

The Real Meaning of Advent Gen. 17:3-8; Ps. 13:1-2; Hab. 1:2-4 12/5/21

I'm not very big on waiting. In fact, I really hate to wait! For example, the timing of the traffic light here at High St. and Baltimore St. somehow changed after the Halloween Parade, so that I spend an awful long time each day waiting for that light to change so I can cross Baltimore St. I got so frustrated with it that I called the borough and eventually even got to talk to someone about it. Unfortunately, nothing changed. So I continue to wait.

And don't get me started about Rite Aid, where Bonnie and I buy our prescriptions. They lost several staff members and have closed the drive-through window, so now I have to go inside and wait in a long line just to pick up our medications! I couldn't get a straight answer as to whether they were working to hire more staff, so I ended up calling the regional office to get some answers. I'm still waiting to hear back from the regional manager. I really don't like to wait!

Unfortunately, waiting is a major theme of Advent. And that is fitting, since waiting has been a major theme for God's people since earliest times! Think all the way back to Abraham, around 1800 B.C. God made some promises to him in the book of Genesis. ³*Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him,*

⁴“As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁵No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁶I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you.

⁷I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. ⁸And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God.” (Gen. 17:3-8)

God promised Abraham that he would have many descendants, even though he was an old man with no children! And from his offspring would come great nations and even kings! And God would give them the land of Canaan. So, Abraham and his wife, Sarah, waited many years for God to give them a child. Nothing happened. They kind of gave up. In fact, when the Lord told them the time had finally come, Sarah laughed out loud! They did have a child, but then Abraham’s descendants ended up as slaves in Egypt for 400 years! What happened to God’s promises?

Finally, God raised up Moses to deliver them from slavery, but it took another 40 years to get them to the Promised Land, which was occupied by

Canaanites, Midianites, and Philistines! So there were many more years until they could finally occupy the land. In all, Abraham's descendants waited around 800 years for God's promises to be fulfilled! And even then, they faced many challenges in their new land.

Around 1000 B.C., David wrote, *¹How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?*

²How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? (Ps. 13:1,2) God promised David that he would be king of Israel, but he was facing enemies who seemed to be getting the best of him. "How long, O Lord?" He was tired of waiting!

Later, the surrounding nations would threaten Israel, and God allowed them to defeat Israel at times due to their unfaithfulness to the promises they had made to God. For example, the Assyrians overran the 10 northern tribes around 850 B.C. Those tribes were never heard from again! About 200 years later, the Babylonians threatened to exterminate the last two tribes. Listen to these words from the prophet, Habakkuk, *²O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save? ³Why do you make me see wrong-doing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and*

contention arise. ⁴So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous— therefore judgment comes forth perverted.
(Hab. 1:2-4)

A familiar refrain, “How long, O Lord?,” in the midst of violence, wrong-doing, in-fighting, and injustice. Meanwhile, other prophets foresaw the coming of a Messiah who would deliver God’s people from their enemies and bring peace and justice to the land while restoring the relationship between God and his people. But where was the Messiah? Nowhere to be seen! Then the prophets went silent. For about 400 years there was no word from the Lord at all. And that brings us to John the Baptist, who worked to prepare the way for the coming Messiah. No wonder people flocked to him. They were hungry and thirsty for a word from God, and tired of waiting for the long-promised Messiah! We’ll talk more about John next week.

Part of what happens at Advent is that we look back to those times when God’s people waited, particularly those people under Roman domination under Caesar Augustus, who were waiting for the Messiah to come. We can understand their longing for his coming! Then Jesus came, preaching the coming reign of God, a reign he said was beginning with him. But it wouldn’t come into full fruition with him, would it? When Jesus left, the Romans still occupied Palestine, and God’s people were still being

persecuted. So, his followers waited for his promised return, when he would finish the work he began during his first visit. They knew they needed his help!

In some ways, we're still in the same situation today, as we await the return of Jesus! We like to think that we can solve the problems which confront us on our own, and from time-to-time we do make pretty good progress. And then we encounter a time like this one. When racial discord flares up all around us. When civil discourse disappears. When our governing bodies are paralyzed by partisan interests. When lying from our leaders becomes the norm. When an unpredictable disease has taken hundreds of thousands of American lives, and confounds our ability to manage it, partly because people believe misinformation which allows the virus to keep spreading. And then there's climate change, which may well be a bigger challenge than all of the others put together.

The benefit of such a time is that it can humble us. It can give us a more realistic view of our inability to manage human evil and fragility. Such a time forces us to admit that we need God's intervention if we are to succeed in meeting the challenges that face us.

At Advent, we look back and identify with those who longed for the coming of the Savior. And we look ahead to his coming again, to finally

bring about the fullness of God's kingdom all over the earth. Meanwhile, we can join with the saints of old in crying out, "How long, O Lord?" But, we can't just sit and wait for his coming. God has work for us to do now! We do that work with the full knowledge that God is in control and will bring about his will in his time. We are never without hope!

So, we do the right thing, bringing the values and priorities of God's kingdom to bear on the present, as we wait for Jesus' return. We insist on telling the truth, and refrain from passing along lies or questionable material. We engage with one another with civility and grace, remembering that each person we meet is a creature made in the image of God. We take the racial injustice in our country as seriously as God does, remembering again that each creature made in God's image deserves respect and fairness in their day-to-day lives. We refuse to whitewash past injustices, but insist on a truthful telling of our history. We do our part in managing this pandemic, following the precautions that those who have studied this disease recommend to us, because they know far more about it than we do, even if we've read a couple articles on the internet! We care for the poor. And, we do our part to manage climate change on a personal level, at the same time demanding that our representatives take appropriate action so that all may flourish on our planet. We do all of this because Jesus calls us to love our neighbors as ourselves.

The challenges that we face are huge- overwhelming, in fact. So we work hard, and look forward to the day when God will intervene and finally set all things right. Advent means “coming,” and we look forward to Christmas, when we will celebrate Jesus’ coming into the world. But Advent also looks ahead to his return, to his second coming, when he will set all things right for all people on our planet. That’s the real meaning of Advent.