

How Will You Wait?

This morning as is our tradition we lit the third candle of the advent wreath. This candle for those of you, who keep track of such things, is the “joy” candle. In some churches, this candle is rose coloured. A blended mixture of the original colour of Advent purple and the liturgical colour of Christmas, white.

As an aside, the use of the “royal” colour purple was to represent the coming King. Use of blue originated in Scandinavia likely because purple dye was too expensive for churches to use. To this day, many churches continue to use the colour blue as a reference to hope. Proof that many church customs usually develop out of practicality, and not necessarily a strong theological understanding.

Regardless, whether we use purple or blue, both represent feelings of anticipation and longing as we await the coming of the Messiah. On Christmas we will light the white Christ candle. White representing purity. Pure light, for a world that so desperately needs it.

The joy candle we have now lit, representing this as the Sunday of rejoicing. Rejoicing because we have arrived at the midpoint of advent, our preparations are half over and we are close to Christmas. The progressive lighting of the candles symbolizes the expectation and hope surrounding our Lord’s first coming and the anticipation of his second coming to judge the living and the dead.

Another church year has begun. Christmas is once again approaching. We find ourselves once more at the third Sunday in Advent, rejoicing that the light is again coming into our world. Joyful anticipation is what we do at this time every year. It is a big part of our faith, this waiting for the Messiah. We confess, teach, and preach the return of Christ. Jesus is in heaven. He is seated at the right hand of the father, and he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. And so we wait.

I am curious, how do you wait?

Now I want us to explore that a little deeper and so I am going to ask you a question. I am going to give you a moment to think about this, because I want you to answer honestly from your heart. I want you to answer based on what you feel, not what you think you should feel. And definatley not based on what you have been told you should feel. Especially do not answer with what you expect the person beside you in the pew wants to hear. If you are ready here is the question.

Do you believe in your heart and fully expect that Jesus will come again?

For some of you, I do not doubt that deep in your heart you were able with every fibre of your being to quickly and confidently answer a deep and rich “absolute yes”. Some of you might even be willing to expect this return of Christ to be a possibility in your life time.

There are others, I am willing to guess, that are also able to answer yes, but with conditions. Maybe you expect Jesus to return but not as the same “Jesus of Nazareth” that we read about in the bible. Maybe your return of Christ looks more like world peace accomplished, or a time in which there is finally equality and justice for all.

Some of you in total honesty might be able to answer “no”, I do not believe Christ will return. There is too much despair, and pain, and sorrow in the world to hold on to that hope any longer. And seriously it has been over two thousand years. I know God’s time isn’t our time but honestly how long do we have to wait.

No matter what your answer, I am sure just me asking the question or you attempting to answer it honestly felt at least a little uncomfortable. I wish it didn’t. But it is a natural reaction to feel uncomfortable when questioning your faith. After all as Christians, it is exactly this word “faith” that we are told we should have in spades. We should be strong in our beliefs. How many times have you heard the expression, “Oh yee of little faith” at the slightest inkling of doubt? How many Sundays in your life time have you stood up and heard the creeds of our church proclaimed by many bold unwavering voices around you. It seems almost unnatural to question those things that we have been indoctrinated with. It’s no wonder we feel uncomfortable with our feelings and opinions around matters of faith and theology.

Why is that? Do you think that this is the kind of relationship that God wants to have with us? Do you imagine that God insists that we bury our questions and our doubts? Does God want us to blindly adhere to ancient church doctrines for no other reason than that, they are ancient church doctrines? Does God insist that we believe what we think everyone else believes?

My hunch is that God would sooner have a real relationship with us; an intimate bond where we feel close enough to God to allow us to be vulnerable. A connection with the divine where we feel safe enough to express honestly that we have doubts. That we have fears. That sometimes we just feel lost in the night. That we often yearn for something more.

We can develop this honest relationship with God by also being honest with one another. We can admit to each other that our faith wavers. As the body of Christ we need to stop pretending we have all the answers and instead invite the questions. We must admit that a spiritual life doesn’t consist of accumulated doctrines and flawless answers. Together let us encourage spiritual exploration instead of the comfort of certainty.

I don’t think it will come as a surprise to many of you if I tell you that the institutional church as we know it is dying. There are many that would say that if we want to save the church we need to return to doctrine that is more rigid. That the church has become too wishy washy in its teaching. I disagree.

Philip Gulley tells of a vibrant growing church located in a community that in all other respects was dying. He was eager to visit with the pastor and learn the reason for its renewal. He admitted he expected the pastor to be strongly evangelistic, to have developed exciting youth and family programming, to have invested every waking moment visiting people and inviting them to church. That isn’t what he found.

While the pastor described herself as evangelical, she was socially progressive. The church had a youth program but it was in no way remarkable, and the pastor was only nominally involved in it. She had invited people to attend church and had worked hard to create a welcoming environment, but many pastors do that with only little success. When he asked her about the growth of the church she seemed mystified by it, she said it had happened at every church she had been a part of, was grateful for it, but didn’t fully understand the reason for it. She chalked it up to just trying to make people feel at home.

In exploring the congregation further, Gulley found the pastor had helped create such an accepting, open environment that people were attracted to it in droves. I can be myself here one lady told him. I don’t feel like anyone is judging me another man said. One man told the story of a difficult period following the death of his wife, of going to the pastor and expressing doubt about God’s existence. He said it didn’t bother her a bit. She admitted if her spouse died she would have doubts about God too. One lady

described the adult Sunday school class. “You can say anything. And I mean anything. As Gulley got to know the pastor, he discovered a woman who was deeply curious, eager to discuss substantial matters, and not so immersed in her own world view that she couldn’t entertain other perspectives. She was immune from the common need to have others agree with us.

Through her leadership their church became known as a place persons interested in spiritual and intellectual growth could gather. They were able to minister with a sense of humour and warm compassion for others, and this infused the community with such joy and energy that all sorts of people were drawn to them—college graduates, high-school drop outs, rich, poor, evangelical, skeptics, traditionalists, and progressives. Together they became an engaged and loving community wrestling with the complexities and challenges of life, people who believe their relationship with God should expand their world, not shrink it.ⁱ

In this season of Advent, I have concluded that the importance is not what we are waiting for, but how we are waiting. In the flickering light of the blue candles, I see signs of hope in our church. Bishop Susan Johnson has been encouraging our Lutheran churches to find ways to help our members and friends to deepen their spiritual practices. Members are expanding their faith while exploring and becoming more open to those whose beliefs differ. We are reaching out to those beyond our walls by welcoming the stranger to our community meals, knitting comforters for someone we might never meet, serving the homeless a hot meal, and delivering Christmas hampers.

The third Sunday of Advent—labelled by the “joy” candle—is one in which the church rejoices as the advent of the Messiah draws nearer. Whether or not we mark this Sunday with a pink candle on the wreath, or a blue one, is not what matters. Whether we understand the longing in our hearts to be a longing for Christ’s return, an aching desire for peace on earth, or a yearning for a deeper relationship with the divine, that is not what matters.

What does matter in this season of anticipated light is how we wait.
How we bear witness to what is coming.

May we continue to wait in hopeful, joy filled, anticipation . . .

for the spirit of the Lord God is upon us . . . Amen.

ⁱ Gulley, Philip (2010) *If the Church Were Christian: Rediscovering the Values of Jesus*, HarperOne, New York.