

Watching - Waiting - Singing Advent Sermon on Luke 1: 57-80

Now is the time of watching and waiting.
The time of pregnant expectation of new life.
Now is the season of hope unfolding.
The dark winter season when hope is waiting to be born.
Let us come before God with receptive and willing spirits.
May our soul magnify God's name
and may our spirits rejoice in God our Saviour!
Rejoice! God comes to bring the birthday of life and hope.

Sisters and brothers, this is how we began this morning... In Advent it's all about watching and waiting, and towards the end of many stories which we come across today and will come across in the next four weeks, people are singing...

Watching, waiting and singing – a beautiful little summary to characterize the season of Advent, but nothing easy to do really...

How can you watch while you run through your days busily preparing for Christmas and getting millions of big and small things ready?

Waiting is not popular at all in our time, is it? We want everything, and we want it now, don't we?

And singing? In many biblical Advent and Christmas stories people are singing. Everyone seems to be singing. Zechariah sings, Mary sings, Simeon sings, the angels sing... And I wish singing out loud and singing inwardly could become one of our little Advent activities which keep us in balance and fill us with serenity and joy.

Looking through my Bible with Advent eyes I noticed how often God's people seem to be waiting. Noah waits for the flood waters to recede; Daniel waits through the night in a den of lions; Sarah waits in her barrenness for a child; Jacob waits for Rebecca's hand; the Israelites wait in Egypt; later they wait 70 years in Babylonian captivity; Jonah waits in the fish's belly; Mary waits; Elizabeth waits; Zechariah waits; Simeon waits to see the Messiah; the disciples wait in the upper room; the apostles wait for Pentecost; Paul waits in prison. The ten bridesmaids, in one of the stories Jesus told, are waiting for the bridegroom... and most stunning: God is waiting too. In the parable of the prodigal son God is waiting for his children to understand his abundant love and grace. It should actually be called the parable of the waiting father, shouldn't it?

God watches and waits for our homecoming with a heart full of love and compassion.

In reading these stories with Advent eyes, I glimpsed the portrait of a patient God who enters into the experience of those who wait... God making a home with us during our waiting, and sharing the experience of what it means to be human...

And here we land in the middle of today's readings:

We have just been hearing and singing a classical story of Advent. It is the story of a time, when the intensive wishing and longing of people must have allowed the unbelievable to come true. Not immediately... but after long days of waiting, months of pregnancy and years of doubting acceptance of a reality that just cannot be changed....

Please, imagine:

An old couple is without a child. For many years both of them had desperately been longing for a child. They had been hoping and waiting, but with the years passing their

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hope has slowly disappeared and they had to allow the realistic view of becoming old without a child.

The two had tried to lead a life that pleases God, they were deeply and seriously living according to their Jewish faith and its traditions.

Who are they?

The woman's name is Elizabeth. She is a daughter of Aaron; and at the beginning of the Gospel of Luke she appears merely accompanying her husband Zechariah. She only starts talking after five months of pregnancy in which she had totally withdrawn from social life and contacts.

After that she suddenly is capable of speaking in public, of showing herself and expressing her gratitude towards God.

She now feels seen and known by God and finds relief from the disgraceful burden of being barren. At that moment she can become a self-confident person, praising the Lord and expressing in one sentence what Mary later on sings in her famous Song of Praise: This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among the people. (Luke 1:25)

Praising the Lord this woman at the same time accuses the society of those days of discriminating and humiliating childless women: there was no respectable position for her among the people whom she was living with.

But in spite of all the humiliation she had to suffer from daily, Elizabeth had managed to maintain some self-confidence, pride and dignity and live righteously and blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. (Luke 1:6)

Elizabeth – in this story – is the person to give a name to her son and by doing so help Zechariah to find speech again.

Zechariah – the man – is a priest: rather dominating and the main focus at the beginning of the story. But in the course of the story this role is changing. We don't learn much about him after he had offered incense to the Lord – doing his duty in the sanctuary. There appeared to him an angel, and Zechariah was terrified and overwhelmed by fear. Hesitatingly he expressed his doubts about what the angel had foretold and therefore became unable to speak. Not really understanding and taking in the angel's words he became mute; and only after Elizabeth had given birth to the child and named him John, he could speak again.

Before that, because he is unable to say one word, he writes on a tablet that he agrees with the name which Elizabeth has suggested for their child.

Then immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak and praise God. This is somehow unreal...

And then – nearly unbelievable – we hear Zechariah's enormous praise and prophecy. After such a long time of utter silence most amazing words find their way from Zechariah to the people around.

Maybe – as it happens so often in peoples lives – looking back, everything seemed to fit together for him: the long and frustrating time of waiting for a child, the resignation and the attempt to come to terms with the childlessness, then the angel who foretold him not

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only the birth of a child but also the fact that this child would be very special, would be filled by spirit and show many the ways to God and prepare them to expect and receive the Messiah.

Long and frustrating times of waiting in a life....

We know them all, don't we?

I do. And I know myself rather well: how depressed, how impatient I can be... How often I'd like to force changes along, and I just can't, because the right time has not yet come....

We all also know and remember these times in life, when one suddenly – looking back after months or years – can understand and learn why things had had to be the way they were and not another?

Advent to me is a challenge – the time of watching and waiting, of pregnant expectation of new life. It's got so much to do with patience and acceptance on the one hand and changes and birthings, revolutions even, on the other hand.

Every child's got to take its time and grow before it can be born. And if in Advent we celebrate the birthday of life and hope, we must not forget that before we can see and experience them, they must take their time to develop...

What touches me most in that story of Elizabeth and Zechariah is the certainty and the firmness with which Zechariah knows himself woven into God's story with his people...; and that he sticks to it, even though he and Elizabeth go through so many years of disappointment and frustration.

After all it becomes clear to him that this child is special and has got a lot to do with God's promises to this world. These promises inspire Zechariah to sing his famous song of praise:

God does not stay far away from his people,

he comes to visit us, he comes very close...

God is sending a strong saviour for us –

...fulfilling what has been foretold by the Old Testament's prophets.

And with God's saviour at our side, enemies are no longer threatening...

If this was true then it can also be true today: God with me in all my days and struggles, living at my side, taking away fear and oppression; God with me in all my fears and doubts, God at my side when the world seems to be in huge trouble... God there in the middle of it all bringing about the big change that everybody was hoping and praying for: social justice, worldwide peace, a culture of welcome, strangers becoming friends, - ... I would love to be able to sing Zechariah's song as my song today...

Zechariah is drawing a line of history for the Jewish people:

What had been promised to Sara and Abraham – mercy and faithfulness – that is also and still important to him, to Elizabeth and to John...- and to the people who had come to join the feast of naming and circumcising the child on that day.

Often people's prayers are wish lists. Zechariah's prayer however is in full acknowledgement of what God has done in the past and will do in the future. He

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worships God using the special name "Most High" and proclaims God's "tender mercy", and he looks forward to the great future of the tiny child just being given to him and his wife.

This child will have an enormous task to fulfil.
He will go before the Lord and prepare his ways.
He will let people know the mercy, the compassion and the salvation of God.
He will give light to those who live in darkness and lead the feet of people into ways of peace.

What do we do with that? How can the power of these sentences, how can the beauty of these words influence our lives today? How do we draw visions out of the ancient song?

If we put ourselves in the long line before and after Zechariah and Elizabeth, we may discover that we too are covenant people, saved and rescued by God's hand. And in every act of saving or rescuing God fulfils the promises given to Abraham and David and countless others ever since. Holiness and righteousness are two important elements of the covenant. They are to mark God's people "all the day of our life". The worship community then and now is therefore invited to join their voices with Zechariah's and Luke's, to serve God, and to live in holiness and righteousness.

Zechariah's son John prepared the way for those who wanted to change their lives and live in holiness and righteousness and have their feet guided into the way of peace. Jesus continued that journey and showed to his friends then and to us now, how to be fearless daughters and sons of a tender and merciful God...

I had assumed that Zechariah's world is far away from my modern world; and I am glad to discover now that the distance between the life experience of Elizabeth and Zechariah and modern life 2000 years later is not as vast as I had thought it would be.

If I let the story sink in I might experience some of the power that is working in it. It may be my experience of Advent to overcome speechlessness and apathy, paralysis and threat, and free myself with the help of God and God's angels – just as Zechariah did.

I cannot tell us, how exactly the power of God's spirit will come into our lives; but I know, it is promised to us – especially in the time of Advent, in that time of watching and waiting.

Maybe we can understand something more about it, when we realise that the time in which Elizabeth and Zechariah were waiting and hoping, was a time full of fear and despair. Daily life was severely threatened by unjust political and social structures, by oppressing systems of power which horrified normal people. ...which made it very difficult for them to hold fast to thoughts of hope and peace and preserve their visions of the presence of God and the liberation of his people.

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Experiences of the beginning and the end of life can be so amazingly close together: an old and barren woman can finally give birth to a child and by doing so break through the wall of hopelessness and decay.

Advent means: life is no longer without hope and dreams. We must connect ourselves in our watching and waiting deeply with the story of the power of God amongst his people... and then break out into songs of praise; - some of us carefully, others in the most powerful way they can... - so that by the end of the day, - well, let's say by the end of the Advent season we are all people who join in God's great song of life in fullness for all humankind.

I do not expect all of us immediately to strike up powerful songs of praise and hymns of hope, but I do believe that each and everyone in this church today can find words again after times of painful speechlessness, if we only allow ourselves to become sisters & brothers of Elizabeth and Zechariah, if we trust in the immense power that can grow out of times of depression and despair, in which we are not at all able to speak or dream or plan or decide upon anything...

I believe that many of us are able to start again, to try again and to succeed in attempts at finding the light and the hope, and the peace of these days.

We don't have to move mountains, we might perhaps only sing a new song, listen to music and discover its beauty, carefully create new relationships, speak healing words, write a poem, pray a prayer and experience...

... that God is coming to us always, he or she is entering our lives, even when we cannot feel it.

We don't have to be very old but can feel so tired of waiting, tired of life itself, and suddenly after times of withdrawal and speechlessness we can give birth to something new.....

We do not have to stay in the dark of hopelessness. Waiting does not have to be an experience of despair, it can be a "pregnant" waiting and bring forth new and healing dimensions of life!

We are Advent people – and we are promised the light of new life, a new day, a new job, a new friend... peace on earth. Amen.