

Charles R. Blaisdell, Senior Pastor
First Christian Church
Colorado Springs, Colorado
December 14, 2014 - Third Sunday of Advent
©2014

Singing the Questions and Answers of Christmas II. How Long?

Selections from Psalm 80 CEB Shepherd of Israel, listen! You, the one who leads Joseph as if he were a sheep. You, who are enthroned upon the winged heavenly creatures. Show yourself 2 before Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh! Wake up your power! Come to save us! 3 Restore us, God! Make your face shine so that we can be saved! ... 14 Please come back, God of heavenly forces! Look down from heaven and perceive it! Attend to this vine, 15 this root that you planted with your strong hand, this son whom you secured as your very own.... Revive us so that we can call on your name. 19 Restore us, Lord God of heavenly forces! Make your face shine so that we can be saved!

Luke 1:67-79 Adapted from The Message Then Zachariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and sang his praises: Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel; he came and set his people free. He set the power of salvation in the center of our lives, and in the very house of David his servant, Just as he promised long ago through the preaching of his holy prophets: Deliverance from our enemies and every hateful hand; Mercy to our forebears as he remembers to do what he said he'd do, What he swore to our father Abraham — a clean rescue from the enemy camp, So we can worship him without a care in the world, made holy before him as long as we live. And you, my child, "Prophet of the Highest," will go ahead of the Master to prepare his ways, Present the offer of salvation to his people, the forgiveness of their sins. Through the heartfelt mercies of our God, God's Sunrise will break in upon us, Shining on those in the darkness, those sitting in the shadow of death, Then showing us the way, one foot at a time, down the path of peace.

When Barbara and I moved to the San Francisco Bay area in the late '90s, it didn't take us very long to discover that any answer to any question about how **far** something was from something else was meaningless if the answer was given in terms of distance. With eight-and-a-half million people crowding around that bay, no one ever answered a distance question with a distance answer. For the answer was always "it depends." It depends hugely on the time of day, on when you start out on your journey, on whether one of the bridges over the bay was blocked or there was an accident in the tunnel, or on what sorts of debris had fallen into the road to slow things down and engage the gawkers. In fact, I began to keep a list of my favorite roadside debris spotted by the traffic reporter; the two I most remember were the four Porta-Potties that

had somehow escaped into the middle of the freeway and the half a dozen crates of live chickens. And just as southern Californians love to endlessly argue about which route to take among their eleven zillion freeways, Bay Area residents will argue about whether it will take 30 minutes, 45 minutes, or two hours to get from A to B. But whatever the arguers' answers, none of them ever answer the question of "how far" with a distance answer; no, the answer is **always** in terms of how long, **how long**.

That's the question so poignantly posed in our Psalm today as we celebrate this third Sunday of Advent and a sermon series theme where we honestly acknowledge, as I said two weeks ago, the ambiguities and even pain of the Advent season – and yet at the same time as we also realize that to skip over those, to not acknowledge those things and to leap right to Christmas as the culture around us has been doing for months is to cheapen and even trivialize what Christmas means. But it **IS** a question that we also ask, isn't it?

- How long, we ask, until there is the promised peace on earth when we read that there were 5000 killings by middle east extremists in the month of November.¹
- How long, we ask, until there is the harmony between people of different ethnicities when we horrifyingly watch an unarmed black man choked to death?
- How long, we ask, with an ache in our heart at how the swords seem to be winning over the plowshares, when in the last two years over 2000 soldiers were killed fighting against those who would torture and enslave and dominate women in the name of a blasphemous understanding of the God we both worship?²
- How long, we ask, remembering the 300 homeless women, men, and children in

¹<http://abcnews.go.com/International/jihadist-killings-equal-911-attack-everyday-month/story?id=27536569>

²<http://icasualties.org/OEF/ByYear.aspx>

Colorado Springs,³ how long until there are children who no longer wonder where they will sleep tonight and parents who wonder if they can afford for a child to get sick, as we celebrate the birth of a Child who Himself was born in a barn?

- How long, we ask as we gather around nativity scenes of the first family of our faith, until the rifts in our own families might be healed or until the pain from the missing member of that family would no longer seem so raw?

Yes, we can understand the Psalmist's cry of pain, written there in the midst of 70 years of slavery, far from home in Babylon, wondering about how long it might be until their terrible journey was done, and what the road ahead might look like? For, as the Rev. Barbara Blaisdell said in a recent sermon:

It's a hard, harsh world that eats up new victims every day, every single hour.

We are living now in a place, heaven help us, where children are stolen and the aging are warehoused and the nations have invented horribly ingenious ways to hate and violence breaks out on every continent. And we are anxious because we feel so unsafe from the violence and oppression and results of oppression stalk us and those we love like wolves stalk sheep.⁴

Our questions about how long and our realization that the road is long and winding and sometimes, like those Bay Area highways, strewn with obstacles makes us realize that it is indeed Advent, not yet Christmas with its promised "peace on earth, goodwill to all" – and while the tradition celebrates this day as the Sunday of joy, we know that we are yet far from the fullness of joy that Christmas promises.

So, how do we journey on this long and winding and sometimes pockmarked

³<http://gazette.com/homeless-numbers-how-many-and-who-they-are/article/1536453>

⁴Barbara S. Blaisdell, "Learning to Wait for More than Santa - II. Waiting for the Shepherd's Care." Preached at First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Tacoma, Washington, December 7, 2014.

road where we don't have the assurances of cheap, or easy, or shallow answers about how long? I know that both this sermon and my sermon of two weeks ago are perhaps hard to hear and full of intensity. I promise that next week's won't be quite so heavy. And yet I am profoundly convinced, as I said a moment ago, that if we don't honestly confront the ambiguity of Advent we can never truly appreciate the celebration of Christmas. Again, as Barbara says, Advent is a strange

... two-track celebration. We celebrate a memory, the memory of Christ's first coming into the world. And we also celebrate a hope towards the time when Christ comes again and brings to completion the world of justice and peace that is his hearts desire. We are looking back over our shoulders at Bethlehem and that first visitation in a cattle shed. We're also looking ahead to the horizon of longing for a better world. This is a bit awkward, looking backward and forward at the same time; celebrating and yet longing for more, singing "Joy to the World" and at the same time singing "Come O long expected Jesus, come and set thy people free."⁵

My friends, I don't have an answer for you to the question of "how long"? What I do have are three suggestions about how it is that we can nonetheless faithfully journey along this sometimes winding and tumultuous "two track" road toward Christmas.

The first is this: if we wait until the road is clear, we won't get anywhere. And if we fantasize about what it would be like if there were no obstacles in the road we won't get any further down it. No matter how many times I was stuck in that Bay Area traffic, jammed up by those Porta-Potties and chickens littering the road, my dreaming about a road that had no cars on it but mine didn't get me one foot farther down that road. So, the first suggestion for how we navigate our way through Advent towards Christmas is simply this: **go**. Do you notice how often that word is used at crucial times in the Bible?

⁵Blaisdell, Ibid.

Jesus tells them women at the empty tomb: “Go.” He tells his disciples that their task after he is gone is to what? “Go” into the world seeking the lost. If we wait until the road is clear, if we wait for peace to fully come, if we wait for the hurts to go away, if we wait for the pain to cease, then we will not have done the good we could have done and we will still be stuck where we are.

Second, and relatedly, a friend of mine is fond of quoting a line from the Spanish poet Antonio Machado: “*Se hace camino al andar*” – “We make the road by walking.” You see, for example, if you are perplexed about racism in our society and don’t know fully how to think about it or about your own attitudes or the ways that you may be prejudiced that you suspect but can’t fully articulate, and decide that you won’t do **anything** until you have **everything** perfectly clarified in your mind – well, I have to tell you that you will fail. But if you simply get out on the road, making mistakes no doubt, but through your words and actions, the things you read and the Facebook postings that you follow and share, that you want to be more the kind of person that Jesus hopes that we all will be, in the kind of society where privilege is not the privilege of one race or orientation or class or gender but the privilege for all to serve the goals of justice and equality, where, as Dr. King put it, it is the “content of a [person’s] character that counts and not pigmentation – then you will find that the road indeed opens up in front of you as you make your way by walking it. For as the always-eloquent and often provocative Denver pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber says, God always wants to “redeem our stuff and our mistakes, but... if we aren't open about the fact that we've made them, that can be a barrier to experiencing that forgiveness and that redemption and that grace.” You make the road to Christmas by walking it, trusting, indeed, that God will find you along the way.⁶

⁶<http://www.onbeing.org/program/transcript/nadia-bolz-weber-seeing-the-underside-and-seeing-god-tattoos-tradition-and-grace>

Third, on that road toward Christmas, don't walk it alone. The Advent and Christmas season can be one of the most isolating times of the year, but that can oh-so-drive you deeper into sadness and even despair. Robert Fulghum's now classic book, All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten, has a line in it that remains true even if it has become a cliché; do you remember it? It's one of those things he says he learned in kindergarten that served him well his whole life: *"When you go out in the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands and stick together."*⁷ One writer once famously said "'Just showing up is 80 percent of life. Sometimes it's easier to hide home in bed. I've done both.'" Haven't we all! In fact, do you know the old joke that goes like this:

A mother went to wake her son for church one Sunday morning. When she knocked on his door, he said, "I'm not going!" "Why not?" asked his mother. "I'll give you two good reasons," he said. "One, they don't like me. Two, it's just too early." His mother replied, "Well, I'll give you two good reasons why YOU WILL go to church. One, you're 47 years old. Two, you're the pastor!"

At the prospect of a long road that seems scary and even painful, the temptation to pull the covers up and stay in bed is a strong one indeed. But my Advent and Christmas counsel to you is to muster whatever you can to indeed show up, show up and begin walking that road. But don't do it alone. That is what the church is for. Imperfect as it is, the church is the place, the people, who connect with a hundred generations of those who have come before, who have walked those lonely roads, who have shown up and who have remembered through the beauty of song and ritual and shared prayer that **God always shows up with them**. Always. Indeed, walking that road with you is a whole tradition -- initiated by a motley band of shepherds and regal crew of astrologers -- who began the journey a long, long time ago and found themselves in the

⁷ <http://www.peace.ca/kindergarten.htm>

presence of an awe-filled grace that change them, and that changed the world.⁸ So, third thing: your road lies in front of you, a road through the thickets of Advent heading toward Christmas. Show up, but do not think you have to show up alone; “hold hands and stick together.”

Did you hear our second scripture from the gospel of Luke? If you weren't listening closely, you might have thought that the prophet Zachariah in the scripture is celebrating the coming birth of Jesus, the one who will, the scripture says, “Present the offer of salvation to his people, the forgiveness of their sins.” But it's not about Jesus, it's about John, John the Baptist. He is the forerunner on the road, the pace car, if you will, the one who makes a way, the one who prepares a place for the coming Christ in the hearts and minds of those who would hear. That's exactly our opportunity this Advent season too: to walk along the road of our lives – even if it is sometimes a painful and debris-strewn journey – always wanting to make a place for Jesus, to live in such a way that Christ will be born again and again in the lives of those who need the joy he brings, even in the midst of struggle. For as Zachariah says, “God's Sunrise **WILL** break in upon us, Shining on those in the darkness, those sitting in the shadow of death, Then showing us the way, one foot at a time, down the path of peace,” the path of joy, the path of hope. Shall we walk that path together?

⁸This lovely sentence comes from private correspondence with Dr. Bob Hill, Sr. Pastor of Community Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Kansas City, Missouri.