

**Sermon for FPC Gardena – Sunday November 29, 2009**  
***Jeremiah 33:14-16 and Luke 1:26-38***

How appropriate that we begin the new liturgical year with a period of waiting...for that is the theme of the Advent season, which literally means ‘a coming’. It is a time set aside by many Christians to wait and watch and pray in preparation for the observance of the coming of the Christ Child.

For really, all of scripture is about waiting...it is filled with prophecy and anticipation and hope...always looking towards God’s vision for the future from Genesis, the beginning, through Revelation and its visions of Christ’s heavenly community.

God created the world in which all things were good, and created human beings in the image of God. Life in the garden was intended to be harmonious and complete, a place in which God and humankind walked together, delighting in one another’s company.

But God also endowed humanity with the gift of free will, and their choices (and our own), beginning with the very first human beings, have not always been compatible with God’s vision of peaceful community.

And so, God set out to invite human beings back into a relationship with God and all creation which is to be defined by justice and righteousness, in a time and place where there will be no more tears, no more wars, no more disease, no more poverty, and no more oppression.

God recognized that it would take time to realize this vision, for the farther humanity got from the peace and perfection of the garden, the more restoration and reconciliation would be needed before the community of God could come to fruition.

Scripture describes to us the wide variety of approaches God has taken in extending the invitation to humankind...

There was Noah—the good person, set aside with his family to restore and repopulate a world gone wrong. There was a lot of waiting and preparation involved, before, during, and after the flood, a time for the family of Noah to cultivate patience and a vision for the future. And God even placed a rainbow in the clouds as a sign of God’s covenant with Noah. God remained faithful. Noah’s family did not.

And so, in time, God brought a new covenant to Abram and Sarai, living a life of both wealth and barrenness in the desert. They were to leave their home and family, to follow God’s leading toward a land of promise. And, God promised them a long-awaited son, who would give them descendants as many as the number of stars in the sky. This, too, would require patience and vision on the part of this couple who became known as Abraham and Sarah. And, in fits and starts, they carried God’s covenant forward to the next generation. And so it went, with successes and failures in abundance, until the Hebrew people, as they came to be called, found themselves enslaved in Egypt under the reign of a cruel pharaoh.

Eventually God spoke to one of those slaves at the scene of the burning bush, calling Moses to lead God's people out of slavery and on to the Promised Land. With God's help, and the help of his siblings, Miriam and Aaron, Moses guided the Hebrew people through the long waiting period of the Exodus. This was a far cry from the lush garden of God's creation. The people endured hunger and thirst, fear and weariness, and all manner of challenges. Yet God never left them alone, continually fulfilling their needs, restoring their hope, and crafting the covenant in encouraging ways such as the ten tablets of law.

It was Joshua who accompanied God's people into the Promised Land, but that land had to be won in battle and through faith and endurance. God sent a long line of judges to keep the peace among the Hebrew people, and to guide them in the covenant. Some of the judges furthered God's vision. Many did not. The last of the judges was Samuel, a man of God, but Samuel's sons did not follow in his ways, and so the people cried out for a king. This was not in God's plan, but God relented, and Saul was made King over Israel. That didn't go well. At all. And so, God had Samuel anoint another, one who had a heart for God and who would become king when Saul's reign ceased. And that was David. David was yet another of God's unexpected choices—a young shepherd boy who sang and played the harp, surely not fit to reign over God's chosen people in the midst of turmoil and trouble. And yet he was, and he did. Not without controversy was David's reign, yet he continued to turn to God in repentance and for renewal in the wake of poor choices. David was considered, overall, to be a great king.

Well after David's time, after a series of kings, both faithful and unfaithful to God, the Hebrew people found themselves living in captivity in Babylon. More despair...more waiting...more wondering whether God's vision would ever come to pass. The people needed this time to recognize that they had fallen away from God, and that they needed to prepare to restore that relationship within their daily lives, first in captivity, and eventually back in Jerusalem. To assist the people in this time of waiting, God sent prophets, such as Jeremiah, to offer vision and guidance for the future. God's words, spoken through such prophets helps us to see the connection between Israel's past and its future....and how the cord of God's covenant ties all of their history to the future.

In today's passage, Jeremiah refers to the 'days which are surely coming' with hope for the future of God's chosen people, through a 'righteous branch' of David. In this time of waiting, while living in captivity, God's people are invited to look back at the history of God's care and God's covenant in order to realize that God has never forsaken them. The prophet alludes to the fact that it is from the line of David that new hope, and a new vision for God's people will arise.

Perhaps this is the moment when the theme of waiting becomes most obvious. It is becoming clear that God is not going to turn back time and make everything better. Human beings have been called into covenant—into partnership—with God from the very beginning, and we have a responsibility for the future.

And, as life became more complex over the ages, God continued to hold people responsible for their choices and actions. God was waiting for God's people to engage in faithful living and to work for the restoration and reconciliation of the world. God waited, but never passively. In some form or another, God continued to send messengers of hope, visions of what the future could be, and guidance for bringing it into being. Jeremiah was one such messenger.

During Advent, we return to the words of the prophets, like Isaiah and Jeremiah, not only to understand the history of our faith—but also to get a glimpse of God's vision for the future of God's people. And this is a part of our process of waiting—to soak up the possibilities God envisions through these prophecies...for they are like beacons of light in a world that is lacking in illumination. And, even now, they can guide us on our way.

Today's vision from Jeremiah, describes God's plan to enter directly into the lives of human beings, in the form of a newborn child, dependent upon human beings for care and comfort. The prophets were poetic, yet often abstract, so that God's people knew that God had a vision, but they only had hints as to how it might come to be. And God's people listened to the prophets—sometimes actually hearing and pondering the meaning of their words—and they waited...and waited...and waited some more. The Old Testament came to a close and the New Testament, or covenant, began, this time with the angel Gabriel heralding the birth prophesied by Jeremiah so long before. Page 5

And, upon receiving this astonishing news from the angel Gabriel, Mary, too, must wait and ponder and prepare for what is to come. During the season of Advent, we wait with Mary and with Joseph, pondering and preparing for whatever it may be that God wants to bring to birth through us as a part of the ongoing journey toward God's heavenly community.

Waiting must have been hard for Mary, yet a bit of a relief as well—to have those months of pregnancy in which to take in the reality of her situation, and to help those around her understand and believe. Mary and Joseph most likely experienced a wild mix of anticipation, apprehension, and awe as the time for birthing drew nearer.

We know that different people of that time waited and prepared for this birth in quite a variety of ways...Wise astrologers, known as *magi*, were studying the stars in order to determine the time and place that this wondrous event would take place....A jealous and evil king plotted to end the child's life even before it had truly begun.....an emperor called for a census and taxing, calling each man to his hometown to be counted.... innkeepers busied themselves making ready for the hoards of guests sure to come due to the census...and a young mother and her husband traveled the distance from Bethlehem to Jerusalem only to find that there was no room for them in the inn, only a place in a stable. All that waiting, since the beginning of time, would culminate in that stable beneath the star, where God would come to life Immanuel, God With Us. Page 6

All that waiting...what does it mean for us as we prepare to celebrate and observe the birth of Christ?

For one thing, it invites us to take the time to reflect on God's relationship with humankind throughout history, some of which we have done this morning—so that we may deepen our understanding of God's deep desire to be engaged in the world and in our individual and corporate lives.

When we recognize this time of Advent as a season in which to practice waiting , we allow ourselves to slow down, to resist the hectic pace that the holidays can impose, and we can engage in times of prayer and worship and community which may help us prepare for journeying along the paths to which God is calling us.

Learning, through the scriptures and through prayer, to wait for God is a spiritual discipline which can aid us in the many times of waiting which we encounter during the courses of our lives---waiting for birth and waiting for death.....waiting for news... waiting for healing...waiting for new beginnings...

waiting for Christ to come again in glory....

waiting for God's heavenly community which will be a time and place of justice and righteousness, in which the Prince of Peace will reign forevermore. And that's something worth waiting for! Amen. Page 7

**Jeremiah 33:14-16**

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."

**Luke 1:26-38**

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.