

Waiting in Hope
a sermon by Laurence Steven
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Today is the first Sunday in Advent, the beginning of a new church year, and we at Grace begin a new Advent theme today: Dare to Imagine. Our worship, music and preaching during Advent will follow—perhaps closely; perhaps loosely—a resource provided by *The Leader* magazine. Over the next four Sundays we will dare to imagine God’s goodness, God’s embrace, God’s song, and God’s face. You can see the Advent candles displayed on our Communion table. We lit the Hope candle today, and it is our Advent hope that enables us to Dare to Imagine a world reconciled to God, a world of justice and peace, a world where we wait *for* and wait *on* each other. As the *Leader* writers say, “As we begin a new church year, let’s dare to imagine our path forward with God toward God’s good dream for our world.”

Today we also celebrate Communion. Advent and Communion go well together. In recent weeks, as we have approached communion, Pastor Doug has reminded us to spend time preparing for it, by making right our relationships with others, and with God. Paul tells the Corinthians (1 Cor 11:33) to wait for one another before eating the communion meal. His stress is on how our relationships with our neighbours in the church are a reflection of our relationship with God. We need to make ourselves ready for the arrival of our God. Like communion, Advent also is a time of preparation and waiting for the Lord to come to us. As choir directors the world over have to remind giddy-for-Christmas congregations, Advent is *not* Christmas. The music is different. The joyous carols will come later; but Advent has a different tone, a more pensive tone of hopeful anticipation, but also a dimension of urgency and warning to us to be alert and ready.

It is this latter dimension, of caution and warning, that we heard in our apocalyptic reading from Luke a moment ago. We also find it in the lead article in the current issue of *Canadian Mennonite*, a sermon by CMU professor Chris Heubner for the first Sunday in Advent called “Advent and Idolatry.” In it Heubner worries that “when Christianity came to define itself over against Judaism, more than anything else, it lost a robust sense of the messianic.” He defines messianic as “a sense of radical interruption—an inversion of the ‘laws’ of history, a revolutionary change that undoes and transforms the ways we have become

accustomed to thinking and acting.” He worries that our hopeful faith in Jesus as Messiah “cancels out” the logic of the messianic. That logic says we cannot know or recognize the Messiah “in advance of his arrival.” By preparing to welcome something we long for, we are actually focusing on ourselves, making ourselves responsible for bringing the Messiah, and thus creating an idol. And it is this very idol the actual Messiah comes to knock off its pedestal.

Heubner says “Advent brings us face to face with our insatiable desire to erect idols.” For Heubner, “We tend to think of Advent as a time when we come closer to God, a God who comes to us in human form in Jesus,” but the emphasis of some of the readings for Advent, he goes on, “is not on a God with whom we are becoming increasingly familiar, but on a God who remains exceedingly strange.” Consequently, for Heubner, “when we try to see or hear God, we can be confident that it is not God whom we see or hear. That is why we are to wait for God to come to us: If we rush to meet God, we invariably find something other than God.”

But just listen to Heubner. For someone who says we can never know God he sounds very sure of himself. He tells us we can be “confident” that we can never know God; that “invariably” we find “something other than God” when we “rush to meet God”. He says that during Advent we are better to practice a form of emptying out of our expectations rather than hoping for a Jesus we know, because “we have made Jesus all too familiar...[W]e must unlearn the Jesus we think we know so that Jesus can come to us as Messiah.”

With all respect to Chris Heubner, I need to respond with a “Yes, but...” *Yes*, some of the Old Testament readings for Advent are concerned about God’s anger and acknowledge our sin and desperate need for restoration. *But*, most of them are about God’s steadfast faithfulness to us, about how God will keep and is keeping the covenant promise made with us, as we heard in the reading from Jeremiah this morning.

Yes, there is a dangerous dimension to the coming of the Messiah. As C. S. Lewis’s *Narnian Chronicles* puts it, “Aslan is not a tame lion.” *But*, for Christians, the Messiah has already come! *Yes*, there will be a Messianic end time. *But*, for Christians it will be a *return*, a second coming of our Lord.

Yes, waiting for God to come to us—or waiting *on* God as the Christian philosopher Simone Weil put it—is an appropriate attitude of obedience and faith and humility, one which makes space for God to manifest to us, and *in* us, in ways

we cannot imagine before the fact. *But...* for Christians, waiting for God is a form of *active* servanthood; again, it is waiting *on* as much as waiting *for*. When Jesus commands us to love our neighbour as ourselves, he is urging us to this active servanthood waiting. Love is active, an outpouring from a loving heart, which is simultaneously and continuously refilled, refreshed, and renewed by God's indwelling spirit, alive in us.

Last week, on Eternity Sunday, Pastor Doug spoke about how we are “time bound” beings living with an “anticipatory faith and hope”, living into an eternal perspective as we remember the cloud of witnesses, the loved ones who have gone before us but who are present with us in a special kind of way. The eternal perspective reveals to us that God's life and love have no end. The loved ones who have left us in physical being are in a *communion* of death out of which new life springs forth eternally.

In closing I want to draw out how our Christian faith makes *explicit* aspects of Jewish faith held *implicitly*, and which justify our anticipatory faith and hope on this Communion Sunday, the first of Advent. Christianity holds the doctrine of the Trinity—Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer—to be central to the mystery of a God who “indwells” our universe. The Trinity allows us to keep our focus on God's steadfast promise to be with us, which is **to be** fulfilled and **has been** fulfilled, and **is being** fulfilled.

The promise *still to be fulfilled* is the Advent story, Jesus as the Messiah to come, the Pantocrator, which is the Alpha and Omega, creator and judge, the cosmic Lord, the restorer, the reconciler, the one we wait for with longing, the one who welcomes us into our promised home. The one who is, was, and is to come.

The promise that has *already been fulfilled* is the Communion story, the incarnation of God in the human person Jesus, our saviour, who, as the Paschal Lamb, sacrifices his life for us, who asks that we remember him, that we follow him in servanthood to those in need.

The promise that is *continuously being fulfilled* is the continuous arrival of Jesus as the spirit of God who breaks into our lives, upending them, turning them inside out, and birthing us anew, again and again.

And it is because of that Spirit in our lives that we can Dare to Imagine. We *can* dare to imagine just because we believe Jesus is *both* the apocalyptic Messiah

who will overturn the tables in the temples we make for ourselves *and* the shepherd who extends welcoming arms to us as contrite prodigals returning.

I want us to finish today by joining together to share in a Psalm out of Hebrew scripture that captures the hope we have as we wait for our Lord and wait on each other in this often volatile world. This is not an Advent reading, but it could be. You all know it. Join with me in reciting the 23rd Psalm, in the King James version:

¹The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

²He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

³He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

⁴Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

⁵Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

Amen, God is Good! Come, Lord Jesus!