

What Are We Waiting For?
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Readings

Isaiah 9:2b-6

The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
a light has dawned.
3 You have enlarged the nation
and increased their joy;
they rejoice before you
as people rejoice at the harvest,

6 For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Christmas Will Come, by Rev. Earl K. Holt, III

All the outward show of the season is a vain attempt to create Christmas, to control it, to make it come. It will come, I have learned. But it comes in spite of, not because of our efforts. It comes not in the outward show but rather in the inner darkness. The wise men could only see the star because of the darkness. It was a lonely cave beside the inn that was filled by the birth of love. The shepherds who waited on a lonely, dark hillside and trembled in fear were the first to hear the news.

Christmas is the promise that our emptiness will be filled, our hunger assuaged and a deep darkness be flooded with light. It is the promise that “the God who has stretched us with loneliness will, someday... fill us with his love.” It is a promise that comes to people walking in darkness – the sad, the weary, the hopeless. It is there for those who feel in their soul’s journey they are – like Mary and Joseph – wandering in a strange country, far from home. It is there for the pain-filled and the troubled and the lost.

Christmas will come, but we cannot make it come. And it may come most powerfully when we are most sure it will not come. The vain trappings of the season do disguise a great emptiness, but that emptiness waiting to be filled is the heart of Christmas and in that emptiness, that darkness, Christmas is waiting to be born.

Sermon

Though we may feel we've just finished with last year's Christmas... here it is December again... in fact the middle of December with Christmas rushing toward us at breakneck speed – or so it may seem.

But it is not quite Christmas, not yet.

So I would remind us of the wisdom in the Christian calendar, which doesn't just leap into Christmas, but offers us Advent.

And traditionally understood, Advent is a season not of shopping and rushing and list-making... but of waiting, of expectation – culminating of course in the celebration of the birth of Jesus, the Christ in Christian terms.

For Christians seem quite clearly to know what we are waiting for during Advent.

The reading from Isaiah gives us language for that which Christians feel themselves to be waiting:

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given...

And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

So: We are waiting for, expecting, seeking something outside us? So it would seem from this reading – and, Christian or not, we may harbor this unconscious hope or expectation, that the saving help we need in our lives and in the world will come from somewhere out there.

Yet from a deeper perspective – might we understand the “great light,” the child who is born, the wonderful counselor, mighty God, in a different way?

To begin with, should it not be intriguing to us that the Christian nativity story is not the only such story of its kind?

For example:

The Roman god Apollo, the Persian god Mithras, and the Phrygian god Attis were all said to have been born in caves at the time of the winter solstice.

What a coincidence!

And they were all, in one way or another, thought to be savior gods.

What a coincidence!

There are, to be sure, many differences in the various myths and legends having to do with these (and many others by the way) various gods, but there are further similarities too. The birth of Mithras, to note just one, was said to be (as described in *The Winter Solstice* by John Matthews) “attended by shepherds, and at the end of his time on Earth, when he returned to his father, he took a last supper with his followers, later remembered by believers in a communion of bread and wine. At the end he was believed not to have died but ascended to heaven, whence it was believed he would return at the end of time to raise the dead from their tombs for a final judgment.”

What a coincidence!

Well, it is no accident that all of these births, including of course the birth of Jesus, were celebrated at about the time of the winter solstice, the re-birth of the sun's light reflecting the birth of the god, in turn suggesting the birth or re-birth of... something... hmmm... something maybe within *us*.

All this said, then, though I do not take the Christian nativity story at all literally, I do take it seriously. Not with scholarly study and furrowed brow. Rather, I take the nativity story seriously each year by immersing myself in it: singing the carols, re-telling the story, arranging the nativity figures under our Christmas tree. Why?

Well, partly just habit and custom. It's what I grew up doing and have done all my life.

But I also recognize and appreciate all that this seasonal immersion evokes within me... if I allow it too, if I pause enough and take the opportunity... evokes something in me as I expect all of these many and various stories of divine births at the time of solstice have evoked something in people of many cultures through the ages.

Evokes what? Or, in the words of my sermon title, "What *Are* We Waiting For?"

Well, to answer that question, it's worth focusing a little more on the invitation to waiting during this season, pausing amidst the rushing involved.

For as Earl Holt wrote in the second reading, we can't *make* Christmas come. Rather, we can only, as the second hymn put it, *let* Christmas come. How? Well, in my own experience, first of all, even as we sing the carols and tell the ancient story, we also do well to be present to and within the dark of the season, to allow, to be present to and with the mix of emotions and memories and feelings we may have during this season, to allow even the feeling that this year Christmas – which is to say whatever we think the "Christmas spirit" is – may not come.

This means sometimes *really* stopping.

I once came across the speculation that one of the origins of the Christmas wreath had to do with the necessity of taking the wheels off the wagons at this time of year and replacing them with runners for the snow; so the wheels would be hung on the wall... and decorated!

This may or may not be a genuine origin for the Christmas wreath... but I like the idea, since the wheel hanging on the wall suggests that we have indeed stopped, or at least slowed down, at least for a season, taken the wheels off our careening spiritual wagons you might say.

Taken the wheels off and maybe slowed down into the mystery... of not even knowing what we are expecting or whether we should expect anything, but realizing intuitively that slowing down and opening our hearts and our lives to whatever might come might be good for us.

Then we might discover something like this.

That what or who we are waiting for just might be and be within, as I suggested a moment ago... *us*.

But not the hurrying, rushing around, too busy to notice us.

Rather, beneath the rushing, beneath the busyness and efficiency or lack thereof (all sometimes just the way things are, not bad, just the way things often are on the surface of our lives)... and certainly beneath the frenzied shopping... beneath all this might arrive (what might have been there all along) the loving us, the wise us, the heart-filled, compassionate us, the us who can in the prophet's words "bind up the broken-hearted," the us who can be present for a moment or an hour, present to the miracle of the

creation, present with one another, present to a moment that is an eternity if not in its length then surely in its depth.

What sort of people, after all, does the world most need? Just STEM people – science, technology, engineering and mathematic people? Oh, we need all those skills. But all the expertise in the world won't necessarily "bind up the broken hearted."

But *we* can, whomever and wherever we are. Yes, we imperfect human beings, broken hearted ourselves, we who sometimes will feel we have squandered time, wasted time, not made good use of all of our time or of our gifts, not paid good enough attention as time flowed all too fast; we who now and then realize we will not complete every task on our day's or our life's to-do list; we who sometimes realize painfully the ways in which we've fallen short in caring, sharing, helping.

Yes, *we* are the ones we've been waiting for... because broken hearted – which is what we all are, sooner or later – means open-hearted... if we allow it.

Last Advent season for me was a season of broken heartedness as my mother lived her last days. But I realize now as I didn't fully realize then that that season of the broken heart was one of the most beautiful Advent/Christmas seasons of my life – precisely because a broken heart is an open heart. The love I experienced from the many devoted caregivers, from hospital and nursing home and hospice staff, and of course within our own family, and from you... was immeasurable.

Yes, a broken heart is an open heart if we allow it, and a broken, open heart can allow in... so much.

The Hindus, as I mentioned last week, affirm that the higher Self, the God within, rests in a cave within the heart. Ah! Again a cave. What, then, if we were to understand that dark cave within which these many and various gods of light were said to have been born – what if we were to understand that dark cave as the cave of our own hearts... divine love that close?

No need to wait for a savior from afar, wonderful counselor, king of kings. No, if we pay attention, all this is already within our own broken hearts, in this broken world we share, a world – whatever else it is – that is also beautiful because it is filled with the beauty of the night sky, the morning's sunrise, the kindness of strangers, and the love in our hearts.

So: Whatever the season brings for you, may it also bring you hope, joy, peace, and love – whether through pausing to immerse yourselves in the old carols and the ancient story, or through simply pausing, sitting, waiting in the dark stillness of the season... with the ever-present promise of returning light.

Yes, may hope, joy, peace, and love overflow in your hearts and in your lives.
So may it be. Amen.