

Jeremiah 33: 14 - 16
1 Thess. 3: 9 - 13
Luke 21: 25 - 36
1st Advent, Yr. C

the Rev. Dr. Dennis S. Tierney
Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church
Bainbridge Island, Washington
November 29, 2015

“These Things That Will Take Place”

One of the life lessons one learns on Bainbridge Island is waiting in ferry lines. This is different from being stuck in traffic on a freeway, something well known in other cities. That one will wait for a ferry is a given; what is harder to judge is how long one will wait. Some people spend their time waiting by reading, some visit with friends, some walk their dogs, some snack, and many appear to work or play using a variety of electronic devices and assume the 21st Century pose – head down gazing intently at a hand-held device. But there are a few people who simply sit quietly in silence – perhaps meditating or perhaps composing sermons in their heads. And, of course, late at night, there are the sleepers who catch a power nap while in line. One quickly learns how to wait in ferry lines.

Most of us dislike waiting at all. We are generally an active people – idle hands and all that lives deep in our souls. If we have to wait, we do so reluctantly and, the longer we are made to wait – even if there are apparent reasons beyond anyone’s actual control, the more agitated some of us get. Children annoy their parents with repeated questions about “are we there yet?” There is the dreaded, “please hold while we connect you with a service representative who is eager to provide you with our legendary excellent service.” If you have been stuck in an airport waiting for delayed flights, you have seen human nature at a very low ebb. People complain, whine, threaten, shout, curse, and generally make themselves and everyone else around them more miserable than they already are. One is tempted to ask, “How’s that working for you – this ranting tantrum?”

This is the first Sunday of Advent, a new liturgical year in the church and our season of waiting. Outside it is a time of no waiting because there are only 26 days of shopping left and merchants are urging us all to act now, buy more, and stop thinking and shop ‘til we drop. Apparently, no stores will exist after Christmas. But for us, it is time of waiting. In Advent, we are called to reflect, to spend time in quiet meditation, to do the inner work of preparing ourselves for the fulfillment of the great promise that began with Abram and is fulfilled with Christmas. But we are warned that the time of waiting will not be uneventful – there will be dangers and trials ahead; we are told of the times of confusion and distress and that people will faint from fear and foreboding. Jesus was not talking about going shopping on Black Friday. This warning is a serious one about the reality that the coming of the Way of Jesus, the over-turning of the world to bring about God’s kingdom will create disorder before there is the fulfillment of the promise. This year is filled with examples of upheaval as the world experiences one of the greatest refugee challenges ever, and as terrorist violence threatens so many people.

Now, some people have understood this time of waiting and preparation as a call to withdraw from the world, to stockpile food and ammunition, and to get ready for great evil to reign. These people even have a reality TV program about them. The “Doomsday People” are getting themselves ready for the great ordeal and believe that they will not be caught in the trap that

Jesus mentions. And they carefully watch for the signs of greater distress in the world as evidence that the time is coming and that they, and perhaps only they, will survive. Others call for sealing ourselves up in “Panic Rooms” and rounding up everyone we think is different. But Jesus calls us, in these troubled and difficult times to “stand up and raise our heads.”

While I would urge all of us to have emergency supplies at home and a safety plan worked out for our families, Jesus is calling his disciples and is now calling us to something quite different – a time of prayer and preparation that will allow us to accept completely the power of the promise of Emmanuel, the coming of the Messiah. For we must prepare ourselves – prepare our hearts and minds and souls to be ready for this magnificent gift of love bestowed upon the world and upon us.

Waiting well means work. It is as if we are preparing our home for a family feast. We often do deep cleaning before a major family event. We wash and polish, we sweep and tidy everything, even the places most people wouldn’t notice because we want everything to look and be at its best. And we prepare for emergencies and we try to anticipate every need or problem we might face because we want this event to be wonderful for all our guests. And we work to put ourselves in the right frame of mind to welcome all our guests. We try not to get frazzled and upset about things, to clear the minutiae from our lives so that when we greet the first guests to arrive, we are focused, present, and welcoming.

Preparing for any life change requires this sort of work, spiritually and emotionally. We must do this work ahead of the event, even when we accept that we cannot know ahead of time what the event will be like or how we will be changed. We seek to imagine, to anticipate, the coming changes but also we work to be open to the unimagined, the unanticipated parts of the change that is to come. We also seek to know ourselves more deeply as we wait. This is so that we can avoid our own traps. Some of life’s most powerful traps are the ones we created for ourselves. For some of us, our hearts can be weighed down by external traps – those things, events, and people outside of us that catch us up and hold us back. But many of us find that the worst traps are those of our own making. The reason they are so powerful is because we ourselves created them. So, our work, as we wait, is to unpack those things, those traps, and disarm them so that they do not keep us from our desired goals. There are spiritual traps that keep us from the love of God and keep us from living into our gifts. There is the trap of believing God’s love is limited – that we are not worthy of God’s love or that there is not enough love to go around. There is the trap of believing that God cannot forgive us of our sins – that our sins, alone in all the world are so heinous that God cannot forgive us or that God should not forgive us. There is the trap of wanting to be God – to be so in control of our lives that we can stand completely alone – self-sufficient in all things.

Waiting is a gift. It is far more than mere idling until the real stuff happens. Waiting, especially waiting in a world that seems to turn faster and weirder every hour is a profoundly important gift. When we really look, look deeply and thoughtfully, when we really listen, listen with complete concentration, when we really sense the world around us – touch it, taste it, smell it and really pay attention to the people we meet in our daily life, we truly become fully alive. And when we are fully alive, we come closer to God and closer to God’s kingdom.

Waiting is a gift, a pearl of great price. Seek waiting, embrace waiting, and learn to wait well. When we wait, we say that we revolve around a greater world; we say that the lives of others are equally important to our own. When we wait, we have a chance to ponder the mysteries and wonders of the ordinary things we so often no longer even see. When we wait, we open ourselves to sensing God within us and God in the world. When we wait, we accept Kairos – God’s time over Chronos – human time. When we wait, we renew and refresh our citizenship in God’s kingdom.

We know that, through our baptismal covenant, we will stand before the Son of Man soon. So, this Advent – all four weeks of it - let us wait well, rejoicing in the sweet pleasures of each passing moment of waiting, accepting the bumps and dangers of our lives, but always delighting in the ways we are changed when we wait well for these things that will take place. Amen.