

# *St James United Church*

Message for November 27, 2022

First Sunday of Advent



“Waiting in Hope”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Isaiah 11:1-10; Galatians 4:4-7

At times it feels like much of our lives is spent waiting for one thing or another. If you are a dog owner, you likely spend more time waiting than walking as your pup stops to sniff thirty spots in as many feet. As traffic increases this time of year, we're in traffic lights more than anything and so we are waiting more than travelling. We wait in grocery stores, frustratingly so if the person in front of us in the express line has more than fifteen items. Shopping with someone looking for the perfect holiday outfit is more about waiting than buying, especially if you are the one sitting outside of the fitting room. And, of course, this season is all about waiting as each morning brings us closer to Santa's arrival.

It's little wonder waiting is a big part of the season. It's hinted at in the name, not Christmas, but Advent. Advent means the arrival of someone or something, or the beginning of a new circumstance, like the success of the Artemis rocket could mean the advent of a new space race. And in the lead up to Christmas we ponder more than one advent. Most of us think about Jesus being born, but before we get there we are waiting for the arrival of an adult Jesus, heralded by John the Baptist, and before that we look to a final advent, often pictured with Jesus returning in glory to bring God's Reign to fulfilment.

That final Advent is today's focus, not Jesus' return but a future fulfilment just the same. It must be in the future because Isaiah's vision hasn't happened yet, at least not the part where wolves and lambs are living in harmony, an image that brings us back to the collaborative and loving ethic of Eden. And with animals often being symbols of nations, the vision also looks to a time when nations no longer try to dominate each other. With Russia and Ukraine at war, not to mention other conflicts, we're clearly still waiting, frustratingly so, for the vision to come true.

One difficulty is that we think of this future time as something God is going to bring, and must do so in perfect fulfilment of the vision. We assume as Christians that Jesus is the shoot that will grow from the stump of Jesse, but given that peace didn't come in Jesus' time, and instead the Romans doubled down on their occupation of Palestine, climaxing in the expulsion of the Jewish people from their homeland, most Jews understandably didn't believe Jesus fulfilled what the Messiah was supposed to mean. And given our teaching that there must be a second coming for the messianic peace to finally arrive, perhaps we don't believe Jesus fulfilled everything the Messiah was to do either.

So where does that leave us? Does it make the coming celebration of Christmas pointless? I don't think so. I hear Paul tell us that Jesus was born in the fullness of God's time, born of a woman and born under the Law, to both redeem his people and extend God's covenant to all nations. Paul then saw an element of Isaiah's vision fulfilled in Jesus, but only a beginning of it as God adopts non-Jews as God's children and God shares Christ's Spirit with all of us. In this I hear the wisdom of some Jewish thinkers who suggest that rather than wait for the messiah to come, they as a people are collectively the one that they were waiting for and so called to help heal the world. I believe that's our task too, not waiting passively for God's Reign, but nurturing it together, with God's grace making Isaiah's vision a reality by living collaboratively in love and seeking peace in all we do.

If this is the case, the purpose of Advent is not just waiting but preparing. Obviously, you say, especially as we try to make up for the last three Christmases. But as much as we many want to make this one extra special, what if those pared down holidays gave us a gift, inviting us to make Christmas less about what we buy for others, and more about how we treat others? This isn't easy given the cultural pressure we feel with Black Friday sales and whatnot, but we can't afford to make this time of year all about consuming, and the earth can't really afford it either.

And so, the preparation we need to do is spiritual. It makes sense given the time of year. For us, Advent falls in a period of growing darkness. The long nights are an invitation to slow down, to pause for prayer and reflection. If we are to take on the Spirit of Christ in our lives, we need to make space for the advent of the Spirit in us. And we can do this in many ways, in a quiet walk in nature, reading the bible, meditating, reflecting back over the day, each with the aim of making space in our hearts for Christ, and so to be bearers of his love and peace.

One practice I find helpful as I try to be more loving and peaceful in a busy time that doesn't engender either, is to centre myself, to be more mindful, as I inevitably end up having to wait. If I am stuck in traffic, in line at the checkout, or even walking my dog, there is nothing I can do to change the situation, but I can change my reaction, be peaceful rather than annoyed and end up being sharp with someone, cutting them off, being impatient with Finley. As I focus on my breath, focus on what I am seeing, hearing, feeling in the moment, I become more aware of myself as a child of God, more aware that the shopper with more than fifteen items is a child of God, as is the driver who cut me off, with their own needs and worries and stresses. As I consider them, I think of their loved ones, the circles of relationships they have, and how they intersect with other circles, I pray for them, extending love and peace in wider and wider circles. In this way I can nurture God's Reign a little bit more.

This time of year is about waiting, ultimately waiting for God's Reign, but we are called to do so with an active hope as we don't just wish the world was more reflective of God's love and peace, but live into the world we yearn for. Each year we do this in the lead up to Christmas. May we extend this beyond these next four weeks as we wait in hope for God's Reign. Amen.