

SERMON- Advent 3 (A)
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Isaiah 35:1-10

James 5:7-10

Matthew 11:2-11

St. Timothy's (Herndon)
December 11, 2022

Psalm 146:4-9

OPENING:

In one of my first years of teaching... I was about 2... and I was in a teacher's meeting and our principal was giving this presentation about *brain research* and how the adolescent mind, the physical brain—and, in particular, the male mind—takes a long time to develop... so much so that that the cognitive areas in the prefrontal cortex centers do not become fully mature until one's mid-20s. That was why our students, the principal explained, particularly our male students, were so immature. I was sitting there and realized that **I** was still in that upper range of brain development... and so what does that mean for me as a young teacher?

Not sure, but I know that, regardless of age or gender, :
“Delayed gratification” is a tough sell.

Famously, Moses never got to see the promised Land.
Famously, Abraham was way too old to ever experience all of God's promises to him.
And, all those Old Testament prophets had it even worse: they rarely even saw a *glimpse* of what was to come, of God's dream, of what they spent all their time making such a racket about.

God... must really like Waiting then,
God must really like delayed Gratification,
God must really like Advent.

All my examples so far have been Male, unfortunately, but here is a prototypically female one, that I offer with all the usual apologies about gender relations:
The 3rd Sunday of Advent is sometimes called “Stir up Sunday”, so called because of our Collect, and so-called because it would be a reminder in olden days for the women in the church to start making their Christmas pudding and the other recipes that would take a long time and that required a lot of waiting.

Modern technology, I am told, makes all that unnecessary:
like with so many things, we can get our puddings when we want, how we want it,

we live in an age where we are Promised and even Entitled to achieve and to realize and to be satiated without waiting.

The famous Christmas Carol “We wish you a Merry Christmas” gives it all away in the second verse:

So bring me some figgy pudding, so bring me some figgy pudding, so bring me some figgy pudding, and bring it right here.

Next line, even more emphatic:

We won't go until we get some, we won't go until we get some, we won't go until we get some.

JOHN THE BAPTIST

To be sure, John the Baptist, he is actually unlike all those Old Testament prophets, in that he gets to see what everyone has been waiting all of history to see, he gets to see the Messiah.

He gets to behold the Promised Land,
he makes it to the end of Advent.

He finally glimpses salvation in the person of Jesus Christ, who shows up at the river to be baptized.

“Merry Christmas John the Baptist”.....

Jeremiah, Elijah, Amos, Micah, they were all waiting for something that never came in their lives but Christmas shows up right at John the Baptist's doorstep.¹

But then, in our reading today, as we fast-forward several months in the narrative, John the Baptist's prefrontal cortex fails him, it starts twitching, it starts doubting, starts worrying as he wants his answer... right now.

John the Baptist was in his 30s by this time, which back then was well past-middle aged, so he does not have **my** excuse of the “Failure to Launch” of the perpetually “Delayed Adolescence” of the 21st century.

Rather, John the Baptist, the star student, our Advent hero and champion, waivers. He is worried that Christmas might not actually come. He needs to rip open the presents, pull the pudding out of the oven early. So he asks:

For crying out loud, “Are you (actually) the one, or are we to WAIT for ANOTHER?”

¹ TP 68, 70.

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER.

His excuse, of course, was that he was in Prison and facing death, so let's cut him some slack.

His cellmate there, so to speak, is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the 20th century theologian and martyr who spoke out against Hitler's regime in Nazi Germany and met his death because of it.

Bonhoeffer pairs well then with John the Baptist. His writings, again, will be featured in next week's special Advent/Christmas Hymn Festival at our 10 AM service, and I will do an Adult Forum prior to the service on that day.

Bonhoeffer, as I said last week, is clear that salvation must come from outside. That we are in need of rescue, that the Gospel does not come from within. So we don't manifest Christmas somehow from our doings. He does not write something to the effect of: "Prison is bad, but because I am so spiritual, I can make it work. It's not really real because of my frame of mind."

That's good philosophy by way of Thoreau or Emerson and maybe the Dalai Lama and probably some figures in Christian spirituality but it's not what Bonhoeffer ever proclaims, and it's not in the answer that Jesus gives to John the Baptist.

Jesus answers John's question this way

"Go and tell John what you hear and see:" (and then Jesus starts listing the Christmas presents)

"The blind receive their sight" CHECK (says John the Baptist)

"the lame walk" CHECK AGAIN

"The lepers are cleansed" GREAT

"the deaf hear" WONDERFUL

Eventually John the Baptist must realize there is one thing missing: where is "the prisoners go free"?

Jesus forgets that part of the Old Testament formula of promises.

In place of the line that John and Dietrich Bonhoeffer were hoping for, Jesus says "the dead are raised."

That's good news, but maybe not if you are in jail staring down the barrel of Roman justice, or in a Nazi prison camp.

Jesus, it seems, has overdelivered in terms of miracles but underdelivered in terms of actual real-world change of the political system. Great savior, poor messiah.

Under the tree is an actual death sentence of waiting and watching. It's enough to

lose your faith, it's enough to doubt and question.

ADVENT

Now that's a big jump from there to the type of waiting that we are engaged in. For example, telling our son for the millionth time: "No you cannot open a present now" does not have the high stakes of what our prophets faced.

But I look out and see you all and think how many people are waiting for something:

Waiting for that promotion

Waiting for that diagnosis.

Waiting for that parent to die.

Waiting for your adult child to finally grow up.

Waiting, watching, and we try to stir things up but.....but more waiting

CONCLUSION

One final story: when I was a teacher, administrators would see my VMI/military school engage and assume that I was this uber-disciplinarian and so would sometimes send the "problem kids" my way. This one student landed in my World History classroom, again where I was this young teacher, only a few years older than my students.

This student was tough to handle and had this reputation about him. And we went back and forth. A few weeks later, and I found myself talking with the Upper School principal in his office about my students and my classes and I was complaining (as all teachers do) about how they were not mature enough and they needed to grow up, and about that one student in particular

The principal said "Charles, you are doing great. These things take time. All we are doing here is planting seeds, that's all we can do. We plant seeds, we water the garden and then we see what grows. We wait and we watch and we wait and we see what's going to happen next."

Waiting, watching, sometimes for the truth that we never see.

Always for something that comes from outside of us.

And always for something that begins in the dark but emerges as a brilliant light.

AMEN