



# THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – November 29, 2009

“Passionate Waiting”

The Reverend Dr. Ivy J. Beckwith

## Jeremiah 33:14-16

The Righteous Branch and the Covenant with David  
<sup>14</sup>*The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. <sup>15</sup>In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. <sup>16</sup>In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: “The LORD is our righteousness.”*

## Luke 21:25-36

The Coming of the Son of Man

<sup>25</sup>*“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. <sup>26</sup>People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. <sup>27</sup>Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. <sup>28</sup>Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”*

The Lesson of the Fig Tree

<sup>29</sup>*Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; <sup>30</sup>as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. <sup>31</sup>So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. <sup>32</sup>Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. <sup>33</sup>Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.*

Exhortation to Watch

<sup>34</sup>*“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, <sup>35</sup>like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. <sup>36</sup>Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”*

Airports are in-between places. Unless you work in one of the shops, cafes, or for the airlines, airports are

rarely destinations. They are the places you pass through in order to get to some where else. For me, at least, airports are places filled with anticipation and hope – a place for a new adventure to begin as I look forward to my final destination. And airports are filled with people waiting. Sometimes the waiting is pleasurable, especially when one finds a place to sit in the gate area with a good book and a cup of coffee while discovering that all is well with the flight and it is ready to depart on time. Sometimes the waiting is adrenalin fueled when one is so excited about getting to the new place even sitting still in the gate area is difficult. And other times the waiting is frustrating and difficult as weather, mechanical problems, or an over crowded air traffic system force that “delayed” sign to come up on the video monitors. And the frustration mounts with every new flight status announcement from the gate agent – as one begins to wonder if the hope of arriving in a new place that day is nothing but a pipe dream.

Today we begin the season of Advent – the four weeks at the beginning of the Church year where we prepare ourselves for Christmas and the celebration of Christ’s birth. Like airports, Advent is sort of an in-between place to be. It is not a destination but a place that we wait with the hope of a new world or a new way of being. Sometimes we wait with the excitement of a child on tiptoe peering up 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue to see the start of the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade. And sometimes the wait seems long and frustrating. As one theologian put it, it’s hard to stand on tiptoe for 2,000 years. We know that Jesus has already come once and we look forward to the commemoration of that coming in 27 days. And we know that Jesus taught that he brought with him the Kingdom of God and that it would start as something as tiny as a mustard seed yet grow into a strong tree. And we wait and hope for that second coming. The kingdom has come already – but it is not yet fully with us. We are in-between and we wait and we hope.

The people to whom Jeremiah and Luke were speaking to in our scripture passages today were also in an in-between space. Jeremiah's words are set against the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians. They are a people who are about to lose their place in the world and be forced into exile – a new home that really never will be home, forced into an in-between space. To these people Jeremiah speaks a word of hope. He tells them there is a safe home for them beyond exile where a righteous leader will rise up from the house of King David and bring justice to all. The hope Jeremiah gives is deeply rooted in the knowledge of Yahweh's absolute love and faithfulness.

Luke's readers were people whose land continued to be occupied by a foreign power and who were waiting for Jesus' return. They were in the in-between place of having had Jesus among them, hearing him say he would return, but not yet seeing the signs of the return. "Where are you, Jesus?" they were saying. "We're waiting for you. Come back soon." Luke reminds them of Jesus' promise that the Kingdom of God and the redemption of the world is near but tries to shift their focus from when this will happen to how the community of believers should live during this in-between time. Both Luke and Jeremiah are concerned with the quality of the waiting not the duration of the waiting.

The season of Advent and these words from the Bible remind us how we should spend our waiting time, our in-between time. They tell us we should live in the present. In the Luke passage Jesus uses words and phrases like: "raise your heads," "be on guard," and "be alert at all times." When we live in the present we don't miss what God is doing right under our noses. If we live in the past – either pining for a time that really never was or ruing things we wished we'd never done—we meet, as one writer put it, this intractable issue: "if we are seeking the new, then what we are practicing was the old, and therefore God was not in what we were doing any more. God has moved on back down the mountain while we stayed up on our comfortable hillock." We can't live in the past if we want to keep up with God. If we live in the future, disregarding the present as unimportant and immaterial to what is to come we miss discovering leaves of God's kingdom sprouting up around us and miss the personal and communal

transformation that comes from actively waiting in the present. It has been said that "waiting for the Lord's coming is not an idle, passive activity. It is waiting that is passionate and active. It is about calling for reform in the world, personal and social." Ethicist Lewis Smedes said that the hardest part of waiting during this in-between time is "living the sort of life that makes people say 'Ah, so that's how people are going to live when righteousness takes over the world.'" Living in the present is living as if the kingdom of God has already come: loving God, loving neighbor, holding lightly to material possessions, and trusting God to meet your needs and the needs of the world.

Our Scripture passages and the season of Advent also tell us to wait with hope. Jeremiah told God's people that despite the hardship they were to endure that better days were coming. A righteous leader was coming who would bring safety to Jerusalem and justice throughout the land. Jesus told his followers to be alert for the signs of the kingdom – when you see those signs you know your redemption and the redemption of the world is drawing near. "Watch with hope," Jesus said. "God is in the midst of the chaos."

Theologian Jurgen Moltmann has described hope as "the active expectation that God will heal and transform the world. Hope does not mean the denial of suffering or injustice, nor does it mean that human beings are able to heal creation apart from God's gracious empowerment. Rather hope is based in what God has promised to do in the future, and it calls us to witness to those promises in the actions of healing and justice in the present." Hope is living as if the kingdom of God is already here. Psychologist Dan Allender adds that "hope looks at the shattered remnants of the soul hit by the storm and envisions not merely rebuilding a life that has more purpose and meaning than existed before the loss. Hope is the dream of Shalom, (the dream of having things as they were meant to be) the anticipation of joy that courses through us and prompts us to rise and rebuild, to envision and risk for what is not yet. Hope takes the experience of loss and powerlessness and uses it as the raw material for writing a new and unexpected story." Waiting in hope for God's kingdom to come is not just looking and working for an improved world but instead a reconstructed one – a world where values are revolutionized, souls are redeemed, lions lie down with lambs, and swords are

melted down into ploughshares. This is the kingdom we wait for on tiptoe, actively and passionately.

The last church I served in Minnesota held an Advent eve service the Saturday evening prior to the first Sunday in Advent. It was quiet and contemplative as we gathered in the late fall darkness around brightly burning logs in a fireplace. Often at the service we asked a pregnant woman to be present. She would be a reminder of that baby we were waiting for during the season of Advent as she, too, was waiting for a baby. But pregnancy is also a good reminder of passionate waiting. Pregnancy is an in-between state. The baby is but is not yet ready to be born but yet exists. Women who choose to carry their babies to term cannot live in the past. There is no going back and reliving the good old days. With the pregnancy their lives have changed forever. They can think about the future but they cannot disregard the present as unimportant because how they live in the present, how they take care of their bodies and the preparations they make for the baby have a direct effect on the future life of the baby they are carrying. And they live daily with a physical reminder of hope. As the child grows inside them they know they are creating something entirely new. The child they will give birth to has never been seen before and carries with it the promise of new life and a new story for the world.

Advent is pregnant with the promise of a new world and a better world; with the promise of a new life and a better life. Wait actively, passionately, and patiently.

*“Above all, trust in the slow work of God.  
We are quite naturally impatient in everything to reach the end without delay.  
We should like to skip the intermediate stages.  
We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown, something new.  
And yet it is the law of all progress  
that it is made by passing through some stages of instability...  
and that it may take a very long time.*

*And so I think it is with you.  
Your ideas mature gradually...let them grow.  
Let them shape themselves, without undue haste.  
Don't try to force them on, as though you could be today what  
time*

*(that is to say, grace and circumstances acting on your own good will)  
will make you tomorrow.*

*Only God could say what this new spirit, gradually forming within you will be.  
Give our Lord the benefit of believing that his hand is leading you,  
and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete.”*

- Teilhard de Chardin, S.J.

**Amen.**