

“Strengthened for the Wait”

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1 Thessalonians 3.9-13

Luke 21.25-36

November 28, 2021

Today I brought with me a special box. This box is important for a couple reasons. First of all, it is a box that Rob and I made the Christmas before we were married. It was just a plain wooden box when we began, but we painted it gold, put some fake jewels on it, that have mostly fallen off now, and put a little sticker on the front that says, “future.” This had great meaning to us because we had big plans for this little box. We decided that we would put a picture or something small from each Christmas together. This would be an important memory that we could look back on and smile or laugh or share with others.

This box is empty. When we lived in Hanover it sat on a bookshelf propping up books, and not in the fancy way you see in magazines, but like, cluttered on top of other books and if I were to move the box out, five books probably would have fallen off the shelf. So, we didn’t open it often. About five years into our marriage, we wrote down a few of the memories from each Christmas, but finally just gave up. Yet, we still kept the box.

It isn’t that we don’t have memories of family meals and gatherings and gifts and trips – it’s that we just never documented any of it. To a stranger it contains air – but to us it encompasses the hope of the future. Rather than filling it each Christmas, we poured all of our hopes into that first year, containing that hope for when we needed it most. Last year, a particularly different and difficult Christmas because of pandemic, we took this box out and smiled, and remembered many Christmas memories from the past. Over and over we can take from this empty box and be renewed with hope. This is something no one else can take.

Each Sunday in Advent we remember a different word. Today, the first Sunday in Advent, our word is hope. Advent is about waiting, and this week we wait with hope. I have found in my lifetime I have seen Advent through a different lens each year – a new kind of waiting. There is anticipatory waiting, like waiting for a baby to be born, or a new job, or a new home. There’s scary waiting, like waiting for a diagnosis or for a loved one to die. There’s unknown waiting, like we are doing now as we watch COVID numbers rise and wonder what is ahead. Waiting can be fun, it can be scary, and it can be all the emotions at once.

We are waiting for the birth of Christ as we look toward Christmas Eve. We remember how God came to be with humans – to be God with us – Emmanuel – to not only care for us but to experience life as humans experience it – in solidarity with humanity. This past event gives us hope for the future – to know that God loves us so much God came in human form to dwell with us. If God can do that, surely God can do anything.

We also wait for Christ’s return – for justice and peace to rule our world. This is the waiting that gives urgency – that reminds us that waiting is a privilege. Some people cannot wait

for food, for equity, for housing, for a job. For those times and for those people we say, “Come, Lord Jesus.”

As we simultaneously hold the waiting for Christ’s birth celebration with Christ’s return for peace on earth, we hold on to hope and look toward scripture. Our Gospel passage reminds us that there will be signs to tell us when Christ is coming. The example given is a fig tree – that nature gives signs that the tree will bloom. Just as that tree gives signs, so we will see signs.

This is hopeful, but I must admit that sometimes I look at the news, I hear the destruction and violence and hate in the world and I cry out like the psalmists, asking, “How long, oh Lord?” Why must we keep waiting? How much more can humanity take? How much more can the earth take?

Jesus tells the people to be on guard. Jesus tells them – tells us – to be prepared. This means that we need to be aware, to be present as we wait. When we are fully present, when we see the awfulness of the world, we won’t be discouraged, because we have hope in Christ, and know that we have been given gifts to help ease the suffering in the world and try to make change. When we aren’t present, when we are surprised by the injustice in our world, we are easily discouraged, and we also don’t see that it has been happening for a long time. When we have a realistic view of the injustice in the world, it is not to be discouraged, but to know the scope of it, and not become overwhelmed by it. God’s light will overcome the injustice in the world.

As I prepared for today, I was struck by the writing of Rev. Willie Dwayne Francois III, who is a Baptist minister in New Jersey. He wrote: “What if the symbolism of Jesus’ depiction of hopeful chaos is not about some distant time of ultimate endings? What if Jesus is snatching us out of our desire for another world by asking us to face the jarring details of this one?” I want to repeat that – “What if Jesus is snatching us out of our desire for another world by asking us to face the jarring details of this one?” He goes on to say: “I see Jesus making a case about the fragility of life and the fierce need for people of faith to show up each day with stamina and courage.”¹ It is good to look ahead and to be hopeful, it is also important to recognize the state of the world around us and embrace what we can and change what we can.

Perhaps when we are feeling little hope, we can look around and see the good. When someone opens a door for you, or smiles, or brings a bit of joy into an otherwise dreary day – then you have a glimpse into the potential of humanity, and remember that all is not lost – and that God is still with us, Emmanuel. We can give thanks for those people who brighten corners of the world, corners of our lives.

The author of Thessalonians writes to this new church from another location. Paul, the author, had just started the Thessalonian church, and they were one of his favorites. He has left them for the first time, and he’s writing to them with prayers and love and maybe some anxiety.²

¹ Willie Dwayne Francois III, “Living by the Word” in *Christian Century*, November 17, 2021, Vol. 138, No. 23, p. 20.

² Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching Through the Christian Year: C* (Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1994), 4.

He sort of reminds me of a parent leaving their teenage children alone in the home for the first time, excited perhaps a bit for them to learn their freedom but worried about the state of the house upon their return.

Paul's words here – though, certainly not everywhere – are meant to give encouragement and hope. Even though he is far away, he is still with them in spirit, cheering them on. Perhaps someone is that cheerleader for you – praying for you and caring for you from afar. You might even extend this same care for someone else. How does that make you feel? How does that give you hope in humanity, or hope in God?

This golden box has another special meaning to me. We made this box here at First Pres my senior year in college. I think it was during the Art of Christmas, but it might have been some other special event. Yet, it has stayed with me. You helped to shape my faith as a college student, and that is the sort of hope we have – that we never know how something will turn out, but we keep trying, because people need to be loved, and to know they are loved – and that is something you all do well.

As we walk through Advent, have hope – trust in God, who is powerful enough to change the world and humble enough to change it through the form of a baby. God's love is powerful, and it is not something we have to wait for – we are loved here and now – and we are given the gifts to love this broken world, and the broken people within it. Thanks be to God. Amen.