

SERMON: “Keeping Watch: *Watching and Waiting*” Blue Christmas

Rev. Geoff Ross Wednesday, December 13, 2017. St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church

Tonight we are here because we’re waiting – watching and waiting – for Dare we say it? For it – the pain/sadness/grief/hurt/shame/guilt/doubt/loss/suffering/whatever your ‘it’ is – all to end. But if you’re like some people I know, you’re also simply waiting for the waiting to end too, because you’re tired – tired of wrestling/dealing/coping, and pretending – that your ‘it’ has gone away, doesn’t still sting/hurt, isn’t just a heartbeat away – and you just wish God would help you make sense of why – why it still lingers/stings/hurts and why God hasn’t done something about it. Like the psalmists we, too, cry “*How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long?*” (Ps 13) And still we remain/keep watching and waiting.... [Purgatory: limbo/waiting/purification – stuck in a moment]

The people of Israel waited too. They waited, not for the few weeks in Advent, or even years in their grief/pain/doubts; but for centuries. Generation after generation they waited for God to answer – or at least fulfill His promises to save/restore/redeem them – for the promised Messiah to arrive. They did not know exactly when he was coming, but through the words of the prophets they knew that the promised Saviour would be a virgin-born Son, a descendant of David, a King with a throne and a kingdom that would endure forever. He would be called Emmanuel, God with us. And, like us in our waiting, each generation, no doubt, hoped to be the one that would see his appearing – that the watching and waiting would finally end! Why? Because, like us, they wanted the pain/sadness/grief/hurt/shame/guilt/doubt/suffering to end; which is what the promised Messiah would bring about: He would swallow up death forever! He would wipe away the tears of his people and lift away their disgrace. He would prepare a rich feast for everyone. [Release: no more tears/death/grief/pain -

Simeon and Anna were waiting too. They knew the promises; they watched and waited, hoped and prayed that they would see the promised Saviour. They had waited for a lifetime. Then finally, one day, there He was – the Saviour, the Lord himself – at the temple: Mary and Joseph brought their firstborn Son – as was the custom, to the temple to redeem him – the Child who would one day be a sacrifice himself must first be redeemed with a sacrifice; a reminder that God had long ago set his people free from slavery through the death of the Egyptian firstborn. Before this could happen, Simeon took the Jesus in his arms and gave thanks to God. Now, he said, he could die in peace because he saw God’s salvation with his own eyes. Anna, an elderly widow, was also there that day. She too had been waiting in the temple day and night, fasting and praying. When Anna saw and heard that the promise was fulfilled, that the Messiah had come to his people, knowing that her waiting was over, gave thanks to God. The two elderly saints had both waited for a lifetime and with their waiting over – with God’s promises fulfilled – they echoed Isaiah’s proclamation: “*We waited and hoped – now our God is here!*”

Like Israel, like Simeon and Anna, we have been watching and waiting – waited and watched – and we are still waiting, waiting for something better than Christmas/this. Paul tells us that we are “waiting for our hope” – that we are to “wait in hope” – even in the midst of the suffering of this life because it is contrasted with the glory, as yet unrevealed, which is in store for us through Christ. I know I don’t have to tell you this: Life as a Christian is not easy – life is hard, it can be brutish/harsh/seemingly unfair, unpredictable/full of suffering and splendour, pain and glory – the poles of our faith/experience known through Jesus’ death and resurrection. Christ suffered death but God raised him to new life – a life of glory – and his life, Paul tells us, is our story. What keeps Paul’s statements from sounding hollow is his recollection that Christ suffered not in vain but in hope – that his suffering was indeed all part of a larger plan. And indeed living in hope is part of the divine plan – not just for us, but for the whole of the universe: hope for redemption and salvation; hope for the cessation of pain and sorrow, for the end to suffering.

[Father’s funeral/chaos/blur/lost – valley of the shadow of death.... Every funeral/his funeral]

A few minutes ago I mentioned one of the promises that God made through Isaiah/would be fulfilled when the Messiah came: that He would prepare a rich feast for everyone. This is the image of heaven as a wedding banquet/feast/meal with rich food/wine and space enough for all. This is the promise made in Psalm 23 *“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me.... You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies....”* It is also the promise Jesus makes to His disciples before He is arrested/tired/crucified – *“In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.”*

It took the death of my father to hear the promises – to hear the hope – in these passages: did you hear them? In the midst of wherever we are – in our waiting/hoping, the shadow of death/enemies/pain/suffering – God is with us/you and has even provided for us/you in our time of need. Friends, God is always with us – even in our waiting. God’s covenant with us is unconditional – His promise was to be-with us and in Christ/Emmanuel He became one of us to offer to us, what only God alone could give; hope – the hope that our watching/waiting is not in vain, that our hope for our lived ones has been met, that – one day – we will join them at that table, with a place prepared for us, where we may be the best of ourselves, together, forever, with them/with God in God’s glorious presence.

Thanks be to God for the gift of Hope as we keep watch and wait this Advent season. Amen.