

Sermon for the 1st Sunday of Advent
N. Farnham & St. John's Episcopal Churches
November 29, 2020 – The Rev. Torrence Harman

“What is it like to wait for God?”

We're at the first Sunday in Advent and it's a waiting time. Isn't that what Advent is all about – waiting for God – for God's Son to come and be with us? Or maybe it is a time God is waiting for us – watching and waiting for us to be prepared for this coming. Will we be?

We have had a lot of experience with waiting this year.

Here is how another minister introduced a sermon for this first Sunday in Advent 2020. I couldn't have said it better.

“Virtually this entire year has been a time of waiting. We've waited during lockdowns and quarantines. We've waited on masks and respirators and toilet paper. We've waited on test results for the coronavirus, wondering whether we were positive or not. We've waited endless weeks and months, not able to visit our loved ones in hospitals and nursing homes, in order to protect them. We've waited on kids going back to school and waited to see if jobs would hold out during the crisis. We've waited on unemployment checks and stimulus checks. We've waited in line to vote and waited to see if our mail-in ballot went through, and then waited on the results of the election. We've waited for a vaccine. And we've waited and waited and waited to go back to church in the old ways that were familiar and comfortable to us. 2020 has been nothing but a year of waiting.” (from *“Sermons that Work”*)

Things seemed rather normal till mid-March and then the pandemic hit. Was it our wishful thinking to hope it would be over in just a few months? Or at least by fall? Which, of course, it wasn't. And so much else compounded the stress, the tension, testing our patience. Summer came and went, so has fall. And here we are on the cusp of winter. Spring, summer then fall, seasons when nature is the kindest. So how will we handle the winter when the times seem the bleakest?

The challenge about winter is that we cannot see what is happening that can give us hope that life will bloom again, the way we have come to expect. Everything is stripped bare as we look around us. Things are growing, things are preparing for the next season. But we can't see it - it is not “above ground” work. Rather it is a time when nature is focusing on deeper “inside” work. Below ground there is preparation going on. The inner world seems to be sleeping, but roots are stretching out in the darkness, some things are resting in the dark underground or the back recesses of caves, working to tap into and reserve resources which will be needed in the

spring. Sap is rising in the dark inner core of trees. It is not just a waiting time but one of inner preparation for the next season.

Advent is not just a waiting time, but a time of preparation. Advent ushers in the longest night of the year at the winter solstice on December 21. Between now and then, the darkness will deepen, daylight will become less and less. The winter solstice marks a turn-around time. Very slowly, but very surely, the light will return. Our faith welcomes this light beginning to reappear yet again in the birth of Jesus, the Christ light. It is not accidental that the Gospel passage every year for the first Sunday after Christmas announces: “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.” (John 1:5)

Here in the mountains of western North Carolina I have spent Thanksgiving week as these last few days have led up to Advent. The last few nights we (that part of the family that is here) has gathered around a stone-surrounded, outdoor fire as the night darkened. Tiny sparks from the blazing fires swirled upward into the night. The conversation turned to memories and to hopes, to trying to make sense of current troubled times, but then to memories of old times, some funny, some challenging, but ones that warmed our hearts and stirred hopes for yet to come good memories to be made. As we were doing around the blazing fire: making memories as we made s’mores and kept warm fireside as the night got colder.

After grandkids and even most of the adults headed off to bed, I slipped back down to where the fire lay dying. Smoke from the remnants of charred logs drifted upward in the reflected light of a rising moon. Still smoldering logs lay on a thick layer of embers. The embers seemed alive, shimmering, glowing red, orange, and gold giving off an intense warmth, reminding me of the reality of earth’s inner core.

In the Celtic Christian tradition prayers and blessings are offered for all of life, for the gifts freely given by all of nature in which the people lived and for the everyday matters of life. There is one for the smoring of the fires at night, banking up the coals, the embers, so that the inner fire of the embers could be the making of new hearth fires in the morning. Thus, essentially, the fire never goes out and during the long cold nights, embers shimmer at rest, preserving the inner “fire” in preparation for the new next day to come.

Advent passages tell us to keep alert, keep awake, keep watch. I ponder the image that though our human bodies require sleep, our spirit formed from a Divine spark is to be the watchman of our inner hearth. Perhaps this Advent is a time to sit with our spirit by the hearth, give thanks for the embers that wait there to keep us warm, preparing us to be ready for morning light, as Christmas comes near.

Winter light is different from the light in other seasons. It is sharper, colder, shorter, more distant in the heavens. And yet it seems to have a clarity about it that the air in other seasons

soften. Tiny pinpoints of starlight in the night seem more brilliant, reminding us that even in the darkest of times light shines upon us. And we welcome firelight and seek the warmth and comfort of it more than at any other time.

It is a waiting time as we long for this season of our life to turn. Will we be ready to embrace the new life that will be birthed? Seek and find the embers waiting in your inner hearth. Know that God waits for us there, that God waits with us there. The God who waits for the Son light to remerge to shine on, in and through our lives. May be ready to receive and embrace it.

Amen.