

Sermons at St. Paul's

A wellspring of spiritual nourishment, a river of service in Jesus' name.

November 29, 2009 The First Sunday of Advent
The Rev. Nancy Burton Dilliplane

In the name the One who was and is and is to come, Amen.

I hope you have all had a wonderful Thanksgiving.

I spent Thanksgiving at my brother's home outside of Allentown. My sister and her children were also there. Because they live in Georgia, we don't often get to spend time together. It was wonderful, and it went too fast. As I was leaving, my sister gave me a last hug through the driver's side window and whispered in my ear, "I'll see you in a few couple whiles."

I drove away crying and laughing. "A few couple whiles." I'd forgotten that particular expression from my childhood. My sister coined it when she was about four, as a way to mark the time until some promised, and eagerly awaited event took place.

When will Daddy be home? It does no good to tell a child who can't tell time, "At 6 o'clock". When is my birthday party? If you don't really have a concept of Thursday, does it help to know that that your gift-bearing friends will be here on Saturday? Somehow my sister came up with the term "in a few couple whiles" as a way to make waiting possible.

"A few couple whiles" meant two things. It meant "not yet"—you'll have to wait. But it *also* was full of assurance—it *will* happen. If something was going to take place in a "few couple whiles", you could trust that it would, indeed happen. You could let go of the anxiety about *when* it would happen—not yet—and you could let go of the anxiety about *whether* it would happen—yes, it absolutely will—and then you could get back to the everyday business of your life.

"A few couple whiles" is a measure of hopeful, assured waiting. "A few couple of whiles" is what Advent is all about.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. Today the church begins again the process of remembering, waiting and preparing. We remember the birth of a baby—Emanuel, God-with-us, and we wait and prepare for the return of the Messiah in glory in the fullness of God's time. And between that first coming, and the last one, stretches the period of hopeful, assured waiting—a few couple whiles.

The church lives and moves and has its being in the few couple whiles between Christ's coming, and his coming again. Advent invites us to pay attention to what it means to be a few couple whiles kind of people.

From the very beginning, the church has expected Jesus' return. We heard *that* story a half a year ago, on the Feast of the Ascension: The bewildered disciples watched as their beloved Teacher, so recently risen from the dead, rose into heaven, his hands stretched out in blessing. And, as they stood gazing up at the place where he had disappeared, they were assured by two white clad men that Jesus would come again in the same way they saw him taken up.

At first, the expected return was every moment. Even though Jesus' parting words to them were that it was *not* for them to know the time when God's kingdom would come in its fullness, the infant church expected it immanently. They expected Jesus' return as the fulfill Jeremiah's prophetic expectation. Jesus would return to execute justice and righteousness once and for all. He would restore Judah and allow Jerusalem to live in safety.

But time went by, and Jesus did not return. The first generation of believers grew old and began to die, still waiting. It was a crisis for the early church—one that Paul addresses in his letter to the church at Thessalonica. In this earliest writing in the New Testament, Paul exhorts the church not to lose faith, but to live in the time of waiting in love towards one another, and towards all, so that when Jesus does at last return, he will find them prepared to receive him—a people skilled at loving and caring for one another. Holy, blameless, prepared for God's ultimate reign.

By the time the gospel of Luke was written, even more time had gone by. Instead of being restored and kept in safety, Jerusalem was occupied, the temple destroyed. And yet Luke remains assured that Jesus will return. The return will have cosmic rather than local significance. Christians are to live with their heads lifted high, and in hope, neither giving themselves over to dissipation nor to drunken despair, as if he will never come, nor being consumed with worry about their lives until he does return. Eugene Peterson translates it this way in *The Message*: "Don't let the sharp edge of your expectation get dulled by parties and drinking and shopping." Instead, Luke calls the church to live in expectant hope, alert, and praying.

Today's readings show us a church learning what it meant to live as a people of "a few couple whiles." Jesus is returning—maybe not yet, but he is most certainly coming.

As Advent returns this year, I wonder if we aren't called to share my 4-year-old sister's understanding of hopeful expectation. Jesus will return and usher in God's ultimate reign in a few couple whiles. We can let go of the anxiety about *whether* Jesus will return. Yes, he will. God has already proved faithful. We remind each other of that when we tell the story of the Saviors birth. God keeps God's promises. The longing of Jeremiah has been fulfilled in the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. In our weekly remembrance of his life, death, resurrection we proclaim what we know is true—God has already acted decisively in history. God is faithful, and trustworthy. We know this by experience. And so we also know that God will keep that other promise: Jesus will assuredly return.

And so this first Sunday of Advent, our singing is all about our trust in that promise. Lo! He comes, with clouds descending! Christ the Lord returns to reign! Our Savior takes power and glory and claims the kingdom as God's own! God's name shall stand for ever, the changeless

Name of Love! So much for doubt. So much for whether. On Advent 1, we shout our “Yes!” to the world. Christ has been born, Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ *will* come again.

Advent’s return also calls us to let go of our anxiety about *when* he will return. Not yet. We relax once more into the mystery of God’s time. And, so, relieved of anxiety about whether and when, we are freed to go about our daily lives in the meantime.

Advent’s return this year invites us to pay attention to *what kind of lives* we will live in the meantime. This Advent begins year C in our lectionary. Year C is the year that we read Luke’s gospel most Sundays. And Luke’s gospel gives us a clear picture of what kind of lives our lives should be. Luke’s gospel is all about the God of justice and compassion and about living lives of justice and compassion.

Luke’s gospel opens with Mary’s song about God’s mercy for the poor, powerless and hungry. In Luke’s gospel, Jesus begins his public ministry proclaiming that in himself Isaiah’s messianic vision of good news for the poor, release for the captives, sight for the blind, freedom for the oppressed has already come into being. In Luke’s gospel, blessing is proclaimed for those who are truly poor, hungry and persecuted. Luke’s gospel calls us to be instruments of that blessing, agents of God’s reign of compassion, even as we wait for Christ’s ultimate return. Advent calls us, for a few couple whiles, to be God’s people of justice and compassion.

In the December issue of Tidings, Cliff wrote about a new world-wide Charter for Compassion that is being put forth in cyber-space. It calls for people world-wide—particularly, I think, those of us who follow Jesus Christ—to lead lives of compassion. The Charter invites us to work to relieve suffering, to treat others as we ourselves wish to be treated, to make others, rather than ourselves, the focus of our care and attention. The Charter for Compassion calls for us to actively and intentionally treat one another with justice, equity and respect.

The Charter for Compassion also calls for us to confess and repent of the ways in which we ourselves, and the church, have contributed to human misery and suffering (to repent of the evil we have done, and the evil done on our behalf—in the words of the confession from Enriching Our Worship)

Compassion is the business we are to be about during the few couple of whiles we must wait for Jesus’ return. Compassion is the character of our Advent waiting and preparation. For Christians, living lives of compassion becomes our witness to the world that a child, born in poverty and homelessness all those years ago, changed the very nature of the world. That child opened the way into God’s reign of justice and compassion that even now is moving towards fulfillment.

Advent returns this year into a world deeply in need of compassion. Many have lost jobs, homes, retirement security. Many are hungry. Many live behind walls. Many are sick and dying. Many live with war and terror as daily companions. The world needs our tenacious Advent hope, sung boldly into the uncertainty and suffering of the world’s darkness.

Jesus is coming in a few couple whiles. In fact, Jesus is here now, in the people who cry with one another, who share their meals, who give their extra coats, who pour oil on the wounds of those they meet along the way, and help them to find shelter and care. Jesus is coming in a few couple of whiles, and is here now in those who love one another as he loved us and gave himself for us all those years ago.

Paul's encouragement to the Thessalonians finds new ears among us today. We are to live during the time of waiting in love towards one another, and towards all, so that when Jesus does at last return, he will find us prepared to receive him—a people skilled at loving and caring for one another. Holy, blameless, prepared for God's ultimate reign.

We are to live as a people of a few couple whiles. Advent reminds us once again that the work begun in the birth, life, death, resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit is *not yet* completed. But it will surely come. We are to wait in confidence standing upright and with our heads held high. We are to be about the business of compassion in the world, lifting our hope-filled faces in confident expectation towards the One who gazes into our eyes with the promise "I'll see you in a few couple whiles!" Amen.