

<Isaiah 40:1-5; Luke 1:26-38; 2:1-20>

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Emmanuel, Light of our lives and our world. Amen.

As a child growing up, Christmas Eve only ever marked one thing: the reality that it was now, finally, one last sleep before Christmas morning. The Christmas Eve service was the final barrier standing between me and the glories that awaited me under the tree. I believe this was true for many of us in our younger years. I can say, with gratitude and humility, that I have received some very loving gifts over the years, but one quiet request to Santa that was never granted was to grow to be taller than I am.

Much to the dismay of my teenage self, I have never been a tall man. This less-than-average degree of height is something I no longer pay much attention to, but when I was younger it was more on my mind. Because when I was younger I wanted to ride the big roller coasters, and it took longer for me to be able to do that. "You must be this tall to ride..." became my very own version of "you might as well not even bother looking." I knew what the answer was. And I knew that, like it or not, I had to wait.

We've been in a season of waiting, these past weeks of Advent. And liturgically in the church, this is by design. Our own waiting, and a time of deliberate reflection and preparation of mind and spirit, reflects the waiting of the people of God that they experienced at various times. For some, it was the waiting to be delivered from bondage and slavery in Egypt. And for their children and grandchildren, it was the waiting to arrive to the Promised Land from the wilderness in which they roamed. At other times, it was waiting to be restored from exile into the land of their ancestry. And throughout it all, it was the waiting for the arrival again of Emmanuel, the root of the tree of Jesse, the king who would reign with joy and shepherd the people as a good shepherd. The One who was prophesied to come.

And still today, some of us live in seasons of waiting, and the news is often not good. We may wait with a potential diagnosis of a life-altering reality. Others await news from a loved one, whether it be an update on work or a note that they have arrived safely after a period of travel. And yet others in our world await news of food to come, or of bombings to stop. My waiting to be able to ride a roller coaster is nothing in the light of these realities of waiting, save that it allowed me to have an understanding of such yearning to be realized. Throughout it all, we also await the coming again of Emmanuel, to see realized that which has been promised - a world in which sorrow and suffering no longer have a place, and in which death no longer is a defining factor.

To my own youthful waiting, finally the day came when, during a trip to visit grandma in Florida and a visit to Disney, I was tall enough to ride the coasters. Finally, the waiting and dreaming would be realized. Finally, the hope would become reality. So, throughout the day I rode what I could, what either my parents would tolerate. But I had to work my way up to Space Mountain; because that one went through tunnels in the dark. I needed to prepare my young psyche to be ready for it.

We've been, as well, in a season of preparation, and despite all the wrapping and the decorating and the baking and logistics, this preparation actually has little to do with the outward world. We are preparing our very selves in order to not only celebrate the birth of the Divine King, but to receive the gift of life which this represents and brings into our world. It is the gift of life which is brought to our awareness. He comes not as we might expect, or even as we might have planned, but he comes in the way that fulfills, and fills full to overflowing, all that is longed for and yearned for in our world, and in our lives.

This is what we prepare for, and sometimes we're uncertain that we've prepared enough, or that our efforts cover all the bases. Perhaps even tonight, gathered here, some of us are pondering one last item left unaddressed, or one final aspect that needs completing. But if we are to think that we must be completely prepared and ready in order to celebrate, then we will never arrive to the point of celebrating; there will always be one more thing to prepare, one more item to check off the list. We strive and we prepare, but in celebrating the arrival of Emmanuel and the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God, we cannot wait for such a time. God certainly didn't wait until all the world was completely ready to take the next steps in realizing the Kingdom in the world.

Madeleine L'Engle, one of my favorite theologians, reflects on Advent and Christmas when she wrote her poem, "First Christmas." She begins it with,

"He did not wait till the world was ready,
till men and nations were at peace.
He came when the heavens were unsteady,
and prisoners cried out for release.

"He did not wait for the perfect time.
He came when the need was deep and great.
He dined with sinners in all their grime,
turned water into wine.

"He did not wait till hearts were pure.
In joy he came to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.
To a world like ours, of anguished shame
he came, and his Light would not go out.

"He came to world which did not mesh,
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
the Maker of the stars was born."

God did not wait, and neither can we. We have waited long enough, and now it is time to live into the fullness of what has been promised and proclaimed. Now it is time to take the leap, and step out in faith and in good news.

Toward the end of that day at Disney, riding the rides and roller coasters which I had longed to do for so long, at last I determined to jump in with both feet and go for it; I would ride Space Mountain. So we got in line, and waited. I attributed it to being the end of the day, but the line moved more smoothly than I could have imagined, and before I realized, I was at the end of the line and at the entrance.

Which was closed. Apparently, Space Mountain was receiving repairs, a sign for which was not evident at the beginning of the line.

Thankfully, to commit and step into joining the work of God to proclaim and realize good news found in the arrival of Emmanuel, there is no more waiting. The celebration is upon us, the lights of the candles shine bright before us, and in this world our lives will no longer be the same. Now, they will be what they need to be, and they will reflect what God desires them to be.

Madeleine L'Engle's poem concludes with a halcyon call, echoing the invitation which came to the shepherds in a quiet field one night, which comes to us still on a quiet night in December.

"We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
He came with love: Rejoice! Rejoice!"

I never did get to ride Space Mountain. Part of me still longs to see that hope realized. But that hope is with a lower-case "h;" it is not truly the kind of Hope that keeps me going when all the world around seems bent on stopping me and keeping me from moving forward. That kind of Hope, with a capital "H," is what we have received, and receive again tonight. Hope of the world. Hope *for* the world. No more waiting. No more yearning. No more quietly whispering. Now, we live anew as a people who are no longer waiting, no longer preparing, but are the people of God for a world in need. Let us rejoice, and with our rejoicing, let us go into the world with good news, with Hope, with the realization of Emmanuel, God-With-Us. Let us light our candles. Amen.

(Sermon preached by Rev. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)