

Advent Waiting IV

As we prepare for our children to bring to life for us this morning the story of the nativity of Jesus, we are reminded that this is a story about the birth of a Saviour. As Linus puts it in the now legendary Charlie Brown Christmas, when answering Charlie Brown's question, "Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is about?" Linus replies, "Sure Charlie Brown, I can tell you what Christmas is all about." And then goes on to recite the King James Version of the nativity in the gospel of Luke saying, "there were in the same country shepherds, abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them! And they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, 'Fear not! For, behold, I bring you tidings of great joy, which shall be to all my people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ, the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you: Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.' And suddenly, there was with the angel a multitude of the Heavenly Host praising God, and saying, 'Glory to God in the Highest, and on Earth peace, and good will toward men.' That's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown." That's what it's all about...that's why we're here today. But what exactly does it mean to say that the child named Jesus is a Saviour? -a saviour to you, a savior to me, a savior to all people.

The name Jesus literally means "saving one." Jesus is the Greek version of the name Yeshua...or Joshua. Jesus' authentic name was Yeshua Ben Yousef...or Jesus...son of Joseph. The title Christ, is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Messiah. In order to understand what the Hebrew people were hoping for in a Messiah, we should turn to the very beginnings of the Hebrew scriptures, to the story of Adam in the Garden of Eden. You see, there in the book of

Genesis, when the first human is created, there is a truth made known about us humans. It is the first thing that God says isn't good. Namely that it is not good for a human to be alone. In the story, in response to this reality, God says that he will produce a helper...and God creates Eve. Now I don't believe that we are called to read too much into the story, in terms of establishing some pre-determined gender roles...for that is not what that story is about. It's about our human need for help.

The Hebrew word for "helper" is "ezer." "Ezer" is a word used many times in the Old Testament. Almost all of the time this word is used in reference to God as a helper. Without exception, these biblical texts are talking about a vital, powerful, spiritual kind of help. It is also used in association with the coming of a Messiah...a Christ anointed by God to help God's people. For thousands of years God's people had been on the lookout, waiting for such a one to come into their lives. Prophets and Kings and women and men of faith, in different contexts and periods of time all united in a hope that one day their help would come. They were waiting for help...acknowledging their deeply spiritual need for help...the very same need named by God in the opening verses of the Bible.

There is a story that comes out of the Jewish tradition that helps illustrate of the long wait that God's people have endured, anticipating the arrival of the Messiah. The story goes that there was a man in a small Russian village who, because of a disabling condition, could not find employment. The community council wanted to help him but they also wanted to preserve his dignity. They decided to give him a job. They paid him two rubles a week to sit at the town's entrance and be the first to greet the Messiah when he arrives. "Just sit on the hill outside our village every day from dawn to sunset," they told him. "You will be our watch for the approach

of the Messiah. And when you see him, run back to the village as fast as you can, shouting, 'The Messiah! The Messiah! He is coming!'"

The man's face lit up just thinking of the glory of his new position. Every morning he greeted the dawn from the hill and not until sunset every day, did he leave his treasured post. A year went by, and a traveler, approaching the village, noticed the figure sitting on a hill.

"Shalom," called the traveler. "What are you doing here?" "I am waiting for the Messiah!" the man replied. "It's my job."

The traveler was somewhat amused. "How do you like this job?" he asked. "Frankly, it doesn't pay much," said the poor man, "but it's steady work."

Indeed, waiting for a messiah, a savior, waiting for someone to help, for any help in this world can be steady work. The human need for help is never ending. All we have to do is look in the midst of a place like Aleppo in Syria, where people cry out for help for years. Many look on and are unsure as to how exactly they are supposed to help...some left with a feeling of helplessness. Closer to home we read stories of people who sink deeper into debt and feel as if they have no way out...perhaps even too ashamed to ask for help. I could go on listing the places and the people in this world, who are looking for help and waiting for help...waiting for a Saviour. Yes, there are some who appear to need more help than others. The need for help can be great or small. All the same, help is something we all need.

Yet a lot of the time it can be difficult to ask for help, or acknowledge our need for help -to recognize our neediness. Asking for help, or admitting a need for help is very hard – an all but impossible thing. I don't mean asking a friend to help you move. I mean saying, "I'm lost, I don't know what to do; I need help." Not being able to ask for help of that kind is a disability, a

serious one. It is a disability that isolates a person. Moreover, it tends to make us inauthentic. That is, we appear, or would like to appear, completely self-sufficient, without needs. But no human being is totally self-sufficient, needless or wantless. I'm afraid that at times the church has contributed to this attitude. We can put such an emphasis on helping, loving, serving, caring about and for others that it can seem to many of us kind of unChristian to need or want anything ourselves or to ask for help. We're only too happy, to give help. But receiving it? - that's something else again. Why is that?

You see, when it comes to help and giving, being on the giving end is a position of strength. I have. I know. I am. Let me help you, show you, teach you, guide you, assist you. That's a comfortable position, a safe position...we all want to be in that position....it is a place of strength and privilege. On the other hand, being on the receiving end is a position of vulnerability...of admitted weakness. That's an uncomfortable position. For a lot of folks it's uncharted territory. We can be so afraid to ask for or seek out help, that we may just operate out of a position when we try to help ourselves. All that can end up doing is causing us to burn out. There are many in this world who just push themselves to do more and more, thinking they can do it all themselves, but soon or later they reach their limit. If we could truly help ourselves we wouldn't need help to begin with.

Or sometimes people will only seek help from a select few people they believe they can count on...ones they believe will not let them down. When this happens, the level of dependency can become debilitating and tax personal relationships to the extreme. I think many of us have experienced this. Instead of goodwill...this can generate a great deal of ill will. This occurs a lot within families. When individuals lean on their closest relatives as being their

only help...afraid or unwilling to look elsewhere. Yet sooner or later, we need to discern and acknowledge in our lives that what we are waiting for and what we need is a different source of help. We need another life line and source of strength that will not only save ourselves from ourselves but even save and protect our relationships with the ones who mean the most to us.

And how might we acknowledge this need in our lives?

I believe a part of the answer can be found in a response that was given by a presenter in an online discussion group I participated in this past fall. The group featured theological conversations various leaders from the black community in the United States. One of the presenters quoted Rev. Dr. Jim Forbes, one time Senior Minister of Riverside Church in New York and professor at Union Seminary. Forbes was asked to lend his perspective regarding the difference between predominantly white and predominately African-American churches. Forbes said, "People in predominately white churches believe God needs them; people in predominately black churches understand they need God." As a leader in the African-American church for decades. Forbes was speaking out of a tradition and a community that had always been a minority, marginalized and even maligned. Those predominantly African-American churches for the most part were never in a position of privilege and often had little protection. They were ones who lived on a daily basis knowing the weakness of their position and their vulnerability. They knew that they needed God...they needed God's help...more than God needed them. They were open to receiving God's help. Yes, we know that it may be more blessed to give than to receive; it is also in a way easier. But when it comes to help there's grace in receiving. Grace in admitting our need. Grace in calling out for help...especially for the help that only God can give.

I was reminded of this truth just a few nights ago in a most random encounter. I got home later in the evening this past Wednesday and decided I would go for a little walk and clear my head. As I walked along the sidewalk, seemingly out of nowhere this fellow was suddenly walking next to me. I said, hello, and he asked if I lived nearby and I said yes a. He then said, "Well I just live over there with my father. He's 91 now and his health isn't good. I take care of him...my sister and I are trying to get him in a nursing home. He had a fall today, he fell out of his chair, we really need a couch and I spoke to my sister and we're going to work on that. He just can't make it up the stairs to his bed anymore. He then went on to say, "This is a hard time of year for me, a couple of years ago my ex was killed. It was a suspicious death that the police ruled a suicide. It still eats me up to this day and sometimes it's just overwhelming. It can get pretty tough. I'm going to be fifty next month (the guy looked about 70) and sometimes it just gets to be a lot." Then, and he had no clue who I was, he said "But you know...and I don't know what you think of this...but twice a day I pray to God and that keeps me going." I verbalized my agreement and affirmed what he had said. Then moments later we parted ways as I was turning one way and he another, we shook hands, exchanged blessings and wished each other a Merry Christmas. Now I don't know if that guy was an angel put in my path -I like to think so. He certainly gave glory to God. What he said to me and what he bore witness to in those words were as powerful as any others I have ever listened to when it came to the importance of faith, the human need for God and the help that only God can give.

Because that Charlie Brown is what Christmas is all about. This great story our children help us to remember today. It is knowing that the wait for help is over, that there is born for us

a Saviour, a helper who comes as one of us and walks among us, to tell us and show us, and lives and dies and rises again to proclaim the help that God is waiting to give...a help that is for all of us. Amen.