

## Advent Waiting II

As I mentioned last week. This season of Advent is known as the season of waiting, yet the word Advent itself means arrival or coming. The reminder being that as we wait, we are expecting. And as we wait with expectation, we usually do so with an idea or an imagination of what we are to expect. We can wait with a sense of great expectation and set the bar high...or maybe we wait with diminished or zero expectation and set the bar low.

A few weeks ago I, met a man who you could say that when it came to this time of year, he had set the bar pretty low. I found myself at a hardware store getting a key cut. While the key was whizzing its way through the machine, the clerk behind the counter and I found ourselves with a few moments to chat. Making small talk, I mentioned how it was certainly about to get a lot busier with the Christmas season almost upon us.

The clerk looked at me and said, "Yes, it's going to get crazy...very stressful."

I replied, "Stressful? Really? I'm surprised."

The clerk said, "People have no patience, if you ask them to wait a few moments they get very upset." He reflected, "This is supposed to be the most wonderful time of year...and people just plow their way through it...demanding this and that...for them to have to wait their turn...it's just too much. People aren't very good at the waiting."

As I listened to his words I thought to myself that yes, he has a point that people aren't very good when it comes to waiting. But something else I realized as I listened to his gloomy prediction is that our vision of how things are going to be will certainly colour our world. I actually felt for this guy since I knew that not only was he going to have his work cut out for him as business ramped up and there would be more and more demanding customers to deal with, but because of the way he was anticipating the coming days and weeks, they were going to be all the more difficult. I'm not sure what it was that gave him such a sense of foreboding, perhaps it was his experiences of previous years while working that job, the ghosts of Christmases past that haunted him...this guy seemed hopeless when it came to his Christmas expectations.

You know, I find it lamentable how the Christmas season, for more and more people each year it seems, is a season that has come to detract from rather than contribute to one's peace of mind. This is supposed to be the season when we await the coming of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace. We reach that time of the year when we celebrate the one foretold by the prophets, such

as the prophesy given by Isaiah in our text this morning. We celebrate the coming of the one and the coming of the day when, “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together.” But Peace at Christmas for some in our world is not in the realm of expectation.

There is probably no day on the calendar year, that carries with it the expectations that Christmas does. Even if you’re not a person of the Christian faith and one who truly celebrates the birth of the Messiah, there is still this commercial Christmas that many find a need and a desire to celebrate. But it’s not just a need, it’s almost as if there is a command, an expectation from the world around you that you will fall in line, stand in line, wait in line and shop on line in order to live up to the hype and lose your peace of mind. Christmas it seems, becomes an exercise in not letting others down, no matter the cost. Giving people everything they want to satisfy their expectations for the holidays. Maybe even having unrealistic expectations of ourselves and what we believe we need to have a Merry Christmas.

Now don’t get me wrong, I love giving and receiving gifts as much as the next person. I love the thought and work and care that many put into creating special Christmas experiences for others. In fact I believe that giving and receiving are important ingredients to any healthy human relationship. After all, our faith and the story of Christmas is rooted in the giving of God’s only son, of others receiving this gift and giving the gift of their adoration in return. But you see, something happens when the world’s expectations become more important than the beauty of the giving and receiving. What we and what others sometimes expect can diminish the gift and as a result, diminish the beauty of the moment...the beauty of the gift.

It’s like the story a couple’s counsellor tells about a young couple she was meeting with. The couple had become engaged and wanted to be married on Christmas Eve. This pair of love birds chose Christmas Eve because, as they said, their love for each other was the greatest gift they could give. So romantic, don’t you think?

Well, a few days before the wedding, the couple showed up in the counsellor’s office with tears in their eyes and red faces. Apparently, the young man had given his beloved an early Christmas present.

“That’s a bad thing?” the counsellor asked.

The young man explained that this was a gift his future wife really needed.

The future wife rolled her eyes and announced, "It was a set of tires!"

"They were Michelins!" the young man protested.

But you see, the gift got lost in their expectations. The young man had his expectations as to how the gift would be received and what it meant...while his fiancée had something else in mind and there was "No peace!" She was waiting for a different sort of gift. He was waiting for a different sort of response. They were both left with disappointment.

We all wait with expectations. Not just at this time of year, but at any time of year and at any point in our lives. And where do our expectations come from? They come from ourselves. Our peers. Our parents. Our boss. They come from the world around us. If we look to the world of advertising and the media, we are constantly being fed messages about the things we need and what we are lacking and how certain products and experiences and material gifts can satisfy. They create a level of expectation. Or sometimes we look at what others have and what we lack and we can start to believe we need what they have too.

These expectations influence how we look at the world, how we respond to others and our perceptions of the future. Expectations that can lead to surprise and disappointment. Expectations that we find are either met or not met and, as a result, can lead to a sense of fulfilment because we got that for which we hoped or despairing because things didn't turn out the way we wanted. I suspect that as we get older we can begin to hold our expectations in check even let go of certain expectations because we do not want to be disappointed. It's the "once bitten, twice shy" syndrome. We may still have expectations, but our expectations are changed or diminished, much like they were for that fellow working at the hardware store. We can end up living life the way the 18<sup>th</sup> century satirist Alexander Pope put it when he said, "Blessed is he who expects nothing, for he shall never be disappointed."

But really? Is that any way to live our lives? To me it seems to be a pitiful and certainly less meaningful existence if we live only to spare ourselves feelings disappointment. After all, this world and this life consist of more than my feelings. Yet there is a danger that as we live, that our feelings, our personal feelings -and by this, I mean emotions can stand in the way. Not that our feelings aren't real or have an impact. One of the things we engage in our grief group is the reality of feelings and how they can consume us and even take over our lives. We have to discover

strategies in our lives to address and deal with our feelings so they don't...and ultimately so we don't stand in the way of life itself.

Because you see, we can begin to protect ourselves as individuals and even cut ourselves off from others, even from God as a way of avoiding disappointment. And you can correct me if you think I am wrong, but I am pretty sure that there is more to life and more to living, that God put us on this earth to do and aspire to more than just spend our lives avoiding disappointment...be it the disappointment of others or our own feelings of disappointment. Where is the faith in that? You see, when our expectations begin to diminish...so too does our faith diminish.

The challenge of faith...and I would say that the great gift of faith is that it calls us to expect not less, but more. When we ask for things of this life, of others, of ourselves and of God we have to be willing to risk disappointment, accept it and deal with it otherwise we will never know what is possible. We may find ourselves pleasantly surprised and even fulfilled when we live to expect more. I love something that the leadership guru Stephen Covey said in one of his books when he wrote, "Treat a man as he is and he will remain as he is. Treat a man as he can and should be and he will become as he can and should be." I think we can say the same thing about life. "Treat life as it is and it will remain as it is. Treat life as it can and should be and it will become as it can and should be." As a people of faith, we are called not to live with diminished expectations, we should expect more. More hope, more peace, more joy, more love, more peace...more life.

Expecting more is at the heart of this text from Isaiah that Keith read for us this morning. Isaiah's prophecy speaks to a disappointed people. The monarchy of Israel/Judah was in ruins. Generations of self-absorbed, self-serving governments had left the people despairing. But all the people could expect, as they looked to the future, was yet another king from the lineage of past governments – yet another incarnation of their old national identity.

Isaiah on the other hand, expects different...he expects more. It's like Isaiah is saying, don't expect the same old...God has given us things from people and places we weren't expecting....like the old shepherd Jesse. When it comes to what God can do...we should expect more. Isaiah expected that under this new spirit-filled ruler, there would be more than a return. There would be righteousness. And it was about more than just themselves, more than just the little nation of Israel. Isaiah joyfully describes not just a nation restored, but a world transformed. This new ruler,

from the stump of Jesse, out of that same unexpected way God had worked in the past...would usher in a new creation, a world in which the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid. It's a world none dared dream of, none dared ask for...A world where "They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord" (verse 9).

Who had thought to ask for such a thing? To expect such a thing?

This is what God had to give. Yet like children wandering through Toys'R'Us in early December...or like me wandering through Toys'R'Us in early December...Israel had to wait. The world had to wait. But wait with the expectation of more to come.

God's activity in the world was not diminished. Instead what had to happen was the drop-by-drop preparation of God's people, of God's world, for the transformative moment to happen. A moment they had to wait for that stretched far beyond their own lives and feelings, yet included them too.

Madeleine L'Engle once described clearly how all these centuries of promises, changes, ups and downs and waiting suddenly precipitated the arrival of the Messiah's birth. She likened the coming of Christmas, of waiting, to something she experienced in a high school chemistry class. She related it to the principle of emergence, where small changes can lead to large transformations. She wrote,

"The experiment I remember best was pouring a quart of clear fluid into a glass jar, and dropping into it, grain by grain, salt-sized crystals, until they layered, like white sand on the floor of the jar. One more grain – and suddenly – water and crystal burst into a living, moving pattern, a silent, quietly violent explosion. The teacher told us that only when we supersaturated the solution, would come the precipitation."

D'Engle continued, "The little town where Christ was born was like that glass jar in our lab. One by one they came, grain by grain, all those of the house of David, like grains of sand to be counted for the census. The inn was full. When Joseph knocked, his wife was already in labour; there was no room even for compassion. Until the barn was offered. That was the precipitating factor. A child was born, and the pattern changed forever, the cosmos shaken with that silent explosion."

After centuries of waiting, after almost countless generations had passed, there finally came that moment when all that was needed was one more addition.

It happened in Bethlehem, in a simple stable, in the quiet, in the dark. But when that final divine addition fell upon the earth, everything was changed. All Israel wanted was another king. Instead all the world got was something more than expected. This child was the Incarnation – God personally and relationally in our midst. All Judah/Israel desired was to reestablish their national identity and borders. Instead all creation was offered the promise of universal peace – a world without barriers and borders, an existence free of enmity and strife.

My friends, this is the spirit of Advent. When God is at work, we can expect more! Like the story of a young four-year old girl had a terrific Christmas. Who got everything she wanted and wasn't disappointed. After all the presents were opened, she turned to her mother and said, "I hope Mary and Joseph have another baby next year!" While we wait, we should expect more!

When we collect food to fill our local food banks. We don't just hope that one's nearby will be fed. We should be praying for an end to hunger across all this earth! When we pay our bills our bills and look at our balance sheets we should expect more than just our own financial security. Ask for poverty and need to disappear from the face of the whole world! As we deal with our own battles with disease and suffering and ailments. We should be praying for more than just our own health. Ask for the end of all disease, for the end of suffering upon this Earth! As we grow older and approach the end of our days. We should be doing more than winding down and looking back as if that's the best for which we can hope. We should expect more -a life that is abundant and everlasting for all people.

Don't read the Christmas story and thank God for that baby born just over 2000 years ago, whose birth brought God's message into this world and a nice story. Ask for that baby to be born again this Christmas, bringing the presence of divine love and light into each and every life. And ask God to do it again next year, and the next, and the next. It's like the ages old confession on the Church that says "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again."

As Christmas approaches, let's remember this: God gives us more than we expected. Because God knows that life can be more and hold more than we often want to expect. Not a God above us; not a God below us; not a God beside us; but God AMONG us, a God WITH us, God as one of us.