

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
December 1 & 2, 2012
John Crosby
The Voices of Christmas: ISAIAH
Isaiah 7:14, 9:6-7**

The first word of Advent is *waiting*. It may be my *worst* word. Waiting. Sometimes it's easier to describe it than it is to define it. There was a young man who said he can only remember the most traumatic seven minutes of his life in pictures, not the whole thing. He has a picture of flying, and all of a sudden his wingman's airplane malfunctions and shoots him down. (*Slide shown*) As he starts to spiral toward the earth, his aviator ejects. Then his own ejection seat explodes so forcefully that it knocks him from the plane and he breaks his back. He parachutes down into the middle of an enemy village. He lands so hard that he not only breaks his leg, he dislocates his knee, and because he doesn't get treated, the knee joint fuses and for the rest of his life, he walks with a painful limp.

The knee injury makes it impossible for him to run away. The villagers capture him and feed him, and they take him through the streets to the capital where he is locked inside a bath stall with irons on his legs. He is tortured and beaten. His captors want to parade him in public for propaganda, so he slits his own scalp with a razor to disfigure himself so he can't be seen as well treated. Then his captors cover his head with a hat, so he beats himself in the face with a stool until he's almost beyond recognition to show the beatings that are underneath his clothes. He sits there and he waits and he waits, and finally Christmas comes. Then Christmas goes. Then Christmas comes again, and they start to beat him more. And then Christmas goes and they ignore him. Then Christmas comes a third time, and he hears through the grapevine that peace talks are underway; that his President is anxious to end the war before the end of his term and that he'll do anything to end the war. So, many of the prisoners babble with hope, and then the election comes and then Christmas comes again, and he sits in silence and he waits.

This morning I had to wait almost seven minutes for my mocha. We all have to wait, don't we? Not like that. We are not in prison camps, but we all live lives where we know that something is missing, something is off, but if something would change, then it would be good. We are waiting for that something that is missing to change. Some of you are still in school, and you are waiting. You are wondering if you will ever get in that crowd where people really like you, where you are really on the inside. You are wondering if you will ever be in a time where you won't have to worry about your grades. Over and over, you are just waiting. Or you are a little older, and you wonder if you will ever meet somebody. Or if that's happened once and it didn't work, you wonder if you will ever meet somebody again and have love that will change your life. Some of you have been waiting for months or even years for a job. You've been looking hard. Some of you are working for a paycheck, but it's not the job you want. It's not like the job you had. You don't know what will happen.

Some of you here are waiting for a child. You see all these kids at the children's sermon, and you look at all these pregnant women, whether it's you or your child or someone that you love. Some of you have a child and you are waiting for the time when the kid won't break your heart or break their own hearts. You know, some of you are sitting here and you are waiting. You come here and you wait. You wish for the kind of faith that they talk about up here, right? You wish you had the kind of faith others seem to have so easily, trusting in Jesus, believing in God, and feeling close to God, and you ask, "How come I don't feel like that? What's wrong with my faith? I have all these questions and doubts and I'm afraid to tell people. When will I ever feel God's presence?"

Some of you are in the middle of treatment of one kind or another, physically, and it feels like it's never going to end, and you're not sure that it will turn out right. And if it's somebody that you love, that's almost worse, isn't it? Because you can't do anything. Some of you have heard "There's nothing more we can do," and you're just waiting. Whenever you turn on the TV, it gets worse because you want to look like *that* or you want to have *that* kind of security or have *that* kind of thing. You are waiting for.... Finish the sentence. You get the idea. All of us spend our lives waiting. For some of us, waiting takes the place of our lives. Some of you are waiting for life and the peace of a life that God wants you to have right now.

That's why the first voice of Advent talks about waiting. Frankly, it's not a very popular voice. It's the voice of one of the prophets of the Old Testament. One of my professors said, "Nobody ever invited a prophet back for dinner." They may get invited one time, but nobody ever invites them back for a second time. "How's it going, Isaiah?" "Oh, doom and gloom. It is literally going to hell in a hand basket. You are a big part of the problem. You don't trust God." "Oh, thank you. Would you like some green beans?" Nobody invited a prophet back because he talked so much about judgment, but buried in all that, the voice of the prophet talks about waiting; waiting for hope in a day that will come. Isaiah says [in Isaiah 9],

² The people walking in darkness have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.

The waiting is over.

³ You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy;
they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest,
as soldiers rejoice when dividing the plunder.

⁴ For as in the day of Midian's defeat,
you have shattered the yoke that burdens them,
the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor.

Every warrior's gear that is used in battle is soaked in blood, and you throw it in the fire.

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.

⁷ Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness

from that time on and forever.
The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.

Hang on. Isaiah writes that, and then Israel goes into exile. Isaiah writes about hope, and then Israel is conquered. Isaiah writes about the Messiah who will come, and then Israel lives as an occupied land. You see, Isaiah lived and prophesied 500 years at least before Jesus comes along. Five hundred years, that's like twice as long as the United States has been a country. "Oh, trust me, there will be a land where law will be the rule." It is as if Isaiah is like Christopher Columbus describing the launch of the space shuttle. He gets to the new world and he sees this flame go up into the sky. Can anybody really believe that that won't happen for 500 years? That's waiting! Some of you are wasting your lives waiting because you're waiting the wrong way. Advent teaches us how to wait.

The man who was captured and turned into a prisoner was Jim Stockdale, a navy pilot. *(Slide shown)* He was interviewed one time for a book on business and was asked, "Who didn't make it out [of Vietnam]?" "Oh, that's easy," he said. "The optimists." Stockdale went on to explain that the people who didn't make it out of captivity "were the ones who said, 'We're going to be out by Christmas.' And then Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they would say, 'Well, we're going to be out by Easter,' and Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And the optimists would die of a broken heart."

The first voice of Advent is Isaiah's. Waiting only makes sense if we are putting our hope in the right thing. If we wait for the wrong thing or the wrong time, then we lose our hope. The Jews waited century after century for a king who would come and kill all their enemies. God, apparently, had something different in mind for the whole world. Isaiah describes that in another part. He says, "The King who will come is a servant King. The King will come for everybody, not just the Jews. The King will suffer." Who understands that? That's what Heather was having the choir sing about. That picture that we ended with was the picture of the wolf who will lie down with the lamb. The leopard will live with the goat. The calf and the lion and the deer will all sit together, and the little child will lead them. "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given... Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." Would you recognize hope if it showed up?

This morning some of you sit in the shadows deep within the fog you had to drive through to get here, and you wait for somebody to get better who may not get better. Do you need to ask for help while you wait? And if you do wait for the light, who would you ask? If you are confused, would you ask for the Wonderful Counselor? If you are exhausted, could you ask for the Mighty God? If you are just relationally, emotionally torn apart, could you ask the Prince of Peace to come in your time of troubles?

Jim Stockdale ends up as an admiral. He talks about what is called The Stockdale Paradox. He discovered it in Vietnam's prisons. He said,

"This is a very important lesson. You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—

That is hope,

which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.”

Face the truth. This is not the Optimist Club. Over seven years after he is thrown into prison, Stockdale is released and wins the Congressional Medal of Honor. His hope is fulfilled, and his faith is unbroken, and it is *not* because he got out of jail. It is because he waited with his hope in the right place.

How many of you went to Thanksgiving Dinner? How many of you had a good Thanksgiving meal? We have a tradition with our clan. We gather together, 20 or 30 of us, and bring in friends and anybody who just wants a good meal, and just like many of you, our tradition is that at Thanksgiving, we go around the table and say, “Everybody think of one thing you are thankful for.” The kids groan and squirm and they hate it, but they do it because they know that there is no food until they do. It’s a great time. But we didn’t do that this year. We were down in Chicago. There were 31 of us from ages 9 to 83, and one of our guests was our good friend Lee. Lee is Laura’s age, and she has just a terrible cancer that has taken her and shrunk her down so that we didn’t even know if she could come. But she came and just before dinner, we sat in a circle around her, and anointed her with oil, and the kids prayed for her, and the grandparents prayed for her. The family sat on the couch, and they just wept. After 15 or 20 minutes of prayer, we turned to the table, and we thanked God. Now we are waiting, and so is Lee, whether for life or for death and life eternal, we don’t know, but she does not wait alone. She waits with us. She waits with the God of hope.

Lord Jesus, I thank You so much that You ended Your life at this table so we can keep our lives going at this table. We wait for circumstances to change, but You want *us* to change. You give us the bread like You did that last night, and You break it and You say, “This is my Body, broken for You. I am here.” You take the cup, and You pour it out and You say, “This is the Blood of My love for you that forgives you and brings you to life.” Lord, as we bring our hearts to this table, we come with our doubts and our fears and our pain and our joy and our dreams and our hopes, and we ask You this Advent, “Wait with us. Be the Wonderful Counselor when we are confused and the Prince of Peace when we are torn apart and the Great Father, who loves us all the days of our lives.” Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.