpasses all understanding; that the same conditions that afflict us with such havoc and pain, also deliver us in a most extraordinary and holy way. A

way that would likely not have been possible without the debilitating diseases or circumstances that have, in some fashion, both plagued and blessed so many of our lives.

This, I think, is the substance of the season of Advent. It is our holy presence with each other that we await in God's coming, and God has awaited in us since our creation. This is what we await in the birth of Christ Jesus. So the question is not who or what we are waiting *for*, but who and what we are waiting *with*. The key is not to wait for everlasting life to show up beneath a star in a manger, but to realize that everlasting life is here in each moment that we freely offer with pure love to each other. To realize in each other and in ourselves, the mortality, the impermanence, the vulnerability, and the innate dignity of our own lives here and now. To embrace these realizations is a gift....the gift of Christmas presence. The gift is to put our own self-centered, self-certain, self-serving agendas away for the season....and for the duration. To simply be with each other....to simply stand in solidarity with each other...to simply wait *with* each other. As I am waiting with Janet. And you are waiting with me. *This* is how we live into God's hope for humanity. *This* is how we live into a world where we love the ones near us as God loves us. *This* is the gift of the season of the incarnation. Solidarity. Advent is the season of waiting *with* each other.

There is a prayer from the Indian poet/prophet Rumi that Janet and I have used as a sort of mantra for this moment in our journey together, and I offer it to you now:

Beyond wrong-doing and right-doing there is a field. I'll meet you there.

It's not who or what we are waiting for....it's who and what we are waiting *with* that is the heart of this season. Beyond wrong-doing, beyond right-doing, beyond everything but the field that is our point of connection, our place of waiting....together. That is where we find the moment called Advent. The season of waiting *with*, rather than waiting *for* the One who comes in the flesh to baptize us in the spirit.

Beyond wrong-doing and right-doing there is a field. I'll meet you there.

And a little child will lead us. Welcome to the family, Ella!

Amen.

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