

Worship in the Waiting - Advent Sunday: Holy Suspense

Order of Service for Advent Sunday 29th November 2020

Intro Poem

This long, dark, restless night is nearly done. The morning star shows: it is nearly day.

The morning lark and owl now sing as one, the owl is flying home, the lark will stay.

This long, dark, restless night is nearly done:

As from my darker dreams I turn away

and cling to dawn's faint hope, rise with the sun, the morning star shows it is nearly day.

This long, dark, restless night is nearly done. The morning star shows. It is nearly day.

Advent Crown Prayer

If you have your Advent candle you may like to light it while saying this prayer.

Or hold up one finger

The first candle in our crown is lit for the first time Jesus came to earth.

A shining example of how we should live, Light of the World from his humble birth.

Jesus, help us live more like you,

O come, O come Emmanuel.

Spirit-filled and shining bright,

O come, O come Emmanuel.

Song: We Have Heard the Distant Bells

(Tune - "TEMPUS ADEST FLORIDUM", known as "Good King Wenceslas")

We have heard the distant bells
ring out "Christ is coming".

We have heard the angels tell:

God is on his way.

We've seen first-fruits, signs of life,
bursting through the darkness.

In a world of fear and strife,
hope is here to stay.

How long, until you come to reign?

How long, until you come again?

One day there will be no pain,
sorrow or injustice.

Jesus will return again

wiping tears away.

Now we sing lamenting songs,

while the chords are broken,

join in the martyrs in "How long?",

how long must we wait?

Rays of light, a glimpse of dawn,

while the night still lingers.

Earth it groans to be reborn,

help us watch and pray.

Clothe us in the ways of Christ,

ready for his coming.

Worshipping through daily life,

hastening the day,

when you come to reign.

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Poem - In Tension

This reading is for two actors. Between them they hold a sheet, and with each line they say they pull the sheet towards themselves and away from the other person. In the "chorus" part, they pull the sheet equally and create an even base.

1. I'm left

2. I'm right

1. I'm for duties

2. I'm for rights

1. I'm for love

2. I'm for reason

1. I'm for boundaries

2. I'm for freedom

[Chorus - said together by 1&2:]

But when we hold these things in tension,
we find it's bouncy, like suspension.

There's energy, like trampolines,
and power with intention.

When these things they pull and flow,
it's like an arrow in a bow,
it's like the skin across a drum,
in our diversity, we can be one.

1. I'm shy in church...

2. I'm really loud!

1. I'm nervous here...

2. I'm cool and proud!

1. I like the prayers...

2. I love to sing!

1. I must be still...

2. I must do things!

[Chorus]

1. God is holy

2. God is near

1. Love is awesome

2. Love casts out fear

1. The Bible's hard

2. The Bible's clear

1. Jesus is coming

2. Jesus is here

[Chorus]

Performed on video by Lucy Wallace and Tabby Chapman

Hymn:

Come, thou long-expected Jesus,
born to set thy people free,
from our fears and sins release us,
let us find our rest in thee.

Israel's strength and consolation,
hope of all the earth thou art,
dear desire of every nation,
joy of every longing heart.

Born thy people to deliver,
born a child and yet a king,
born to reign in us for ever,
now thy gracious kingdom bring.

By thine own eternal Spirit
rule in all our hearts alone ;
by thine all-sufficient merit
raise us to thy glorious throne.

Charles Wesley (1707-1788)

Reading: Mark 13:24-37

Read / performed by Rev Phil Summers

Reflection: Holy Suspense

It makes a nice sound when I strum the strings and play a chord on my guitar. But if I were to turn the little knobs at the end and loosen the strings it would make a different sound and eventually no sound at all! It works because of tension. The strings have to be tight in order for it to make a sound. So in this case tension is a good thing because it makes the guitar work!

And we like tension when we are reading a book or watching a film. It's tension that moves the story forward and makes us want to keep reading or watching. Tension can be a good thing.

The problem is, often tensions are uncomfortable. If we know two people are having an argument with differing points of view, we will say that we can feel the tension in the room. Tension asks us to

hold in balance two things which seem to be opposing each other, and that can be a challenge. This is often true when we try and wrestle with some of the big questions of the Christian faith. Is God our friend, or is he our judge? Is God close to us, or holy and other? Is God in charge, or do we have free will? When questions like this get too much for us we often give up and collapse the tension, rather than try to wrestle with the apparent contradictions and to find creative power in the midst of them.

First Coming And Second Coming

Today we begin the season of Advent, and we said last week that Advent means “coming”. The “coming” of Jesus refers to his first coming as a baby 2000 years ago. The birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus began the Kingdom of God on earth. This was the beginning of the kingly rule and reign of God which had been long promised by the prophets. It might have looked very different to what people had expected, but it made a transforming difference in the lives of everyone who responded to it.

At the same time, the fullness of Jesus’ Kingdom won’t be complete until he comes again. As well as the first coming of Jesus as a human baby, there is also a second Advent, a “second coming” of Jesus. This is a clear expectation which the New Testament church had: that Jesus would come again. Jesus himself speaks of:

“the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory.” (Mark 13:26, Luke 21:27)

Or take for example this passage from Hebrews:

“Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.” (Hebrews 9:28)

After Jesus’ resurrection and his ascension back to his Father’s side, the angels explain to the disciples:

“This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back the same way you have seen him go into heaven.” (Acts 1:11)

This belief in the return of Jesus shapes the whole of the New Testament understanding of what it means to be a Christian, and how we are to live in the world as we anticipate it.

Knowing What Time It Is

Our passages for today encourage us to be aware of the “time” we live in. Paul writes to the Romans:

“And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here.” (Romans 13:11-12)

Imagine that you wake up early the day of a big party - it could be your birthday, a wedding, or Christmas day. The night before is almost over, the sun is just beginning to come up. You’re full of excitement - and yet the party itself has not yet even started. In this situation, you begin to live with both the anticipation of the day being almost here and frustration that it has not yet fully begun. You

would begin to put on your party clothes and do all you could to make final preparations. But you would hold that in tension with knowing that the party in all its fullness was still a few hours away.

The “time” we live in as Christians is like this. The night is almost gone and the day of Jesus’ Kingdom has started to dawn. And yet, that Kingdom “day” has not yet arrived in all its fullness. We live with the suspense that the full party has not yet started. Paul tells us to be aware that we are living in this “time”, this in-between daybreak stage.

This is a huge tension in the Christian life, sometimes called the “now and not yet” of the Kingdom:

“Now” Jesus is King, and at the same time his Kingdom is “not yet” here in its fullness.

“Now” Satan is defeated, and at the same time we are waiting for all evil to be finally overcome and so our lives are “not yet” free from temptation.

“Now” Jesus has healed the sick and has given us authority to do the same in his name, and at the same time we live in an era where sick people are “not yet” healed.

“Now” Jesus is resurrected from the dead and we are seated with him in the heavenly places, and at the same time we live in the “not yet” where all creation groans to be healed and resurrected.

This “now” and “not yet” calls us to a radical form of living. It asks us to be both hope-filled and also realistic. Life is not all roses and sunshine this side of Jesus’ second coming. We all struggle with pain, temptation, disappointment and loss. The earth continues to groan, the oppressed continue to cry “How long?” And yet in the middle of these challenging realities we have seen the sun beginning to rise and we are called to live in its light.

How Then Do We Live?

Paul continues the passage we just read with this exhortation:

“So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.” (Romans 13:12-14)

When we know a party is coming, we need to put on our party clothes and prepare all we can for the coming celebration. Similarly, when we know Jesus is coming we need to put on our Jesus clothes - for example the Armour of God (Eph 6) and attitudes like compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience (Col 3:12). Jesus reminds his disciples that nobody knows the time of his return, and that we should:

“Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you suddenly like a trap. For it will come on all those who live on the face of the whole earth. Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.” (Luke 21:34-36)

In this passage and in many of his parables Jesus asks us to live in a holy suspense - ready for his return. This week might be an opportunity to reflect about whether you are living a life which

anticipates God's eternity and celebrates what is best for you, for the people around you, and the world which God has made.

From Worship in the Waiting by engageworship - visit engageworship.org/waiting

Reading: Psalm 25:1-10 Prayer of Lament - How Long

We join with the psalmist, their spirit in anguish:

How long, Lord, how long?

We join with the broken, the beaten, the famished:

How long, Lord, how long?

We join with those suffering discrimination:

How long, Lord, how long?

We join with the scapegoats in every nation:

How long, Lord, how long?

We join with the woman whose voice has been silenced:

How long, Lord, how long?

We join with the girl who is subject to violence:

How long, Lord, how long?

Hymn: Like a candle flame,

Verse 1

Like a candle flame,
flickering small in our darkness.
Uncreated light
shines through infant eyes.

Chorus 1

God is with us, alleluia
God is with us, alleluia.
Come to save us, alleluia
Come to save us.
Alleluia!

Verse 2

Stars and angels sing,
yet the earth sleeps in shadows;

We join with the martyrs, their voices as one:

How long, Lord, how long?

Waiting and longing for justice to come:

How long, Lord, how long?

We join with our Lord as he hangs on the cross

How long, Lord, how long?

Bearing our pain as he suffers with us

How long, Lord, how long?

We join with the earth as it groans for release

How long, Lord, how long?

We long for your kingdom of righteousness and peace

How long, Lord, how long? Amen

can this tiny spark
set a world on fire?

Verse 3

Yet his light shall shine
from our lives, Spirit blazing,
as we touch the flame
of his holy fire.

Graham Kendrick (b. 1950)

In the refrain the words in bold italics are sung by one group, the words in light italics are sung by another group and the word 'Alleluia!' in normal type is sung by all.

Words and Music: 1998, Graham Kendrick / Make Way Music Ltd,

What Time Is It - Sending Prayer

Hold in your hand either your watch or your phone (or whatever else you use to tell the time).

What time is it?

The hour has come to wake from your slumber!

What time is it?

The night is nearly over; the day is almost here.

What time is it?

Time to put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light.

What time is it?

Time to go out, clothed in Christ. **Amen.**

*Some of the resources used in this service are from Engage Worship's resource pack for Advent and worship on the theme of *Worship in the Waiting*. This theme is being followed by some of our churches through Advent.*

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