

Worship in the Waiting - Hope Filled Expectation

Order of Service for the 3rd Sunday of Advent 2020

Intro Poem - Hope Filled Expectation

A secret seed is rich with promised fruit,
for seeds are buried when it's time to grow.

This life begins with one seed, tiny, mute,
like treasure in a field, like yeast in dough,
a secret seed is rich with promised fruit.

We wait in darkness, wait in earth, below,
seek out the signs of life in root and shoot:
for seeds are buried when it's time to grow.

A secret seed is rich with promised fruit,
for seeds are buried when it's time to grow.

Advent Crown Prayer

LEADER: The third candle in our crown,
like John the Baptist, lights the way,
preparing for Jesus, coming soon,
in ancient times just like today.

Jesus, help us make way for you;

ALL: O come, O come Emmanuel.

In words and acts and in our lives,

O come, O come Emmanuel.

Song: We wait with great expectancy

We wait with great expectancy
to see your Kingdom come.
We trust your word to be fulfilled
and pray your will be done.
So in our world of ache and loss
we're calling out, as one:

Come Lord Jesus,
we hunger and we yearn
for your return.
Come Lord Jesus,
oh we pray for your return.

You came to us so long ago
and you will come again.
We long for heaven on the earth,
an end to grief and pain.
Lord, may our lives anticipate
and usher in your reign.

Come Lord Jesus,
we long to know you here,
come and draw near.
Come Lord Jesus,
oh we long to know you here.

So lead us in your patience, Lord,
and help us match your pace,
to walk the straight and narrow road
in rhythms of your grace,
and may this Advent way of life
all hurriedness replace.

Come Lord Jesus,
and teach us how to wait,
you are not late.
Come Lord Jesus,
help us worship as we wait.

*To the tune of GOD REST YOU MERRY, public domain.
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Reading: Psalm 126

Reading: Matthew 11:2-11 or John 1:6-8 19-28

Hymn

On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry
announces that the Lord is nigh;
awake and hearken, for he brings
glad tidings from the King of kings!

Then cleansed be every life from sin;
make straight the way for God within,
and let us all our hearts prepare
for Christ to come and enter there.

For you are our salvation, Lord,
our refuge, and our great reward;
without your grace we waste away
like flowers that wither and decay.

To heal the sick stretch out your hand,
and bid the fallen sinner stand;
shine forth, and let your light restore
earth's own true loveliness once more.

To God the Son all glory be
whose advent sets his people free,
whom, with the Father, we adore,
and Holy Spirit, evermore.

John Chandler (1806–1876) .

Sermon

Hope-Filled Expectation (Advent 3)

I get a lot of joy from looking out of the window and watching the squirrels running around in the garden. They are a nuisance really because they eat the food meant for the birds but we now have a feeder especially for them, they spend hours running back and forward collecting the nuts and burying them - presumably so they will have a store of food for the Winter.

During the Winter, the natural world experiences a period of waiting. The leaves have fallen, the flowers are gone, things look grey and bare. We know that there are seeds and bulbs planted in the ground, hidden and dormant, but you might look out at your garden or at the flower beds in the park and wonder whether the colour and life of Spring will ever return.

Or think about long car journeys to see relatives around Christmas time - at least in normal times!. What is the eternal song that echoes from the children in the back seat? "Are we nearly there yet?" Their minds are fixed on the destination, so they wish the journey away.

I wonder if you ever waited a long time for something - a parcel, a job, some news, or something else - and at the end of your waiting, when the thing finally came, it turned out to be very different from what you expected? Maybe you were surprised, even disappointed, that it didn't seem to live up to all that you had hoped?

Back in July I saw on Facebook that one of my favourite artists had released a new album that could be pre-ordered on vinyl - 'Oh Great' I thought and clicked the link and ordered a copy. It wasn't until later that I realised that I had bought it from the US store and I could have bought from one in the UK. No matter I thought it'll still get here. It did - it arrived this week! The only problem is that the album has been out on download for months and I've been playing it through a streaming service - so the excitement of hearing something new is not quite there. I'm not really disappointed though the record and the packaging are beautiful and it sounds great!

Beyond waiting for Spring, or for our destination, or waiting for parcels or jobs, some of us have waited on God. Maybe we wanted him to act, to answer a prayer, or to fulfil our dream. Perhaps you have experienced disappointment with God, if those things haven't come, or haven't lived up to your expectations. It is important that, rather than ignoring our struggles, we bring them to God. God can handle us being honest with him about how we feel.

John's Disappointment

John the Baptist is often someone we think about around Advent, because he proclaimed the coming of Jesus. John would have been well aware of the promises from Isaiah about the coming Messiah:

“Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way;
say to those with fearful hearts, ‘Be strong, do not fear;
your God will come, he will come with vengeance;
with divine retribution he will come to save you.’

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.

Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.” (Isaiah 35:3-6)

Put yourself in the place of John the Baptist for a moment. You’ve proclaimed the coming Kingdom of judgement and fire. You’ve criticised the “powers that be” and called them to repentance and radical life-change. You’ve seen Jesus baptised, sent out by the Spirit, and your hopes are well and truly set on him being the fulfilment of hundreds of years of waiting.

But then, suddenly, you’re thrown in jail. And Jesus, although brilliant, isn’t quite doing all the things you expected him to. The Romans are still in power. Corrupt priests and teachers are still in charge of the temple. The vengeance and divine retribution promised by Isaiah is not yet in evidence. Where’s the judgement and fire you said was coming (Matt 3:7,11)? Matthew’s gospel reports this:

“When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to ask him, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?’”
(Matthew 11:2-3)

John seems confused, even disappointed. This wasn’t quite the glorious future he had imagined. Perhaps we can empathise with him in the areas where we’ve felt disappointed or discouraged. We should follow John’s example of being honest with God about our disappointments - asking questions, lamenting difficult experiences, handing them over to Jesus. We see in this passage that Jesus is big enough to deal with our sadness and confusion.

A Surprising Kingdom

To understand what is going on with John, we can think back to the themes we’ve already explored in the past weeks. One is that Jesus is a different kind of King to the one everyone expected. His Kingdom is not about power and might, but love and self-sacrifice. His victory doesn’t come with swords and chariots, instead it lifts up the poor and sick and vulnerable. He doesn’t force or coerce people to follow him, instead he reveals the heart of God to them and invites them to freely choose him as their Lord. So Jesus responds to John:

“Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.” (Matthew 11:4-5)

These are all fulfillments of Isaiah’s prophecy. They are beautiful, remarkable acts of kindness and justice. They are not, however, the judgement and victory over their enemies that Israel had hoped for. This is not the goal that John had pictured, and he begins to doubt if Jesus is the Messiah after all.

John has his mind so fixed on his idea of the destination that he is missing the journey. He imagined a future of judgement and justice which has not yet arrived, and he is allowing this to distract him from the signs of the Kingdom of God which Jesus is already displaying.

I wonder if we can learn from this at the present time of the covid pandemic. It has caused us to change how we live and work and interact. It has caused us to close down or put on hold many of the things we have cherished in our lives. We were happy to go along with this for a limited time but now it seems to be going on and on and we are frustrated and even angry. We want our normal back.

But are some of us actually so focussed on getting back to business as usual that we are missing the journey? Should we instead see this as an opportunity to pause, reassess, reflect on what God might be saying and leading us to through this time? There will be time enough for action when the risk is reduced, we’ve all been vaccinated and the virus has been subdued.

Like John, we need to allow God to meet us in our waiting, to see how he is bringing his Kingdom around us even though we've not yet reached our final destination.

A Two-Stage Process

The second reason why John was disappointed is that he failed to see the two-stage process of what God was doing in Jesus. We spoke during the last two weeks about the "now and not yet" of God's coming Kingdom. The promises of the Old Testament appear to say that in one decisive moment God would establish his Kingdom, judge wrongdoing, and put everything right. However, in practice it seems this plan has been split into two stages:

Stage One - Jesus, the Messiah is born to the world. He kicks-off the Kingdom of God on earth, bringing healing and truth and love. He dies to restore all of creation to God, and rises again the victorious King of the world. His resurrection body is like the first shoots of new life and growth coming out of the barren winter soil - a promise and a model of the new life which will come for all of creation.

Stage Two - God will complete the work he began in Jesus. The judgement of sin and injustice; the cleansing of heaven and earth; the putting right of all things - these promises have not yet been realised in their fullness.

The New Testament writers make it clear that we live in between Stage One and Stage Two, and that we are to wait with patience and hope for Stage Two to arrive.

At the present time we likewise need to wait with patience and hope that the virus threat will pass and we can resume a more normal existence.

Seeds of the Kingdom

In his letter, James uses an image of seeds planted in the ground to help us with this:

"Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near." (James 5:7-8)

God has shown us the seeds of his Kingdom. We've seen glimpses of the new life that came with Jesus, and hope for the restoration of all of God's creation. But right now, most of our seeds are still in the ground, and we won't see the fullness of the crop until Jesus returns. So God calls us to be faithful farmers - imitating Jesus wherever we find ourselves: using our gifts, caring for the sick, reaching out to the lonely, tending God's planet, proclaiming the good news - and trusting in that glorious day when the fullness of the harvest will come, and our disappointment will be no more.

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

Hymn: We Have Heard the Distant Bells (Tune: 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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Intercessions - Isaiah 35

LEADER: We proclaim that Jesus, you have come,

**ALL: and you will come again,
help us work for the justice of your Kingdom.**

We look at our world, so desperately in need of you.
Deserts spread, harvests fail and people thirst.
But you promise:

“The desert and the parched land will be glad;
the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.” [Is 35:1]

We bring to you those who suffer with droughts and famines,
that you would provide for their needs.

And we pray for those who work for environmental justice,
who battle for a better stewardship of your creation.

We proclaim that Jesus, you have come,
**and you will come again,
help us work for the justice of your Kingdom.**

We look at our world, so desperately in need of you.
Nations act selfishly, injustices deepen
and people suffer with anxiety and depression.
But you promise to:

“Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way;
say to those with fearful hearts,
‘Be strong, do not fear...’” [Is 35:3-4a]

We bring you those who suffer from fear and anxiety,
that you would bring healing to their souls.

And we pray for those who work to strengthen the fearful,
the therapists, social workers, counsellors and pastors.

We proclaim that Jesus, you have come,
**and you will come again,
help us work for the justice of your Kingdom.**

We look at our world, so desperately in need of you.
Illness cripples potential, causing pain and suffering.
But you promise:

“Then will the eyes of the blind be opened
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.
Then will the lame leap like a deer,
and the mute tongue shout for joy.” [Is 35:5-6]

We bring you those we know personally who are ill at this time,
that you will bring healing to their bodies.

And we pray for those who work tirelessly
to care for those in physical need:
the personal assistants, the nurses,
the doctors and the medical missionaries.

We proclaim that Jesus, you have come,
**and you will come again,
help us work for the justice of your Kingdom.**

Lord Jesus,
we see in the gospels

how you fulfil Isaiah's prophecies,
and we hunger for those promises to be complete.
As we wait for your return,
help us be your hands and feet on earth.
We proclaim that Jesus, you have come,
and you will come again,
help us work for the justice of your Kingdom.
In Jesus' name,
Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Hymn

Of the Father's love begotten
ere the worlds began to be,
he is Alpha and Omega,
he the source, the ending he,
of the things that are, that have been,
and that future years shall see,
evermore and evermore.

By his word was all created;
he commanded, it was done;
earth and sky and boundless ocean,
universe of three in one;
all that sees the moon's soft radiance,
all that breathes beneath the sun,
evermore and evermore.

This is he whom seers in old time
chanted of with one accord,

whom the voices of the prophets
promised in their faithful word;
now he shines, the long-expected;
let creation praise its Lord,
evermore and evermore.

O you heights of heaven, adore him;
angel hosts, his praises sing;
all dominions, bow before him,
and extol our God and King;
let no tongue on earth be silent,
every voice in concert sing,
evermore and evermore!

Aurelius Clemens Prudentius (348–c.413)

*translated by John Mason Neale (1811–1866) and Henry
Williams Baker (1821–1877)*

Send Us Out prayer

ALL: Send us out, Lord,
LEADER: to have faith that the waiting seeds will bear fruit.

Send us out, Lord,
to trust you through our disappointments.

Send us out, Lord,
to take joy in the journey, rather than rush towards the destination.

Send us out, Lord,
to live with the tension of the now and the not yet.

Send us out, Lord,
to be patient and stand firm, because your coming is near.
Amen.

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