

LEANING EXPECTANTLY

Matthew 11: 2-15

[Augsburg College Chapel, 14 December 2007, Advent III]

- I struggle a bit with Advent because it is such a dark time – and though we slipped into a few Christmas carols yesterday in chapel, I’m going to take us back to Advent today because I think we’re meant to remain in the dark just a bit longer and to hunger even more for the light that is about to break upon us...
- Advent can be a heart-wrenching season, a time when we are reminded again and again of the ways in which humans feel the pain and confusion of longing for something and yet not being patient enough, not believing enough, not hoping enough. Stay awake, be vigilant, watch intently are the messages of the season – and yet that is really difficult stuff for most of us. We want this so badly, we need this so much, we long to be redeemed, to find significance and meaning, to know that we are loved, and yet we remain in the dark...
- I’ve been thinking a lot about this in the last few days as my son, Thomas, celebrated his birthday yesterday. At Target, he needs that toy or game so much – sincere feeling, and yet he will not be satisfied. Or what about that first time we believed we were in love and sure we couldn’t live without the object of our affection? Or what about our own community – students and staff and faculty members – who are so sure that they need or deserve this or that – status or power or information or resolution or redemption? We know this longing and the pain and confusion it causes us – we feel it deeply and genuinely, and yet we too remain in the dark...
- The Advent story of John the Baptist, which reaches a most heart-breaking moment in our reading from Matthew, is an emblem of our human longing for something more, something sacred and redemptive in our lives. We need to do a bit of piecing together of the entire narrative. It begins in Luke’s story of Zechariah and Elizabeth – remember Zechariah struck dumb when he doubts Gabriel’s message of a son. Here is longing that doesn’t yet believe enough. And then there is John, earlier in Matthew’s gospel, baptizing by the River Jordan, and along comes Jesus, whose baptism with water sets up this remarkable scene where God proclaims his beloved Son. We can just imagine the longing that John feels to know that this is it – this is what gives his life meaning and direction.
- And then there is the final piece of the narrative, today’s reading recounting John’s question from prison to Jesus – please tell me that you are the One who was foretold, that my work was not in vain – can’t you just feel the longing, the desire for vindication and recognition, the expectation of salvation?
- And how does Jesus respond? He praises John for his work, on the one hand, but then reminds him that his work fits into a much larger pattern, a pattern of God’s love breaking into the world in new and remarkable ways. In other words, the message to John is this: Your longing to know the truth is not enough. You are a prophet above all others, but there is so much more to this story and your longing blinds you to God’s plan for God’s people.
- This is so much like my son, Thomas – and the child in all of us – whose longing for recognition and satisfying our needs for status and power and meaning keeps us from seeing what God truly needs from us – not our longing, but our faithful discipleship – not our human desires, but our eyes on God’s plan for God’s people and creation.
- What if, instead of our longing, God calls us to “lean expectantly” toward God’s

reign, God's love, God's purposes for God's people?

- The idea of leaning expectantly turns the tables on our Advent lives as we shift from expecting that our longing will be satisfied to trusting that the arc of God's work in our midst will bring order and sense and meaning to all God's creatures – no matter how exalted they may think they are or are not!
- What exactly do I mean by “leaning expectantly”?
- First, it is quite literally a “posture,” an attitude – leaning in toward someone or something, watching and listening carefully, more focused on what is happening out there, rather than in here – it is a posture of active listening and watching, ready to respond as is called for when one expects something to happen...
- Second, leaning expectantly is a way of being that is out of balance, leaving us to rely on the pull of a force and power that draws us in, that centers us, rather than believing that we can find that fulcrum of balance within ourselves – the centered life, as our Luther Seminary colleague Jack Fortin teaches us, not the balanced life – balance is the wrong metaphor for the life of faith (not to mention it is impossible to achieve) – instead, the center holds us in God's orbit...leaning expectantly centers us in God
- Finally, leaning expectantly also is a way of being that focuses on the neighbor, that leans toward the other and his or her needs rather than our own. When we “lean expectantly,” we focus on our neighbor, on the needs of strangers that claim us to be hospitable, to do justice, to pay attention to the call to love without condition...
- And what difference does it make to “lean expectantly”?
- The great Lutheran theologian, Joseph Sittler, in his sermon “Peace as Rest and as Movement” points to the fact that the peaceless world “is precisely the place for the working out of God's will for truth, justice, purity, beauty.” Similarly, Martin Luther King, Jr. proclaims: “Let us realize the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.” We lean into an arc already making its way in the world, a plan already unfolding, justice demanded, love already breaking in, and there we find glimpses of salvation and grace in our midst. If we are distracted or even blinded by our longing, we will miss the remarkable signs of God's will for us that are ours as we lean with expectation into the arc of God's reign.
- The 20th century theological moralist, H. Richard Niebuhr, challenged the traditional images of humans as moral agents in charge of their own destinies or as followers of the law, when he developed an ethics of responsibility, suggesting that the appropriate role for moral agents is as responders to God's creative and redemptive work in our history. Leaning expectantly prepares us to respond to God's work in the world, to become co-creators, to follow the call, the signs of what God expects of us. Leaning expectantly, focused on our neighbor, we recognize in the needs of others what God requires rather than what we think is right or best...
- Finally, to lean expectantly challenges our notions of what it means to be called. In this Advent season when we have example after example of ordinary people being called to extraordinary work – Mary and Elizabeth and Zechariah and John and Joseph and the shepherds – we learn that to be called does not mean some dogged pursuit of what makes us happy, it means leaning expectantly into the arc of God's love breaking in and accepting what it means for our lives, here and now, as frightening and dangerous and adventurous and awesome as the call may be. We're in good and gracious company as we lean into our calls to do God's work in the world.

- Like Thomas, we want so much – like John, we long to know that our lives have meaning and purpose – and Jesus recognizes our longing – as he commends John for his work and tells him how much he loves him – while he also calls him and us to abandon our longing, to give up our aspirations to make sense of it on our own – heart-wrenching stuff – and to lean expectantly into the love that knows no bounds, the peace that passes all understanding, the hope that abides in God-with-us, Emmanuel. Come, oh come, we cry. Amen.