“Awaiting the Day”

Isaiah 42:1-9

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A few weeks ago, I enjoyed a lovely vacation with the Longino family.

At first I was disappointed I would miss the hanging of the greens service and the first Sunday of Advent.

Advent is my favorite season.

But while one vacation, I found myself appropriately reflecting on this time in the liturgical calendar.

By waiting. A lot.

We went to Orlando and spent our week at the various theme parks there.

If you’ve been to Disney World, you know there is a lot of waiting involved.

Waiting in lines for rides.

Waiting for parades or fireworks to start.

Waiting to see your favorite character and take your picture with her.

This was my first visit to the Magic Kingdom, and I rather enjoyed the atmosphere, despite all the waiting.

In addition to the normal waiting that a visitor will do, being pregnant added to the waiting.

There were several rides I was not advised to go on, and so I would wait at the entrance until my family wound their way through the line and rode the ride.

So I spent a lot of time sitting on benches, people watching to pass the time.

The crowds weren’t that bad the week we were there, but even so I noticed people getting very worked up over having to wait.

10 minutes to ride Dumbo? No way, let’s come back later when it’s less crowded.

My time spent waiting and watching others wait that week reminded me of just how much we struggle with waiting.

We don’t like it.

We avoid it if we can.

We check the traffic app on Google Maps to make sure we won’t be stuck in rush hour.

We call ahead orders so we can avoid standing in line.

We are not a culture of waiters.

I suppose this is why Advent can be a challenging season for many churchgoers.

It’s all about waiting.

It’s all about building anticipation for Christmas, but not celebrating it too soon.

This is made more difficult by the secular world where Christmas songs have been playing since before Thanksgiving.

Advertisements have been promoting stocking stuffers for weeks.

The world outside the church makes Advent very difficult.

But for us, in the church, during these four weeks, we wait.

We wait to sing the entirety of O Come O Come Emmanuel until Christmas Eve.

Week by week, verse by verse, we make our way there.

We invite Emmanuel to come, but acknowledge that his arrival won’t be until Christmas.

We light one candle each week, illuminating the wreath.

We don’t light them all at once.

We are more intentional than that.

We limit the number of Christmas hymns we sing until Christmas actually arrives.

We don’t practice these things to torture ourselves or to take a stance in the “war on Christmas”.

We practice these things because it reminds us that Advent is a season of waiting.

It is the time in our year when we slow down.

We think about our actions, our songs, our scriptures.

We look at how all of creation waits for healing and redemption.

In an age which demands instant gratification, we pursue the practice of waiting.

Our text from Isaiah today speaks about waiting.

The prophet Isaiah speaks hope to a people who were waiting with desperation.

Their world had fallen apart. They’d been forced into exile.

The suffering experienced by the people in Babylon compares to the most painful events in recent history.

Genocide, starvation of entire societies. War-torn nations.

God’s people in exile were waiting for salvation.

They were waiting for rescue out of their pain.

They worried that God had given up on them and abandoned them.

After all, they suffered daily and God didn’t seem to respond.

So they looked to the prophet Isaiah.

He reminds them that God is with them.

That God will bring them salvation.

This section of the book of Isaiah is saturated with comforting words of hope.

Words that a desperately waiting people needed to hear.

Isaiah speaks of the suffering servant.

The chosen one who will deliver the people from suffering.

The Hebrew text doesn’t explicitly state that this servant will be Jesus Christ, but as Christians, we read that part into the text.

We have the advantage of hindsight which shows us that Jesus is the one spoken of here.

We know that he is the one who brings justice to the nations.

…the one who will not be broken or quenched until his work is done.

…the one who does not boast of his name and draw attention to himself.

We follow a humble, ordinary savior.

One who comes to get work done without much pomp and circumstance.

In the midst of trauma and pain, Isaiah reminds the people that Jesus is coming.

Relief will arrive.

You’ll notice, however, that Isaiah doesn’t tell the people to idly sit by and wait for his arrival.

Isaiah doesn’t say, “Sit tight and carry on with your despair. Wallow in that pain you’re experiencing.”

Instead he reminds them that they are called by God to be a light to the nations.

They are called to rise above their suffering and proclaim hope.

To show the world that even though they have been conquered by another nation, they place their hope in something beyond this world.

In a God who is with them always.

There is no room for apathy and complacency for those who are suffering and waiting for deliverance.

God calls these people to take action as they wait.

To make a difference in their world as they wait.

To become a reflection of the servant who is to come, the one who will bring justice and healing to all.

The people of God are called to this task as they wait for their own rescue.

Like I said before, we’re not very good at waiting.

We’d rather skip the line, jump ahead. Avoid the waiting game.

But based on this text from Isaiah, it appears that God intentionally makes us wait.

That God places a challenge before us as we wait during times of suffering.

Yes, God promises relief from our suffering, eventually.

But in the meantime, we’re called to act. To pursue justice. To be the light to the nations.

Bringing hope. Bringing justice. Bringing peace.

In our church tradition, we believe that all people are members of the body of Christ.

Every person is a child of God.

And we confess that when one suffers, we all suffer.

We’re all connected by Christ.

There are many children of God who are suffering in our world today.

Victims of injustice and cruelty.

How are we responding to them?

How are we making ourselves light to the nations, hope to the hopeless?

Are we being intentional with our time as we wait for God to bring an end to all suffering?

Being a light to the nations in the midst of our suffering is messy business.

It challenges us to reach outside of ourselves and connect with others.

Connect with those who experience this world very differently than we do.

Connect with those whom we disagree with, even.

We see this messiness all around us.

Messiness and anger have arisen out of the events in Ferguson, MO, Cleveland, OH, and Staten Island, NY.

The rise in black men killed by police has brought racial tensions to the surface.

Tensions which we thought we buried with the Civil Rights movement.

These events and our reactions to them reveal that there are still boundaries that divide us.

How we respond to these events as we wait for a resolution, matters.

How we conduct ourselves as we talk about it, as we hear about it, matters.

There are ways we can rise above the heated rhetoric, to be a light to the nations.

We can start by recognizing that none of us has all of the answers. None of us fully understand this complicated issue.

We can open ourselves to dialogue, and genuinely listen to those whom we disagree with.

Hearing their stories, placing ourselves in their shoes. Learning from each other.

For those of us who are white, we can recognize that racial injustice still exists in our nation, even though we don’t experience it the way people of color do.

In each of these ways, we can respond to this situation with open minds, compassionate hearts and listening ears.

Making ourselves available to hear a different side of the story, and allow our hearts to be changed.

This is what it looks like to intentionally use our time as we wait for relief.

Rather than sit back and wait until the media gets tired of covering the stories.

Or until the protests die down and we go back to ignoring the problems.

We are called to act and respond to this conflict and all other conflicts that arise in our world.

God calls us to be a light to the nations as we wait.

To pursue justice and act with mercy.

To show compassion to those who suffer worse than we do.

Isaiah reminds us that relief is coming.

The savior will arrive someday.

Until then, our job is to be mindful with how we use our time.

To use our waiting time as an opportunity to be a light to the nations, awaiting the day when all suffering shall cease.

May this Advent season help us to wait with intentionality and action.