

27 November 2022 – PLYMOUTH

Rev Kate Whyman: ADVENT ‘What are you waiting for?’

1. **INTRO MUSIC:** ‘Contemplation Suite: IV. Dream’ (4’58”), Julie Cooper.

<https://music.youtube.com/watch?v=bp3km9X23IM&feature=share>

2. WELCOME/CHALICE LIGHTING

Welcome to this morning’s service. Thank you to Nick for the opening music. You are welcome whoever you are and however you are feeling today. Whether you are a member of this congregation, or a visitor. Whether you come in sadness or in joy, you are welcome here.

This morning is the first Sunday in Advent.

French philosopher Simone Weil said: ‘Waiting patiently in expectation is the foundation of the spiritual life’. And Advent is definitely a time of waiting in expectation.

So, let us begin our worship - this time of celebration, contemplation and community - by lighting the first of our advent candles as well as our customary chalice. If you’re at home, please light a candle with us now.

May these flames be symbols of the quiet, still places in our minds, the place that waits patiently with expectation of the glory to come.

3. **1st Hymn:** 82 (G) People look East

People, look east! The time is near
of the crowning of the year.
Make your house fair as you are able,
trim the hearth, and set the table.
People, look east, and sing today:
Love, the guest, is on the way.

Furrows, be glad! Though earth is bare,
one more seed is planted there:
give up your strength the seed to nourish,
that, in course, the flower may flourish.
People, look east, and sing today:
Love, the rose, is on the way.

Stars, keep the watch! When night is dim,
one more light the bowl shall brim,
shining beyond the frosty weather,
bright as sun and moon together.
People, look east, and sing today:
Love, the star, is on the way.

French carol, words Eleanor Farjeon, from Oxford Book of Carols

4. PRAYER

Let us join together in prayer. This morning I begin by offering an Advent prayer from the Catholic priest and author, Henri Nouwen.

O God, Renew our souls so that we may find what is good and acceptable and perfect in your eyes. Open our eyes to see beyond the lures of the world – the prizes of success, the rewards of wealth and position, the seductions of a modern life lived out at a frenetic and competitive pace. Help us to sever our dependencies on the world's distractions and give us an opportunity to find ourselves in the shelter and safety of your wings. Amen

Divine Spirit, we know that...

This is the season of anticipation,
Of expecting, of hoping, of wanting.

This is the time of living in darkness, in the hues of unknowing.
Of being quiet, of reflecting on a year almost past.
Waiting for a new beginning, for a closing or an end.
This is the time for digesting the lessons of days gone past, anticipating the future.

This is a time of waiting...
for a world which can know justice
for a lasting peace.
for a bridge to span the divides which separate us.
for a promise or a hope.
For all of this
We are waiting.

Amen

5. STORY – a different version of a well-known story from Osho ‘Joy: the happiness that comes from within’

The Sufi mystic Rabiya was searching for something on the street outside her small hut. The sun was setting and darkness was descending, as a few people gathered around her. *“What have you lost? What are you searching for? Perhaps we can help,”* they said to Rabiya.

Rabiya said, *“I have lost my needle.”*

One of the people said, *“Well, the sun is setting now and it will be very difficult to find the needle. Where has it fallen? If we know the exact place, it will be easier to find it.”*

Rabiya told them, *“It is better not to ask me that question — because, actually, it has not fallen on the road at all. It has fallen inside my house.”*

Everyone started giggling as if she was joking. One man said, *“If the needle has fallen inside the house, then why are you searching for it on the road?”*

“For a very simple reason: inside the house there is no light and on the outside a little light is still there,” Rabiya replied.

The people laughed and started dispersing but Rabiya called them back and said, *“Listen! That’s exactly what you are doing: I was just following your example. You go on seeking bliss in the outside world without asking the most fundamental question: where exactly have I lost it?”*

After a pause, she continued, *“You have lost it inside, and yet you are looking for it on the outside for the very same reason — your senses are outward bound, your ears hear sounds on the outside, your hands touch things on the outside. That’s the reason why you are searching outside. For a very long time, I was also just searching on the outside. But the day I searched inwards, I was surprised. That is where I lost it and that is the only place it can be found.”*

6. SECOND READING – Henri Nouwen, Catholic writer

Henri Nouwen – whose prayer we shared earlier – wrote a lot about the spirituality of waiting. He believed that waiting was a practice that was active, moving, hopeful, open-ended. Here are some words from him about waiting.

“The secret of waiting is to trust that a seed has been planted, that something has begun. Active waiting means to be present fully to the moment, in the conviction that something is happening. A waiting person is a patient person. The word “patience” means the willingness to stay where we are and live the situation out to the full in the belief that something hidden there will manifest itself to us. Impatient people are always expecting the real thing to happen somewhere else and therefore want to go elsewhere. The moment is empty. But patient people dare to stay where they are. Patient living means to live actively in the present and wait there.

‘Waiting is open-ended. Open-ended waiting is hard for us because we tend to wait for something very concrete, for something that we wish to have. Much of our waiting is filled with wishes: “I wish that the weather would be better. I wish that the pain

would go.” For this reason, a lot of our waiting is not open-ended. Instead, our waiting is a way of controlling the future. We want the future to go in a very specific direction, and if this does not happen we are disappointed and can even slip into despair.

‘To wait open-endedly is an enormously radical attitude toward life. So is to trust that something will happen to us that is far beyond our own imaginings...The spiritual life is a life in which we wait actively present to the moment, trusting that new things will happen to us, new things that are far beyond our own imagination, fantasy, or prediction. That, indeed, is a very radical stance toward life in a world preoccupied with control.’

I invite you to journey now into that quiet place of waiting. Author Philip Chircop says: ‘Distracted by fleeting, external excitements we forget to tap into the fresh, secret waters deep within, where the Source of life and love and joy is waiting to be found.’

7. 2nd HYMN 35 (P) Find a stillness

Find a stillness, hold a stillness,
let a stillness carry me.

Find the silence hold the silence,
let the silence carry me.

In the spirit, by the spirit,
with the spirit giving power,
I will find true harmony.

Seek the essence, hold the essence,
let the essence carry me.

Let me flower, help me flower,
watch me flower, carry me.

In the spirit, by the spirit,
with the spirit giving power,
I will find true harmony.

Transylvanian melody, words by Carl Seaburg based on a Transylvanian text © Alan Seaburg

SILENCE

INTERLUDE Wait for the Lord – Taize

https://music.youtube.com/watch?v=E_XwvwyD2vo&feature=share

ADDRESS

Advent in the Christian tradition, is about waiting to celebrate the birth of Jesus – of God's incarnation into the world. It's also, in the case of the anticipated 'second coming', about not knowing when he will come, but preparing and being ready anyway.

Advent originally began around the 4th or 5th century as a period of fasting, similar to the period of Lent before Easter, and it still retains something of the spirit of atonement and penitence in some cultures. For example, both the Eastern Orthodox and the Eastern Catholic Churches continue to observe an Advent fast: known as Philip's Fast, after the Apostle Philip.

In the pagan tradition, this time of year is also about waiting. In this case waiting for the return of the sun. Even as we descend into the darkest time of the year we are already anticipating the moment when the earth once again turns towards the light and the days begin, almost imperceptibly, to get longer again.

In other words this season is, at its heart, about waiting in the darkness and preparing for the light to come, both literally and symbolically. It is a time of spiritual contemplation, an invitation to empty ourselves in order to prepare for the transformation that is to come. It asks us to have faith.

This feels very different from much of our day-to-day experience of waiting, which is often characterized by a sense of frustration and powerlessness. Waiting for a bus that doesn't come, waiting for a hospital appointment or procedure that gets cancelled, waiting for a house sale to go through, hanging on the end of an automated phone line waiting for assistance. And so on and on. I know I struggle with that kind of waiting. It makes me feel helpless, that I don't matter, that no one cares, that I'm stuck in a broken system I can't do anything to change, and that can be hard

to bear. I feel anxious now, just talking about it!

But advent does offer the chance to embrace another kind of waiting too. One that feels very different. (I can already breathe more easily!) This sort of waiting is not dependent on anyone else or any system or any outcome. It's a waiting that exists simply as a connection – as a gossamer thread, if you like – that shimmers between me and my god. And between you and yours. It is an 'open-ended' waiting, as Henri Nouwen called it, that is not about having our wishes fulfilled as quickly as possible (nice though that might be) but is instead alive with possibility. It asks us to look within, to learn to trust and to have faith in the process of life itself. To believe in the possibility of things emerging along the way that we'd never even have dreamt of, and in the promise that hope and light will eventually return, one way or another. There's no rush. There's nowhere to go except to dwell in the sacred relationship. The waiting IS the living, right here and now. AS Suzanne put it to me, what do we become WHILE we are waiting? And as Margaret Kirk reminds us:

The word 'wait' has a number of different roots. One of these roots is from the old French word 'waitier', which means to watch as well as to wait. Another is from the Old High German 'wahta', meaning watcher and 'wahhon', meaning to be awake. So, quite deeply embedded in the meaning of our English word 'wait' is the suggestion that however powerless we might feel, waiting brings with it an awakening...if we allow it to.

I know I can't tap into this calm, open-ended space all the time, and I'm sure you can't either. We all get irritable and disappointed and miserable when things don't work out how we'd hoped. As Ann spoke of last week, we're not perfect, and that's OK. We're human. But it is something we can practise, and return to, and keep reminding ourselves of. And that can make all the difference between hope and despair.

UU Frank Casper writes: 'Waiting is a kind of attitude, a way of living within a spiritual orientation that has confidence in what is unfolding. Saying "I don't really know what this all means, but I trust in the nature and character of what is happening." In terms of the spirit of Advent a patient person is one who does not rush from one moment to the next, robbing each moment of significance, then finding themselves left to ponder

the emptiness, but is instead attentive to the present, and in relative possession of themselves. That kind of confidence can bring a kind of calm, a spiritual rest in the midst of festive madness.'

As we enter Advent once more, may we too find calm in the midst of the madness.

8. 3rd HYMN 133 (P) Play trumpet, cello, harp and flute

Play trumpet, cello, harp and flute;
play organ, violin and lute.
Write poems and read the written word;
Write plays, tell stories to be heard;
and let the cosmos all around
with love and justice then resound.

Paint pictures dark and painting bright;
Paint with a brush and paint with light.
Dance minuet and highland fling;
dance two by two and in a ring;
and let the cosmos all around
with love and justice then resound.

Speak words of comfort and of peace;
speak gently so that wars may cease.
Sing melodies and measured phrase;
sing songs to set the world ablaze;
and let the cosmos all around
with love and justice then resound.

Music Norman Cocker, words © Andrew M. Hill

9. CLOSING WORDS Adapted from 1 Thessalonians 5: 12-18

Be at peace among yourselves.

Encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone.

See that none of you repays harm with harm, but always seek to do good to one another and to all.

Rejoice always, be at one with your god, give thanks [as best you can] in all circumstances.

This is all that is asked of you.

10. CLOSING VIDEO 'O come, O come, Emmanuel', The Piano Guys

<https://music.youtube.com/watch?v=iO7ySn-Swwc&feature=share>