

1st Sunday of Advent, Year A
November 29, 2020
St. Charles Ave Presbyterian Church
Rev. Sarah Chancellor-Watson
Isaiah 64:1-9

“Those Who Wait”

Today I'd like to draw attention to particular elephant in the room, it's me – I'm the elephant in the room. If you have missed the memo or didn't hear through the gossip grapevine, no I am not carrying around the quarantine 15, I am in fact 9 months pregnant. Since we've been worshipping remotely and most of y'all have only seen me from here up, I never got to make a formal announcement and it's something that could be easily miss. I will say it's quite an interesting experience, being in this condition as we enter into the season of Advent. Not only am I really feeling a connection to Jesus' mother Mary these days, but this season of watching, waiting, anticipation, preparation, deep hope and love, is something that is a lived, bodily experience for me. I am reminded of these advent themes with every week that I grow bigger, with every ache and pain, with turn and kick of the new life inside me. And I'm taking that as the spiritual gift that it is, as I simultaneously prepare for the birth of my first child, we once more prepare for the birth of the Christ child once more in our hearts and in the world, remembering the glorious event of when God became one of us as a vulnerable child and anticipating his return in glory to make all things new.

Now, of course, it's not necessary to ever have experienced pregnancy to know and understand these lessons and themes of Advent. Normally, I'm spending the First Sunday of Advent, imploring us all to slow down, to not get caught up in the busyness of that often consumes us this time of year – in the presents to be bought and wrapped, the cookies and baked goods to be made, the parties to be planned, the decorating to be done in our homes. But this year, well is very different. For ways both good and bad, we've been forced to slow down. We grieve the loss of many beloved traditions this year, but as we make adjustments and modifications to our celebrations we also make room for new practices and traditions, perhaps a return to a more simple holiday season taking stock of what truly matters. I don't need to say what would it be like if we stripped away all the hustle and bustle of December and instead just

waited, because we've been waiting! We've been in this holding pattern of the pandemic wondering when our lives might go back to some semblance of normal. And maybe I should speak for myself, but I think it's not too much of a stretch to say that we're kind of tired of waiting!

In our scripture today, the Israelites are also tired of waiting! They have been in exile under the Babylonians, they have now returned from exile to rebuild their city, their temple, their culture and way of life, this time under Persian rule. They have heard the stories of God acting in the past, freeing them from slavery, feeding them in the wilderness, giving them a land to cultivate and make their own, and now they wonder – “Where is God now?” They don't just wonder they rail against the heavens, saying “Make the mountains quake and wildfires boil the waters. Show your power to not only us, but our enemies!” Our advent season doesn't begin with joy, but with lament, as we ask the same questions – “Where is God? Why does God's face sometimes feel hidden from us?”

This place of waiting is not an altogether unfamiliar place. It may be a rare instance where we're all here at the same time, but we've all had to or are currently enduring some difficult times of waiting. Some of us are waiting for reconciliation in our relationships, for forgiveness to be given or received. Some of us are waiting for the treatment to take effect, for the test results to come in, for the therapy to give us relief. Some of us are waiting in the loneliness and sorrow of being separated from our loved ones until the day of resurrection. My husband and I have been waiting much longer than 9 months for this baby. It has not been an easy journey for us to parenthood, and many of you have shared your own stories of heartache and grief along similar journeys and they have strengthened and sustained me in ways that I'll never be able to fully express. And then we look at world around us, at justice deferred and denied for so many of our neighbors, we are reminded once again of just how far we are from way things God intended them to be and there is pain and suffering and exhaustion in the waiting for the day when God will make all things right.

I really don't blame the Israelites for shaking their fists and pounding their breasts demanding that God come down now and act! It may seem like an audacious thing to demand such things from God, especially when in same breath they acknowledge that they have sinned

and that they bear responsibility for their present circumstances. We too, must acknowledge that our hands are also unclean and we play a collective role in the way our world works. These pleas for action though are a defiant kind of hope that sustains us in the slough of the waiting. It is a hope that says, “this is not how things should be and we’ve been promised much more.”

Our scripture ends with a quite powerful image, the Prophet reminds God, “You are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter. We are all the work of your hand,” although I suspect that this reminder is less for God and more for the people. Now I have always been fascinated with the process of making pottery, particularly using a wheel to turn a vase or bowl or cup. I am a novice of the nth degree when it comes to turning pottery having only done it myself a handful of times, but I did a bit of research and asked our resident potter Christina Carlisle a few questions. This process of turning a lump of clay into not only a work of art, but a useful vessel, is one that obviously take a great amount of skill as along each step of the way a potter must exert not only a great amount of strength and pressure, but also a delicate gentle touch to shape a piece into its final form. And one of the new things that I learned is that clay before it’s put into the kiln to be fired- that is baked in a special high heat oven – is completely reusable and recyclable. In the many days it takes a piece of pottery to be dry enough to be fired, bits of clay are shaved off as the potter continues to form the piece, adding flourishes and artistic touches, but also sometimes pieces break, or the potter realizes that what she has created maybe is just not quite right. Those pieces of clay, while hardened and rigid and set in their form may seem destined for the trash bin are instead put aside to be rehydrated, to once again become malleable clay that will be repurposed and become something new altogether.

We are clay and God is the potter. We don’t know where in the process of being formed and shaped by our Creator we’re in, but what we can be assured of is while we are waiting God is not done with us yet. Even when we feel dried out, useless, and used up, we can again be infused with the Living Water that Christ offers us, to become once again a new creation. God has not abandoned us but continues to work in and through us to accomplish his purposes and establish his kingdom. It is with this hope that we move forward in faith and trust, that we continue to answer the call God has placed on our lives, continue to do the work of God set

before us – loving our neighbors as ourselves, waiting patiently upon the Lord, and allowing our lives to be shaped by the Potter's hands.