

## Waiting for God

*Isaiah 40:27-31; I Cor. 1:3-9; Binkley Baptist Church; November 27, 2011*

The title of my sermon may remind you as it did Dale, when he heard it, of the still replayed BBC sitcom, “Waiting for God.” The series depicts two prickly, but very good souls trying to live out their days in a somewhat dysfunctional retirement community. The feisty Diana and her kindly partner Tom are an interesting pair, but what really gets us laughing are their witty pranks to unhinge Harvey, the self-serving administrator of Bayview, who is all appearance and little integrity. No doubt many a theological theme could be mined from the sitcom, but that’s not quite what I was thinking about today. Of course, we all know about waiting. Waiting for the light to turn green, we peer ahead in traffic wondering if we’ll have to wait at the next light. We stand in grocery store lines, bank lines, gauging which line is moving fastest. We wait on emails, and since these take too much time, we turn to texting. And there are still some of us who wait patiently for the mail carrier, hoping for that rare personal card or letter. We wait for a broken bone to heal, a sleepless night to end, and count down the days until a loved one comes home. We wait for justice to be done, for dictators to be overthrown, for green energy to be funded. And we wait, as have countless generations before us, for the coming God’s reign of peace on this earth.

Waiting can become a way of life, as the writer of Second Isaiah finds the people of Israel in the waning days of their 70-year exile. The psalms describe the stinging pain of those long years, “By the rivers of Babylon—we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’ But how could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?”<sup>1</sup> Today, generations of Palestinian children have grown up in refugee camps knowing a similar sting of displacement and anger. And closer to home, here at Binkley church, there are Chin and Karen, Montagnard and Vietnamese families who know what loneliness for one’s homeland feels like.

Yet, it is a good thing, I believe, that we humans can feel longing. We treasure what we long for, Jesus instinctively knew, for then we will give ourselves to its coming, we will work for its fulfillment. I have never known food insecurity nor wondered about a bed to sleep in at night. But I have known about the longing for a child and the seemingly unending wait for her. In March of 2005, I sat in my office, staring in amazement as the large, brown and sad eyes of a baby girl in Mumbai, India, appeared on my computer screen. A single woman at mid-life, I had prayerfully discerned my heart’s desire to parent through adoption and had begun the process. When the referral of the year-old Deepmala came—I celebrated, bought books on India, went to workshops on adoption. I found the energy to *wade* through reams of paperwork in order to complete the dossier; my parents generously helped me raise the needed funds. The agency—new to Indian adoptions—suggested a timetable of November, or perhaps December 2005, so that summer, I imagined Indian civil servants ploughing through my documents, confirming that I could be a fit mother for one of their own. But then, in September, word came—the documents I had so speedily prepared sat untouched in a government office all summer. There would be a further delay of months, I was told. And as it turned out, that wait would lengthen to another year plus. That early fall, I walked around dazed, sad; I wondered if God had forgotten my earnest prayers.

This first Sunday of Advent, we are invited to take stock of a word that on the face of it appears simple. We use this word all the time, to describe wishes, desires, plans, and purposes. Yet digging deeper, we find that hope has a meaning unique to each one of us, arising out of the narratives that form us and the stories that we, in turn, write of our lives. What are the hopes that your parents and past generations instilled in you? What are the hopes that you have discovered, sometimes painfully, as decidedly your own? And where is the hope inside you now as you prepare for Jesus’ coming?

In Corinthians, Paul lists hope among the three primary virtues, alongside faith and the greatest of all, love. Unlike the wishes or fantasies that are lost in the sands of ego desires, hope is built upon the firm rock that

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 137:1-3

is the soul. Such hope is best left open; it may be expectant, but does not contract into rigid expectations. It roots itself in an openness to mystery, to the workings of God that are not under our control. Such an open-handed gesture is not typical for most of us. We prefer to work with known quantities; formulas for life abound because it is hard to be open to simply what is. And even with the promise that God's Spirit will guide, we cling to the maps we've designed. As the spiritual writer Gerald May points out, hope, by its very nature, "always admits uncertainty." In fact, he contends, the root of many of our spiritual problems can be found in our fixation on getting what we expect, rather than an openness to the grace that is available to us in each moment.

In this beautiful passage we heard John read from Isaiah, the prophet reminds the disheartened exiles that God has not forgotten them, that God is neither tired nor has grown faint, and that God's nearness, God's presence is ready and able to help them overcome their great weariness. What seems passive or even weak—this expectant waiting upon their Redeemer—in not passive at all, but like an eagle opening its wings to catch the uplift, it cooperates with what is already blowing through with strength for the next moment. This will not be the power of youthful control, the prophet tells them, but will rather be like the bearing of an eagle's wings upon the breath-wind of God. It is this turning to Divine, be it in the wordless intent of a sigh or in faithful prayer, which will help the exiles regain the source of their hope, the strength to resist giving up.

My own story of waiting was uneven; I did not rest easily in unknowing. I got anxious and fearful, but I do know that I was given an inner steadiness, some might call it a stubbornness, to keep going—despite other hurdles that came. The 22-month wait for Deepmala also brought the unexpected event of meeting and marrying Les Williams, who would become Deepmala's father. There was also the unexpected gift of an 8-year-old girl at the Quaker church we attended in Indiana who became very attached to me. Every Sunday after worship, she would seek me out to tell me about a new purse her mother had gotten her, or what she had been doing over the weekend. We became good friends. Without her awareness of it, she was an embodied witness to the fact that God had not forgotten my mothering soul. And then in August of 2006, after many months of difficult discernment herself, my own mother agreed with the doctor to undergo a scary, but necessary mitral valve repair of her heart. The surgery was successful, thanks be to God, and once she was out of intensive care, I was able to stay with her for some nights during her recovery at the hospital. One morning in the hospital, still a bit bleary-eyed, I heard my cell phone ring. It was my case worker from the adoption agency telling me that the judge in India had just awarded me "legal guardianship" of Deepmala. We would be able to go as soon as our visas were ready to meet her in India and bring her home. I smiled at the blessing of my mother's well-being and the gift of a new daughter. And five years ago tomorrow, Deepmala took her first breath of cold, winter air in our first moments outside Chicago O'Hare airport.

We all have stories of hope to tell. I believe that one of the important roles of the church is to encourage us to bear witness to the hope that is within us. How have we been led, sometimes in mysterious ways, in life's journey? What have been small and big ways that we have found hope in God or through in an encounter in nature, with another person, or in community? We call ourselves Binkley Baptist Church, but as we well know, this community extends far beyond these walls. So I would invite you sometime this week to sit down with a friend or with your family—or with a long-time co-worker—and simply reflect on what stories, what moments in your days, or what news is giving you hope now, in 2011. Since I have had a bit longer with the question than you, I would tell you a couple of things. First, I would tell you about a story I heard on NPR on Friday, replayed from November 2010, of girls studying English and other skills at a hidden school in Kandahar, Afghanistan. They do so, despite the dangers of being seen by the Taliban. I would tell you about an 11-year-old girl named Bilqis Ehsan who in nearly fluent English, and how she talked about education as if it were gold, but even more precious than any possession, because as she observed, once you learn something, it can never be taken away from you. Second, I would tell you about the hope that I carry into Advent from August 28<sup>th</sup> of this year, when you welcomed me onto Binkley's staff. Thank you for what I have experienced by being among you, what I have learned, and what I will continue to learn with you! A-men