

## Being Able to Wait

(Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36)

Sermon delivered by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia  
The First Sunday of Advent, December 2, 2018

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Ninety years ago today, the vicar of a German Evangelical congregation in Barcelona, Spain stepped into the pulpit of his parish to deliver his sermon. The church there, as we are today, was observing the First Sunday of Advent, and I have no doubt those in attendance were anxious to hear what this young minister had to say at the beginning of this season of hopeful expectation. He had after all only been in Spain for a short period of time, and the congregation was likely still in the “getting to know him as a preacher” phase of their relationship.

The vicar pulled out his text, gave a short reading from the day’s passage from Revelation, and then opened with this statement: “Celebrating Advent means being able to wait.”<sup>1</sup>

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He continued to deliver his sermon, a bold reflection on the meaning and implication of the season on his listeners. “We must wait for the greatest, most profound, most gentle things in life; nothing happens in a rush.”<sup>2</sup> And still later, “We have grown so accustomed to the idea of divine love and of the coming at Christmas that we no longer sense the awe that God’s coming should awaken in us.”<sup>3</sup>

The vicar in the pulpit that morning was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a minister who 17 years later would be murdered because of his opposition to a tyrannical regime. As he sat in a prison cell for the last few years of his life, he did so surely awaiting the end of his earthly journey and the start of a new life in the presence of God. But on this day nearly two decades earlier, in the peaceful surroundings of a church on coastal Spain, he preached on waiting of a different type.

This morning we too are waiting – but for us it is a time of “double waiting.” On the one hand we are awaiting the arrival of the Messiah, of course, the yearly remembrance of the birth of Jesus more than 2,000 years ago. But we also are awaiting his return a second time, the coming again that he foretold in today’s reading from Luke. One season in which we are preparing ourselves for two arrivals: the “already” and the “not yet.”

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<sup>1</sup> “Sermon on Revelation 3:20, First Sunday in Advent, December 2, 1928.” *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 10: Barcelona, Berlin, New York: 1928-1931*, p. 542.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> “Sermon on Revelation 3:20,” p. 544.

This dual-Advent, if you will, is reflected in our readings from Jeremiah and Luke. Let us begin with a look at Jeremiah, a prophet during a time of significant trauma for Israel whose central admonition to the people was to not look away from what was happening. As a prophet, his work was in overseeing those in exile in Babylon and Egypt – exiles that he considered righteous acts resulting from their violating the covenant with God. It is a time of lament and anguish, of separation from their homes and seemingly from God.

The three verses that we just heard are a glimpse of the new covenant that was promised by Jeremiah, a rebirth of the relationship with God at some point in the future. The theologian Walter Brueggemann writes that the underlying message is that “[W]hen the king practices justice and righteousness, the city and the land will be healed and saved ... [a reshaping of things] which connects covenant obedience and covenantal blessing.”<sup>4</sup> While these words are “spoken to give hope to a crushed people and inspire faithful endurance of the presence circumstances”<sup>5</sup> – a reminder that “the days are surely coming”<sup>6</sup> – they also are a reminder to the people that they must wait.

*Celebrating Advent means being able to wait.*

And then we move into the passage from Luke, in which we hear Jesus deliver an almost apocalyptic description of the signs that will herald the return of the Son of Man. As with many things shared by Jesus in the Gospels about the end times, when they will take place is known only to God. But here, as with Jeremiah before him, Jesus is telling people to be watchful and to be ready. They will know their redemption is getting close, he says, when they begin to see all of these signs. And as with their ancestors before, the people must wait.

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Both of these readings are shocking, are they not? Where are the angels and the shepherds, and the vision of a soon-to-arrive baby swaddled in a manger? Christmas carols have been playing for weeks; stores have been decorated for the holidays seemingly since July 4; television specials and Hallmark Channel movie marathons are well underway. All of these build up our hope ... our expectation ... for Christmas. We are being pushed by society and our culture to blow through Advent and focus on what lies ahead.

But with these readings, all of that is cast aside. They are difficult passages to read, yes, but the opportunity to read them at this point in the year is a gift. They allow us to step into the shoes of those far from home in Egypt and Babylon. They give us the opportunity to be shocked by what Jesus is saying just as much as those standing with him on that day. They are a reminder to us that while the present may be difficult and emotional and perhaps even overwhelming, Jesus will come again “with power and great glory.”<sup>7</sup> We are reminded once again that “the

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<sup>4</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *To Build, To Plant: Jeremiah 26-52*, p. 99.

<sup>5</sup> Angela Bauer-Levesque, “Jeremiah 33:14-16: Exegetical Perspective.” *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Vol. 1*, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Jeremiah 33:14 (NRSV).

<sup>7</sup> Luke 21:27 (NRSV).

days are surely coming ... when I will fulfill the promise I made”<sup>8</sup> and a righteous ruler will spring up.

Even as it was during the exile, and just as it was for those following Jesus on his journey to the cross, we must be patient. We must wait. It will be difficult, but it will be a blessed time. Over these next few weeks, we will be granted opportunities to hear time and again the promise of the Advent season. And “[T]he good news of Advent is not simply that Christ is coming, but that his coming means we can hope, despite all that is falling apart in our lives, our communities, and the world around us.”<sup>9</sup> It is a time of waiting, yes, but Advent also very much a time of promise.

So as we move into this season of waiting for an arrival that has both already happened and is yet to come, let me end with the same words with which Bonhoeffer ended his sermon on that morning nearly a century ago: “Learn to wait, for he has promised to come. Behold, I stand at the door... And we call to him: Yes, come soon, Lord Jesus.”<sup>10</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> Jeremiah 33:14 (NRSV).

<sup>9</sup> Kathy Beach-Verhey, “Luke 21:25-36: Homiletical Perspective.” *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Vol. 1*, p. 25.

<sup>10</sup> “Sermon on Revelation 3:20,” *Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 10*, p. 546.