

Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church  
November 30, 2008  
Longing for God

Scripture: Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19  
1 Corinthians 1:3-9

Well, how many did you gain? I mean pounds, of course.

And how many will we all fight to avoid gaining in the next few weeks?

It's a bit ironic, what we've done to the holidays ... how this time of year has become a time of feasting ... when it was intended to be a time of fasting.

That's right. What we call Advent today, the season of the church when we prepare to celebrate Christ's birth, began with the idea of eating less, not more.

The origins of Advent are not entirely known. But history does record that in the year 567 AD, high church officials called on monks to fast from the beginning of December until Christmas. That penance was then extended to the laity.

Somehow, over the centuries, we have stood that idea on its head, especially in America, where research shows the person gains at least a pound between Thanksgiving and Christmas. That sounds a little low to me.

Now, I would call on all of us to take matters into our own hands ... to begin today to return to fasting rather than feasting. But there is only one problem. That is that we have our own breakfast feast here at Caldwell at Christmas time, and it's one of my favorite fellowship activities.

Chocolate chip pancakes and sausage and bacon and eggs and French toast and all sorts of other indulgences. It's every bit as good as the fish fry in the fall, when we all gorge ourselves on meal-battered, oil-fried, crispy-finned goodness.

This year, the Christmas breakfast extravaganza is December 14. Don't miss it.

So, with that in mind, rather than sounding too self-righteous about our dietary habits, let's just promise each other that we will try to eat a little less at other times in the holidays to make room for the fellowship and the feast.

There is so much else to the season of Advent, besides the food, of course. It is, above all else, a time of waiting. But, I'll admit, for all that we as people of faith anticipate on December 25<sup>th</sup>, the idea of just "waiting" still doesn't quite capture it for me.

I like another word more— expectation, which conveys more of the full experience of these four weeks.

As a people who believe that God came into the world in the person of Jesus Christ and will come again, our very faith is founded on expectation.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a 20<sup>th</sup>-century Jesuit priest and philosopher, wrote that this commitment to waiting is one of the things that sets us Christians apart from other walks of faith. He wrote:

Expectation – anxious, collective and operative expectation ... that is perhaps the supreme Christian function and the most distinctive characteristic of our religion. Historically speaking, that expectation has never ceased to guide the progress of our faith like a torch.

This year, in particular, even the idea of expectation may not quite say it all for some of us.

It has been a year of such tumult, of such uncertainty, a year when many of us have become acquainted with fears we did not expect. They may be fears about our finances or our jobs. They may be fears about our health or the health of loved ones. They may be fears about the state of our world or our environment or the undesirable legacies we risk leaving to our children and grandchildren.

Perhaps then, weary from our travels across 2008, our feelings go beyond expectation ... to longing, as we look forward to the birth of our Lord this Advent.

And in that longing, the words of our opening hymn resonate in a special way:

"Come, thou long-expected Jesus, born to set they people free; from our fears and sins release; let us find our rest in thee.

Israel, hope of all the earth thou art; dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart."

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Whatever word we may use to describe our waiting ... or expectation ... or longing for God, if we express that desire to God it is probably underwritten by another feeling – that of trust ... trust that God hears our plea. After all, why else would we express it? And, even more, if we express it, we must expect God to respond.

We heard that in the tone of the psalm Bob read a few minutes ago, didn't we?

What I love most about the psalms is how they express virtually every human emotion, how they reflect the trust that God is with us in everything we experience. Pick an emotion you have felt and you will probably find it in the Psalter. Feelings of thanksgiving or lament, victory or suffering, praise or petition, trust or abandonment, joy or sorrow. They are all there, and more, aimed directly at God.

The psalms record a dialogue with God all rooted in the belief that God is our first and last and best hope, whatever we are feeling, whatever we are experiencing. The psalms reflect a trust that God hears our pleas and responds.

The psalms also reassure us that God can take whatever we can hurl at God, our anger and frustration and even inclination to tell God what we want God to do.

Psalm 80, which Bob read, is offered as one of four scripture passages we might consider this first Sunday in Advent. And, though it is a rather obscure psalm, it illustrates all these aspects of the entire book of Psalms. And, in doing so, Psalm 80 provides an unexpected but refreshing entryway into advent.

For many, the coming of Christmas is a happy time. The sights and sounds of the season resurrect happy memories of Christmases past, time with family and friends, the kind of memories that we hear in the classic Christmas carols that become so omnipotent in these weeks.

Even if we've never put a chestnut in the open fire or taken a ride in a horse-drawn sleigh, many of us can be warmed by such Norman Rockwell notions if only because Christmas has always been a time of joy.

But for others of us, Christmas may not be such a welcomed time of year, this year or any. It may be, for some, a season that plows up unhappy memories or uneasy expectation. It may be that some of us are facing this Christmas having suffered a loss of close friend or family member. It may be a time that brings us fresh reminders of our loneliness. And for all of these reasons, or others, Christmas may be about as cheerful as a pile of dirty snow leftover on the side of the road.

We hear feelings like that in Psalm 80. The Psalmist doesn't hold back. Rather, he boldly presents God with his feelings.

"O Lord God of hosts; how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?" he writes.

"You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in full measure.

You make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves."

Perhaps these words capture your own lament this advent. Or if not your personal situation, perhaps, in some respects, these lines capture a national lament after a year of economic hardship with no relief in sight.

What this psalm communicates – and what we all may feel at one time or another – is not so much that God has acted against us. Rather, we feel at times that God is simply not present, not evident in our lives, absent in our moments of greatest need.

But, as with all the psalms, Psalm 80 conveys this emotion trusting that God is listening. The Psalmist doesn't leave things left unsaid. He doesn't simply turn his back on God and slouch off. He brings his complaint in a full-throated way, as we should do with God in prayer whatever we may be feeling. Our God seeks to be known, and we come to know God – and ourselves – when we bring all of our wants and needs and feelings to God. Whatever we have to say, God can take it and God wants to hear it.

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Finally, because God never leaves us alone with only our despair, this Psalm speaks to us with a ray of hope that we can hold on to this advent.

Scripture makes many references to the face of God. In multiple contexts, the face of God represents the purest and most unfiltered representation of who God is and what effect God has on our lives. Remember how Moses' own face shone after meeting with God on Mt. Sinai, and how the bright light of the transfiguration of Christ overcame those who witnessed it?

So, the Psalmist calls on God to be present again in his life and that of God's chosen people with nothing less. Three times he calls out to God, each with increasing urgency.

“Restore us, O God: let your face shine that we may be saved.” (v. 3)

“Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine that we may be saved.” (v.7)

“Restore us, O Lord, God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.” (v. 19)

I'll tell you what that brings to mind for me this advent. It brings to mind the paintings of the birth of Christ, with the wise men and the animals all surrounding the manger and Mary and Joseph looking down at the new born Lord. From the manger there is a glow, the light of the world made flesh, God's face in Christ's face illuminating the night, pushing back the darkness, answering all of our prayers.

So, as a people whose very faith is built on expectation, even longing for our God, we begin our journey to the manger this advent. We sing together, “Come, thou long expected Jesus.”

As we go, whatever you are feeling, whatever Christmas may mean to you this year or any year, I invite you to speak the words the Psalmist spoke and to do so with the same kind of trust that God hears and responds to our prayers.

“Restore us, O God; let your face shine that we may be saved.” (v. 3)

“Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine that we may be saved.” (v.7)

“Restore us, O Lord, God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.” (v. 19)

In the name of our triune God, Amen.