



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Waiting for Our Saving God
A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

November 29, 2009
First Sunday in Advent (Year C)

Psalm 25:1-10

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*To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.
O my God, in you I trust;
do not let me be put to shame;
do not let my enemies exult over me.
Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;
let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.
Make me to know your ways, O Lord;
teach me your paths.
Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long.
Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.
Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;
according to your steadfast love remember me,
for your goodness' sake, O Lord!
Good and upright is the Lord;
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.
He leads the humble in what is right,
and teaches the humble his way.
All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness,
for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.*

Whatever emotion you have ever felt—from great joy to deep sorrow, from overflowing love to bitter anger—someone has given it voice in the Book of Psalms. As this season of Advent dawns this morning—as we enter this season of waiting and hoping—we discover the good news in Psalm 25: Someone has been here before us and has given voice to the longing of our souls. Someone knows what it's like to cry out to God to do something about his life.

Several years ago now, when Alayne's parents were in town for a visit, we decided

to take them up to Skyline Drive for a day of hiking. It was something they'd always wanted to do and that particular time the weather cooperated. When we got to the park, we decided to hike the trail to the base of Dark Hollow Falls, which, if you've been there, you will remember what it's like. The trail winds down at a fairly steep rate, which meant that it would mean climbing back up that same steep incline after a couple of miles of hiking. I will admit that I immediately began calculating which one of the girls—or Alayne's parents—I would have to carry back up the trail.

What made the task even more grueling is that I had never seen the falls, so I wasn't altogether certain that the journey would be worth it. But we kept marching down, spiraling our way toward an uncertain destination.

But along the way, something started to happen. We began to pass people coming back up the trail who breathlessly bore witness to those of us still heading down: "It's worth the effort. You're almost there. You don't want to turn back now."

I discovered that I had an inner filter working, as some of the families or groups were more believable than others. They seemed somehow borne up by an experience that the sweat and out-of-breath-ness didn't dampen. And so, we kept trudging downward—trusting that what the witnesses were telling us was true.

And then, as you can imagine, we finally reached the base of the falls and it was breathtaking. As we began the climb back up, our roles switched. We became the ones who were bearing witness to the power of the destination to all of those staggering down the mountain. They would often call out as we passed, "Is it worth it? How much further is it? Will it be what we hoped?" And, since we were now among those who bore the marks of the struggle as well as the vitality of hope, we were being trusted as faithful witnesses for others on the journey.

That's sort of how this season of Advent functions at the beginning of the church year. We get to hear the voices of the faithful before us who have glimpsed the final destination to which God's purpose is heading, and we are given hope as we continue our journey through these uncertain days that are so common at this point in our history.

This season of Advent—the church's season of preparation for Christmas—is a time when the church looks in two directions, and it serves to offer us a vision of what God is up to in Jesus Christ. The word *advent* means "to come," and so the church looks back with joy to how God entered the world in the flesh of Jesus. And we also look forward to the day when Christ shall come again, to that day when all flesh shall see the glory of God, when every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord! We look back in joy and we look forward in hope, but whatever direction we look, we are marked by a deep longing. We are longing for the day when God will set things right.

That's why our longing is particularly real this year. We're looking at the world around us and we're discovering what the psalmist saw when he looked around in his day. He saw a world that was crumbling, a world whose very foundations were shifting

beneath his feet, a world where enemies were around every corner. And he did the only thing he knew to do. He lifted his soul—his hands—to the Lord and cried out for God to do something about it. But he also did something more. He also dared to remind God of God’s mercy, and begged God to remember him. And he also told God that he planned to wait for God to show up with power—even if it meant he had to wait all day long.

Since the earliest days, Advent has been a time for the church to wait for the God of our salvation. In a very real way, Advent becomes a time when our longing merges with the longing of God. It’s a time of watching in anticipation for the coming of God’s promised reign. It’s a time of waiting for God to set things right.

When your world’s crumbling, when you have no where to turn, the only thing to do is to look to the heavens and beg God to come down and do something about it. Though the words have been different, though we may not always use the exalted language of the psalmist, we are well aware that we, like those before us, long for the promised day of the Lord, and we are casting visions of what that’s going to look like. After all, we are keenly aware of the hurt around us—in a beleaguered Middle East; in a fragile and uncertain economy; in nations around the world that are devastated by natural disaster; in an Angel Tree overflowing with names; in a world plagued with violence and despair and war—we know what it’s like to be a people who look around and see profound hurt. Which is why we need the season of Advent—a time to give voice to the longing we feel deep in our bones.

I realize I may be in the minority, but the church’s season of Advent is my favorite. Now don’t get me wrong, I love Christmas when we sing about the joy God has sent to the world in the birth of Jesus. And, it should go without saying that I love the season of Easter when the church bears witness to God’s power conquer death with the news of resurrection and my new life. But if pressed, I would have to say that my favorite season is Advent, for, as I always remind my good friend Chris Joiner—a pastor in Tennessee—it’s the one time of year that I can wallow in pathos and not feel too guilty about it.

Heidi Neumark, a Lutheran pastor, has written an amazing account of her first church in the South Bronx. Her book is about the amazing transformation that her church underwent over the course of several years. Imagine my surprise to hear my own thoughts echoed in her words. She, too, loves Advent, and she gives a great description of why that’s true for her:

“Probably the reason I love Advent so much is that it is a reflection of how I feel most of the time. I might not feel sorry during Lent, when the liturgical calendar begs repentance. I might not feel victorious, even though it is Easter morning. I might not feel full of the Spirit, even though it is Pentecost and the liturgy spins out fiery gusts of ecstasy. But during Advent, I am always in sync with the season. Advent unfailingly embraces and comprehends my reality. And what is that? I think of the word *longing*. Advent is when the church can no longer contain its unbearable, unfulfilled desire and the

cry of *longing* breaks forth: Come, Lord Jesus! O come, O come, Emmanuel!” (Heidi B. Neumark, *Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 211)

I think I understand what she means. And I know the psalmist would, because whenever we discover that the world isn't what we or God imagined it would be, when we recognize the hurt, and lift our heart and soul and voice to God in hope—we do so in the promise that God will do something about it—and we are going to wait for God to act—even if it means we have to wait all day long.

And so, during these days of Advent, we will tell the truth. We will not be afraid to name our hurt, because we cannot affirm our hope without it. And this is our hope: that even now God is in the midst of our world—knee-deep in the pain and hurt—and God is working out a day when all hurt will be ended.

In just a moment, you and I will gather at this table to feast on the grace which God will offer. This table gives us a glimpse of our final destination, when people will come from east and west and north and south to feast at the Lord's Table in the kingdom of heaven. And the folks that we meet as we go forth from this table are going to be looking at us to see if we will witness to the power of what we have seen. They will look to us for some hint of what God is up to in Jesus Christ. So may what we experience here give us hope for the living of these days, as we continue to long for God's promise of justice and righteousness to be fulfilled.

And now, let us say together what we believe:

God keeps his promises and gives us hope.

In the life, death and resurrection of Jesus God kept his promises.

All that we can ever hope for was present in Christ.

But the work of God in Christ is not over.

God calls us to hope for more than we have yet seen.

The hope God gives us is ultimate confidence that supports us when lesser hopes fail us.

In Christ, God gives hope for a new heaven and a new earth, assurance of mercy and judgment beyond death.

This hope gives us courage for the present struggle.