

Advent Two 2018
St Brendan's Anglican Church
Rev. Doug Floyd

Readings: Malachi 3:1-5, Psalm 126, 1 Corinthians 4:8-21, Luke 3:1-6

Collect: Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and the comfort of your holy Word we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

During Advent we watch and wait for the coming of the Lord. When I was a child, we watched and waited for the coming of Christmas. The newspaper ticked off the countdown to Christmas, and every day I would check the paper to see how many days were left. This time before the coming was a pleasurable burden. As each day crawled by, I dreamed of the surprises to come. As a child, you end up waiting for all sorts of things: for dad to come home; for summer vacation; for the long road trip to come to an end; for the punishment to be over.

Waiting is not always a pleasurable burden. Sometimes it is just a burden, a struggle, an anguish. Sometimes waiting can be stressful. We recently started a new health insurance, and I found out this week that they will not fill my transplant medicines locally. I have to get them through the mail. One problem: my medication would run out by Wednesday and I didn't find out there was a problem on Monday morning. On Monday and Tuesday, I called my local pharmacist, the specialty provider and my doctor. I would call and then wait for their responses. There are not many things that stress me, but medications problems can send me into panic.

Once I left my medications in a hotel room in Santa Fe, NM, and I didn't realize it until Kelly and I were a day's drive away in Texas. As I begin to panic and act irrationally. Kelly calmly resolved the situation and had the medications overnighted to us. On Monday and Tuesday, I was trying to keep calm while feeling panic barking at the gate.

What was particularly stressful was the sense of helplessness. As much as I tried to effect change, I couldn't make things happen any faster. I simply had to wait and trust that it would work out. There are times and situations when we simply cannot control the outcome. The sense of powerlessness is a painful reminder of our frailty as humans. We have little control over many of the fundamental aspects of living. While we are not always aware of it, most of life requires trust in our bodies to function properly, trust in other people, and primarily trust in God's faithfulness.

The tension of helplessness and trust stands out in Fleming Rutledge's book on Advent where she recounts a dire situation of waiting in the midst of a war zone. She writes, "In 2017, Yemen, the poorest country in the Arab world, was suffering from a prolonged crisis as a result of civil

war. The government and all its agencies had ceased to operate. All services—medical care, sanitation, food supply, factories, airports, seaports, bridges—everything was collapsing. Parents were desperate as their children began to die of cholera, a disease that is easily treated in the developed world. A man named Muhammad Nasir waited outside a primitive cholera clinic as his son Waleed hung by a thread. Even if he recovered, his father had no money to return home. Another poor man, Saleh al-Khawlani, had fled from bombing with his wife and six children from one side of Yemen to another. He said, “The war haunts us from all directions.” A third man, Yakoub al-Jayefi, a Yemeni soldier, had not been paid anything for eight months, and his six-year-old daughter was in dire condition from malnutrition. Waiting by her side in a clinic, he said, “We’re just waiting for doom or for a breakthrough from heaven.”¹

This captures the deep darkness and bright hope of Advent. “We’re just waiting for doom or for a breakthrough from heaven.” In this tension, there is the struggle to stand, to wait, not to lose heart, not to grow bitter. The parable of the 10 virgins captures that long wait deep into the night. They are helpless to make the bridegroom come sooner. All they can do is watch and wait. Five lose hope, lose faith while five continue trusting.

This long wait in the night can be found in our Old Testament lesson from Malachi. He writes to a community that is struggling with disappointment, loss of faith, and some of whom have even left the faith. They accuse God of betrayal, of loving the evil doers while abandoning the righteous.

Now lets back up a bit get a sense what has happening to this community. Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi are writing to the community of Hebrews who returned from exile in Babylon. Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel proclaimed that this community would represent a second Exodus. Just as the ancient Hebrew slaves left Egypt for the Promised Land, this group of exiles would follow a similar path in returning to the Promise Land. Expectations were high for a glorious renewal.

Though they were sent into captivity for seventy years, the time would come that God would do a new thing with his people and lead them home again. What excitement when King Cyrus issued the following decree, “The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. ³ Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem. ⁴ And let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem.” (Ezr 1:2–4).

Psalms 126 records the joy of this returning community of exiles,

¹ When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.

- 2 Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then they said among the nations,
“The Lord has done great things for them.”
- 3 The Lord has done great things for us;
we are glad. (Ps 126:1–3)

As they were taken away to Babylon, they had gone out weeping. But now years later, they were coming home shouts of joy. And yet, there were signs that this return would be more difficult.

Unlike the Exodus story, there were no clouds by day or fire by night. Moses did not lead them through the wilderness. Joshua did not conquer the enemies. They came home and life was hard. Rebuilding the Temple was not easy. Obstacles faced them at every turn. Enemies in the land conspired against them. Officials stopped them. King Cyrus died. One emperor after another came and went, and still no Temple.

Haggai and Zechariah prophecy to the leaders and the captives, encouraging them to complete the task. It takes over twenty years to complete the Temple. When it is finally complete, it pales in comparison with Solomon’s Temple. It is nothing like the glory that Ezekiel describes in his vision of a renewed Temple. The older generation mourns even as the younger generation rejoices (Ezra 3:12). Haggai encourages them, “For thus says the Lord of hosts: Yet once more, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land. And I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with glory, says the Lord of hosts.” (Hag 2:6–7). Though the Temple looks less impressive, the prophets suggest that it is more glorious. Though Israel is weaker and no longer independent, once again, the prophets suggest that she is becoming more glorious. Already, we are beginning to how the Lord is revealing a very different kind of glory and this will continue when Christ comes.

The people cannot see this hidden glory. What they see is struggle. The struggle of obeying the Lord in the land was much greater than the people expected. Many grew weary, lost faith and hope, and returned to old patterns of disobedience and rebellion. The rich took advantage of the poor. The people intermarried with surrounding pagans.

Instead of crying out to God in their frustration and pain, they made excuses for their own unfaithfulness, accusing God of not being faithful or just. Malachi opens his prophecy in the middle of this dispute between the people and the Lord.

2 “I have loved you,” says the Lord. But you say, “How have you loved us?” (Mal 1:2).

God becomes their scapegoat. In their frustration and helplessness they blame God for their problems. Right before today’s lesson, the Malachi writes,

“You have wearied the Lord with your words. But you say, “How have we wearied him?” By saying, “Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them.” Or by asking, “Where is the God of justice?” (Mal 2:17). Though they cannot see his hand at work, he is moving and has moved on their behalf.

The Lord responds to their complaint, “Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. ² But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap. ³ He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the Lord.” (Mal 3:1–3).

In keeping with the pattern of the prophets, this word most likely would have been fulfilled in some form in their day, but at the same time, it anticipates another later time. The passage speaks of a coming messenger who will prepare for the coming of the Lord. In Luke 7:27, Jesus quotes this Malachi passage when pointing to John the Baptist “This is he of whom it is written,

“ ‘Behold, I send my messenger before your face,
who will prepare your way before you.’ Lk 7:27.

If you look at icons and artwork of John the Baptist across the age, many images show John pointing. Even though John was killed at the beginning of Jesus ministry, many church artists chose to show John at the cross pointing to Jesus. During Advent the church sets aside two Sundays to focus on John the Baptist. Why? He is pointing to the coming Savior, to the long-awaited Bridegroom, to the scapegoat. John the Baptist is the fulfillment of all the prophets and in him we see ancient Israel pointing forward to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. The Lord of glory has come hidden in the in the humanity of Jesus.

Just as the people complained about God in Malachi, the people threw accusations on Jesus in his coming, suggesting that he is of evil one, that he is a blasphemer, that he is a threat to Israel and to Rome.

As he hangs on the cross, John is still pointing to the Savior, to the Lord of glory, to the scapegoat who bears our sins outside the camp into the inhabitation of the demons. Even in his apparent defeat, Jesus is the Harrower of Hell who conquers sin and death and leads captivity captive as death is undone. Though hidden, he is redeeming his people and the nations.

During Advent, we are waiting and watching for the coming of the Lord.

Like the exiles who returned home, we face our own frustrations at the helpless, difficult places in our lives. We are waiting for God to come in the midst of our broken relationships. We are waiting for God to come in the midst of the very real challenges of living out faith in a world of

sin. We are waiting with the people Yemen, of Venezuela, of Nigeria, and of all the torn and devastated places of our world from nations to homes on fire with pain and anger. And we are waiting for Him who will remember us even in our own deaths as we enter into the ultimate place of helplessness.

For only he can call us home.

In this world of woe, we look, watch and wait for the hopes and fears of the all the years to be met in Jesus Christ our Lord. As we look forward to his coming, we also look back over our lives and our world. We pray for eyes to see and ears to hear Him for He has been at work in our lives and in our world and working out His purposes even now. We ask for grace to behold glimpses of His hand of mercy all around us. And in the fullness of time, the hidden glory of our Savior Jesus Christ will be fully unveiled.

Even so, come Lord Jesus.

¹ Fleming Rutledge, *Advent: The Once and Future Coming of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 13.