

Preparing for the Unexpected: Heralds of the Gospel, Patient and at Peace

Good morning. Last week, while we explored our Advent Question “How Long Must We Wait,” we tried to heed call to “stay awake,” and to be “watchful” while we wait for Christ’s unexpected and mysterious coming among us. While preparing for *this* sermon, on what we should do to “prepare” while we wait for Christ’s coming, I found myself thinking more about these ideas of “wakefulness” and “watchfulness.” As a child, I was very close with my cousins, and whenever our family planned to have them over, I have vivid memories of pacing by the window, by the door, or outside, in eager expectation of when they might arrive – oh was I *watchful*. Back in those days, we didn’t have texting or google maps to say, “Google says we’ll be there in exactly 10 minutes,” so I think the anticipation was greater, and the arrival was always a bit more unexpected and exciting than arrivals tend to be now.

But beyond eagerly awaiting the arrival of our guests, one thing I don’t recall very much as a child was participating in the process of preparing for these beloved visitors. I was watchful and full of mental and physical energy, but I didn’t always know where to direct that energy. Looking back, I confess I probably should have done more to help my mom and dad prepare for guests. As the baby of the family and being a young boy, I suspect that age and gender roles meant my older sisters were more likely to be asked to help with preparations, whether that meant cleaning the house or preparing the food in preparation for our guests. Looking back now as an adult who has many times hosted family travelling from afar in our home here, I have a much greater sense of the preparations that are involved. Much planning and preparing needs to be done to ensure that time together with guests is a meaningful and enjoyable one: meals, sleeping arrangements (for overnight guests), and activities to keep everyone engaged and entertained. Planning, planning, planning.

Of course, one of themes that runs through the Christmas story detailing Christ's first advent, and later Gospel stories telling of the ever-present possibility of his next advent, is the theme of *unexpected* guests and *surprising* news – unexpected visits by fearsome angels, by humble shepherds, and by these strange men called Magi; surprising news from a young fiancé to her very confused spouse-to-be; and later a surprising a new voice calling out in the desert. The unexpected and surprising are by their very nature difficult to “plan for” since you never would have seen it coming. All one can really do, as the old saying goes, is to “expect the unexpected.” But, how does one do that? How does one prepare for the unexpected and surprising coming of the Lord? As I looked at our texts today from Isaiah 40, Mark 1, and 2 Peter 3, I found myself drawn to at least two different “ways” these texts might call us to prepare while we wait for God's unexpected coming.

First, in the Isaiah text, there is the call to “get up to a high mountain” and be a “herald of good news.” In Isaiah's context, this good news was one of *great consolation and comfort*. At the time these words in Isaiah 40 were penned, the people of Israel had been through a period of suffering and exile in Babylon and were now being invited into a new hope. “Comfort, comfort, O My people,” says the Lord. If you want to hear the full affective impact of these words of Isaiah's, just come listen to the performance of *The Messiah* tonight at Centre in the Square! We do well to remember that “comfort” might itself have been an unexpected or surprising word for the people in that time: “How can you possibly seek to comfort us in the state we are in?” we might imagine the exiles saying. Here the good news is that the status quo of their exile was not all they had to look forward to - God was up to something, a new thing that would transform the old pain and hopelessness by a surprising new hope. So, Isaiah's task was to prepare the people

for the unexpected by announcing Good News in the midst of the gloom that was hanging over them. His prophetic words brought comfort.

I wonder if Isaiah found it difficult. Under the gloom of our current personal as well as global challenges, I suspect that we might find this task difficult – speaking words of comfort. Do we believe that God still brings unexpected comfort? And, do we believe we can be agents of that comfort? Perhaps one way we are being called to prepare for God’s coming while we wait is to *practice being agents of God’s comfort and care* in our world. Looking at the challenges our world faces and the lack of leadership to meet those challenges head on, it’s so easy to become cynical. In such a context, we might hear the call to “preach good news of God’s comfort and care” as just another kind of political rhetoric: it sounds good but at the end of the day, is it just an empty promise? I read a quote recently that said: “critical thinking without hope is cynicism. Hope without critical thinking is naivete” (Maria Popova, quoted in *Generation Dread*, 150). I think the truth is that as Christians we need to hold critical thinking and hope together as we seek to embody the Good news of God’s comfort and the possibility for change in our world. We need both because proclaiming the good news really can just be empty rhetoric unless it is informed by the hope that change really can happen – and as Christians we have to believe that the driver of that change is the God of unexpected surprises – the God who does a new thing.

What might it look like for us be heralds of good news through embodied action? We need not think big to imagine what kind of embodied actions could display the hope of God’s comfort for our world. It might begin with something as simple as a word of affirmation and encouragement spoken to people around us. Perhaps the Gospel Word we and others around us need right now is: You are not alone – you are welcome in our home and in our community; you are not alone – in your time of pain and suffering, we are with you. Be comforted. In our bible

study group this week, it was noted that Isaiah said that when God comes in glory “all people shall see it together.” But how, we wondered, will “all people” see it together if we continue to live in a world where “all people” are not welcomed, comforted, and given a place to belong? Preparing while we wait for God’s “new action” must involve being a people of welcome if we have any hope to be heralds of Good News. But for that to happen, the forces of unwelcome in our world and in ourselves need to be challenged. Our inner and our outer worlds need to change.

Good thing, then, that action and the call to change is also part of the good news of God’s comfort. It doesn’t take much reading in the prophets or the gospels to learn that God’s Good News is not without a sharp edge. In both our text from Isaiah and from Mark, the good news of comfort comes with the assurance of God’s forgiveness and the summons to repent from sin. In Isaiah it comes with the declaration that Israel’s sins have been paid and that a new way forward was possible. In Mark it comes with John’s call to repent and with the equally comforting declaration that God’s arrival would bring us new power to change and to grow. God is doing a new thing, so Isaiah and Mark encourage us to turn around and away from old patterns and open ourselves to God’s empowering spirit to work its transformation in us and in our community. Here the good news we preach is not just directed outward – it is echoed back to us, calling us to attend to the wilderness within, those barren places of the soul, those valleys of the hard and cynical heart which the Lord desires to lift up; those mountains of the self-assured, prideful heart that the Lord desires to make low; the uneven ground of our affections that must be made plain, level, and directed toward the good. Both Isaiah and Mark call us, this Advent, to prepare for God’s coming by being agents of the good news of God’s *comfort* and also of the surprising and

hopeful possibility of *change and growth* in ourselves and in our world. This is the **first** “way” we can prepare while we wait.

What, then, of the second “way?” In 2 Peter 3, Peter addresses a problem in the community that was waiting for Christ’s next advent among them: Impatience. Now, I confess that I think there is something good about a certain kind of impatience. Impatience in the face of injustice, for example, or impatience in the face of the climate crisis. In some instances, I think it is healthy to be impatient, especially if that impatience replaces complacency and satisfaction with the status quo. That said, in 2 Peter, the impatience he is addressing in the church he writes to has to do with an impatience bordering on fatalism – an impatience that was leading not to action but rather to a throwing up their hands, no longer believing that God’s promise of new life was sure. Peter addresses the problem of “scoffers” or “mockers,” those who were throwing into doubt any belief in God’s promise to renew and restore creation. Now as then in Peter’s age, the church struggled with cynicism while it waited. Maybe God’s promise is empty after all? And yet, Peter’s advice for how to prepare while waiting is instructive: namely, to practice patience and to be at peace. While we might justifiably think that the world’s transformation – the fulfilment of God’s promise - is frustratingly slow, Peter’s call to practice patience asks us to believe that the truth and reality of God’s promise is active – that it is not dormant or dead, but that it is alive and growing. In fact, Peter goes on to say that what we perceive as the “slowness” of God’s promise is itself ingredient to God’s providence – God does not force the promise of salvation and transformation upon the world but uses time to stir in us and in our world the kind of change that goes with the grain of God’s promise of restoration and new creation. And so, as bleak as our world seems, Peter asks us to be patient and at peace, to look continually, even in the midst of winter, for those small signs of newness that appear only after we’ve been at peace

long enough to spot them; to look for that “Rose, a floweret bright, blooming from tender stem” in the midst of winter, as we’ll sing in a little bit.

And so, in the midst, then, of what seems like a frustratingly slow delay in the arrival of the “day of the Lord,” we prepare by practicing patient hope that the restoration of creation will come through the hearts of people being turned around. Here I think about two lines in the hymn, “God of the Bible.” The first illustrates the patient means by which God seeks to change the world when it says: “not by your finger, not by your anger, will our world order, change in a day, but by your people, fearless and faithful, small paper lanterns, lighting the way.” The second line illustrates the importance of hoping in God’s promise: “hope we must carry, shining and certain, through all our turmoil, terror and loss, bonding us gladly, one to the other, till our world changes, facing the cross.” What is the **second** way we can prepare while we wait? We can prepare by practicing patient hope, refusing to be easily drawn away by cynicism or mockery, and we prepare by letting our hope shape us into a people of peace.

So, this advent, may we prepare for God’s coming by being a people who embody the good news of God’s comfort and care; the good news, too, that we can all change and grow; and may we prepare for God’s coming by being a people who practice patient resolve as we hope in God’s good future for our world. May it be so. AMEN.

Communion

In my sermon for this morning, I began by reflecting on what it takes to prepare for guests, and I mentioned meal planning as a key aspect to preparation. One of the most significant gifts of the Christian tradition passed down through history is the gift of a shared meal, a gift passed down through time beginning with Jesus and his disciples and the meal they shared on that Passover so long ago. Those disciples did have time to prepare for that meal – they obeyed Jesus’ command to go and prepare in advance of their gathering. But more and more, I think that as Christians through the centuries and millenia have eaten this meal in memory of Jesus, they have come to realize a profound truth about it – and that truth is that despite all appearances, this meal is not hosted and planned by us, but that it is a meal first and foundationally planned for us and hosted by Jesus. While we’ve prepared the table this morning, it is God who makes it a site of unexpected encounter with the one who’s advent brings comfort and peace. When we approach Jesus’ table, we are met by the one who embodies Good News, who gives nourishment to the hungry, comfort to the disconsolate, and peace in our turmoil.

On the night when Jesus gathered with his disciples for a meal, he took the bread, and he broke it, saying “**This is my body, which is given for you.**” In the passage from Isaiah 40 this morning, it says that when the Lord comes, he will “feed his flock.” At Jesus’ table, we are fed this morning, a people hungry for the nourishment that comes from the Good News. This bread is the bread of Good News and receiving that good news as a gift from Jesus is part of preparing our hearts for God’s coming.

Then Jesus took the cup and said “**This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.**” A covenant is a promise – and in our passage from 2 Peter this morning, we heard that God’s promise can bring us peace in a world of unrest - that in the midst of this, God’s promise can be our center. But promises don’t come without a cost and without the need

for patience in times of suffering. It is significant that Jesus said that this was a promise made “in his blood,” a promise made in the midst of his own self-offering even unto death to make peace where the cycles of violence continued unabated. This cup is a cup of peace, and when we drink of it, we find ourselves called by God to make peace with each other – this too is part of preparing our hearts for God’s coming this advent.

And so, this morning, we are invited to partake of this bread of good news and this cup of peace. But we are going to partake in a bit of a different way than usual. Instead of having ushers pass the elements around, you are invited to come to the feast, guests at Jesus’ table, where you will be served. Dorothy will begin playing piano, and then you are welcome to eat at either of the tables at the front or the back – when you arrive, you will be offered bread and then juice or grapes for children not taking the elements. You can eat the gifts at the table and then you are invited to sit back down together with all the other guests. I will then draw our time of communion to a close with a prayer of thanks.

Prayer of Thanks

Lord Jesus, this morning while we have thought about waiting, while we have thought about preparing for your coming. Meanwhile, you have been waiting and preparing for us. We have been guests at *your* table. Thank you for the gifts of your table – for the good news that brings us nourishment and for the new covenant, for the promise that bring us peace – might our eating at your table make us into heralds of your good news and ministers of your peace. AMEN.