

A Season of Anticipation

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 2 December 2018

A Contemporary Reflection by Will Ray

Advent 1C

Jeremiah 33: 14-16; Psalm 25: 1-10; Luke 21: 25-36

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under “Sunday Gatherings” tab

Before I begin, I just want to share a word of thanks. Having the opportunity to speak to you today is a privilege that I do not take lightly – and to be able to do something that I’ve never been able to do before is both exciting and terrifying at the same time. So, I’m very grateful for that.

Prayer

One of my favourite things about my home back in Wisconsin is that we have four very distinct seasons. Each one has something to look forward to: fall brings with it beautiful colours in the forests and family time, winter brings a stillness to the air that forces everybody to slow down, spring rains and melting snow shake people out of their winter comas, and the summer warmth brings a fleeting sense of freedom and enjoyment. Then it resets, and the wheel spins again. No matter what season I was in, there was always a sense of waiting for the next one.

We find so many powerful emotions in waiting. Waiting on a message from a friend long lost, waiting in the hospital to hear the news of the birth of a new child, waiting on financial reprieve, or waiting for that special someone to walk into our lives. But, we also wait for global things, like solutions for climate change, or an end to war and mistreatment of those it affects. We don’t even know for how long we must wait, which can make the wait so much harder.

Our Christian calendar has a cycle of distinct seasons, too. We roughly follow events in chronological order. We have Jesus’ birth at Christmas and then Epiphany. Then we’ve got the presentation of Jesus at the Temple (I like the term “Candlemas”, I think that’s fun), then Ash Wednesday, Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter, Easter Monday. The list continues on. And just like seasons in nature, we can sometimes find ourselves waiting for the next one. Always waiting.

Then we arrive at Advent. Advent is the connection point between the end of one cycle, and the beginning of the next. In these four weeks leading up to the birth of Jesus, it focuses both on the end of history before moving on to the beginning of Christ.

So we get this weird clash of apocalyptic texts like: *They will weigh down your hearts with carousing, and the anxieties of life, and then that day will suddenly close on you like a trap.* But we’ve also got coupled with messages of love and excitement: *How can we thank God enough for in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?.*

If there's one theme, I think, that connects the revelation of the return of Jesus to the culmination in his birth, it is waiting.

Luke takes this head-on in in chapter 21. (Luke 21:25-36). He says:

"There will be signs in the sun, the moon and the stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. People will faint in terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken."

Wow!

It reminds me of a time I was wondering to a friend if I had broken my wrist. He looked at me and said, *"trust me, if you broke your wrist, you would not be wondering."*

Luke's pointing out that this moment is not something we were gonna miss. It's going to be quite obvious when revelation is upon us. We're not gonna go *"oh, is it today?" Or is it tomorrow?* It's gonna be obvious. You won't miss it!

He follows that up with the message of the fig tree parable, reinforcing that the message will be clear. Then he continues:

"Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you suddenly like a trap. For it will come on all those who live on the face of the whole earth. Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man."

I'm not sure about you, but this is a piece of advice I have to go back to, pretty regularly. I get so caught up in things that scare me, things that worry me, that I sometimes give them a disproportionate place on my mental bookshelf.

Two weeks ago, I was under intense pressure at work, to complete an auditing feature for the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries in Queensland. We're working to enact new vegetation laws in early 2019, to improve the protection of the land from clearing, fodder harvesting, and several other activities that, when done in excess, can put our environment at risk. I was sketching out architecture designs, probing for more detailed requirements, all so I could get this thing built as quickly as possible.

In the midst of all this, I was approached by another government employee at the company who asked if I wanted to get a cup of coffee. This was a very unusual thing for him to do. He is a very introverted person who shies away from conversation as often as possible.

But, I waved him away - without even making eye contact - because I was so worried that I needed to get this work done that I didn't want to spend any time away from my desk.

Two days later I heard that his wife had just been to emergency for a serious illness.

I missed an opportunity to help someone that day because I was so focused on what was right in front of me that I missed what the bigger picture was! As Luke wrote, I was caught in *"the anxieties of life."*

And you know what? If I hadn't finished that feature on time because of that, it really wouldn't have mattered at all.

I wonder what's on the top of your mental bookshelf right now. Does it even belong there? I'm not saying it's not important, I'm just wondering if it is the most important.

Luke's reminding us to stay focused on the bigger picture, and not get too caught up in the worries of the day. Not to ignore them, but not to get so hung up on them that it paralyzes us. To keep God on the top shelf in our head. Then things start to fall in line.

But not only that. I think that Luke is offering a perspective: that while we cannot remove our waiting, we may affect its character.

He is shifting the dialogue from waiting, to anticipating.

I think that's what Advent is - a season of anticipation. We know what's coming, we're not going to miss it - and we don't have to wait for it. We need to be patient but we don't have to wait. Because when we wait, we just sort of sit around and let things happen to us.

This is the line of thinking that John the Baptist had with his religious movement. He believed that if enough people were baptised in the river Jordan and went off to the other side, that God would come down and deliver them to the promised land - away from the heel of the Romans.

God was near! But he wasn't here yet. Let's just wait it out.

But Jesus did not say this. Just a few chapters before, in Luke 17: 20 - 21 he says: "*The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'there it is,' because the kingdom of God is in your midst.*"

He did not say that the Kingdom of God was near, he said it was here.

God was there. Amidst all that pain under the heel of the Romans that they suffered.

And God is here, even when asylum seekers are imprisoned on Manus and Nauru. He is here, even when asylum seekers are met with tear gas at the US border. He is here, amidst all this pain and suffering.

What does that mean? If God is in our midst, why is all this happening? I thought God was going to deliver me from all my problems! I was just waiting for him to do it!

Does Jesus mean to say that God won't do it without us, and that we can't do it without God?

What changes in our mindsets when we stop waiting for God, and start anticipating the return of Jesus? How does that shift the way that we perceive the world around us?

I find it liberating, because it drives me to action; because I don't have to wait for someone else to fix it! I have been given the power to do something about it!

Not in righteous fury, not in self-righteousness, or a sense of injustice. These cause me to put the wrong thing on top of my mental bookshelf. I get angry at the aggressors and try to stop them. But as my sister once told me: *the true power of God does not show itself in crushing his enemies. It comes when we stand with the victims.*

These things cannot sustain me for long without putting venom into my veins. And anger!

It drives me to action out of hope. Out of love. Out of joy. Out of peace. It is my turn to take steps to help this world.

You can drive change into the world too. Far greater than you know, because that is what God has been waiting on you to do. In anticipation of what is to come, you can walk into a field of suffering and see the hope, spread out in little specks across the world. That's something that we get to do in the midst of all this pain.

We can do so much with just a little bit of hope. We only need one candle.

Don't – what I'm trying to say is - don't just let God change your eternity. Let God change your mentality. Keep your vision on the horizon, your eyes fixed on what is truly important.

We didn't wait for God to magically fix the roof! We did something about that, because we believe that is important, not just to us, but in the hope that those who come after us will benefit from its shelter in the same way we have.

A society grows great when its people plant trees, under the shade of which they know they will never sit.

As Christians we have so much to look forward to. You are only at the beginning of your eternal life. As far as I'm concerned, God hasn't even started with you yet.

Do not spend your days focusing on all the pain under the sun, and the anxieties of the present. These things paralyse us.

We are not a paralysed people, waiting on God to deliver us We are patiently, hopefully, anticipating the return of Jesus.

I pray that you go about this week looking for those specks of hope spread out across your life. They're there, and they're so important!

I pray that you find that candle of hope which sustains you, even in times of darkness.

And I hope that this Advent season brings you the sustaining forces of Christianity: the strength of hope, of love, of joy, and of peace.