

“Come Before Winter”
Texts: Luke 2:22-32; II Timothy 4:9-13, 19-22
The Reverend Joanna M. Adams
Morningside Presbyterian Church
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Do your best to come before winter... II Timothy 4:21a

This is the first Sunday after Christmas, as if you didn't know. The four long weeks of Advent are behind us. Christmas has come, and though the season is not over yet, the angels no longer fill the sky with their songs; the crowd around the manger has gone home. The baby Jesus is growing bigger by the day. For us a new year is already pressing in. I am drawn to the Christmas poem that goes something like this:

When the star in the sky is gone,
When the shepherds go back to their flocks,
When the wise ones return to their homes,

That is when the real work of Christmas begins;
To heal the sick,
To comfort the grieving,
To feed the hungry,
To work for God's peace on earth,
To make room for God's love
In the inn of every human heart.

What a wonderful guide by which to set our agenda for the year ahead. But before 2009 comes to its completion, before we answer this annual summons to make Christmas not only a beautiful holiday but to receive it as a mandate to action, I want us to ponder together two New Testament passages. The first one features a righteous, devout man named Simeon, who all his life had looked forward to the consolation of Israel. Many years had passed, but he never lost the hope that before he died, he would see the Messiah with his own eyes. The Holy Spirit had promised that he would, and Simeon trusted the Holy Spirit. Indeed, only the Holy Spirit could have orchestrated the encounter that took place between the elderly Simeon and Mary, Joseph and the baby they had brought to the Temple for the purification rites which every newborn Hebrew child had to undergo. The Temple in Jerusalem comprises 35 acres - 35 acres of buildings and open courts. (NRSV notes) The odds of a chance encounter were poor to terrible. But there they are – Mary, Joseph, the baby, and Simeon, together. Simeon takes one look at the baby, sweeps him up into his own arms, and looks to heaven, saying, “Now I can die in peace, for mine eyes have seen the salvation of God.”

With the new year hot on our heels, I believe Simeon has something important to teach us about how we live our lives and how we deal with the time that we have. He remained patient and hopeful, never becoming discouraged or grumpy when what he wanted out of life did not come. He expected God to keep the promises that God had made, and he never doubted that those promises would come into being. He had faith, faith as the Letter of Hebrews understands it, “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” He was a man who lived in hope; every moment for him was alive with possibility. He didn't get under the bed and feel sorry for himself because what he wanted had not happened yet; he kept on doing what he was supposed to do, and going where he needed to go, so that when the time was right - in exactly the right moment – bingo! There was the baby!

We really have, I think, only two choices of how to handle life's delays. One is to deal with them in a spirit of frustration; the other is to understand them within the context of anticipation - frustration or anticipation. Those are the choices that we have. My own default position, I'm embarrassed to say, is more likely to be frustration. If you know me at all, you know that I really don't like to wait. I remember a couple of Christmases ago, Al and I decided we'd sneak off to a movie on the day after Christmas. About 3,000 other people wanted to see that same movie. We were late. We were standing in a line that seemed never to end. I heard the guy in front of us ask his girlfriend, “Which do you think moves faster, a glacier or this line?” That's what I wanted to know. And yet a large portion of life requires patience. Though we want our problems to be solved ASAP, though we want our prayers answered ASAP, they will only be answered in God's own good time and manner. The launch of a new year might be just the time to examine the possibility that every moment, every hour that we have in life is a gift to be received, rather than a curse to be endured. I love this Celtic blessing for the New Year:

“Never vouchsafed to me before,
It is to bless Thine own presence,
Thou hast given me this time, O God.”

In other words, every moment has the potential of being filled with God's presence. All the moments - the boring ones, the exciting ones, the heart-rending ones, the joyful ones - they can bless us with the very presence of God, which is after all, the meaning of Christmas, that God became flesh and dwelt among us.

Sometimes, what is required of us is to wait, not in the sense of sitting down and giving up, but going about our business, living our lives constructively, hoping and anticipating that what we hope for and wish for God will bring into being. Some, this year, are waiting for a new job. Some are waiting for the economy to improve. The mother of a two-year-old is waiting and praying that the “terrible two's” will pass. Waiting is expectantly believing that God will do something new, not only in our own lives but also in the world. Patience, endurance, long-term hope are often in order.

But then there are those occasions when something else is called for. Paul's urgent-sounding epistle to Timothy names that something else: Get up and get going. It is time to act, not wait. Wisdom comes in discerning what time it is. Is it time to wait or time to act? Often in life, only an immediate response will do. If you wait too long, the opportunity is lost. I think of Dr. Martin Luther King's magnificent speech in 1963, the "I Have a Dream" speech. Do you remember how he said, "We have come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now"? In every era, we must be reminded that sometimes patience is called for, but there are moments that demand that we get up and go and do. Liberty and justice for all cannot wait. Today, the growing epidemic of hunger and homelessness cannot wait to be addressed. We need to do something now about the deterioration of our environment, or then it will be too late.

I love this description of an incident I came across in one of my meditation journals. It seems that a retreat leader was loading her car after a gathering in the mountains of Oregon. Suddenly, the snow stopped, rain began to fall, and then a rainbow formed in the sky. This young woman closed the trunk of her car, rushed indoors and called out to the others who were checking out of the retreat center. "Come outside! You won't believe what you can see. You can see snow, rain, and a rainbow all at the same time!"

Only one woman rushed outside. She gazed up at the shimmering arc of color with joy, but she was the only one. The others cast about for their umbrellas and their hooded jackets. They looked at their watches. One fellow said, "If you've seen one rainbow, you've seen 'em all." She started to argue that this particular rainbow had red on the bottom and then some blue violet, but then she said, "To heck with them!" She got in her car and drove away through the arc of the rainbow, 'which lasted for at least five minutes - a very long time in rainbow-time.' (*Weavings*)

I love a bumper sticker that someone gave me recently. It reads "Don't Postpone Joy". I would add "Don't Postpone Showing Love." No one knows what tomorrow holds. Act now, make the call, write the note. Tell someone you care, go to visit.

Paul wrote to his young, beloved colleague Timothy saying, "Do your best to come to me soon." Paul was in prison, most likely in Rome. He had already been through one trial and had been acquitted. That's the good news; the bad news was that he was facing another trial, and it was a virtual certainty that he would be convicted, and if he were convicted, it was an actual certainty that he would be put to death. What we read this morning comes at the conclusion of Paul's correspondence with Timothy and at the conclusion of all his correspondence. At the end of this letter, when Paul writes *Grace be with you*, his entire communication to the world comes to an end. The curtain closes on his ministry and his life. Timothy is hundreds of miles away in Ephesus. "Come before

winter," Paul urges Timothy, because the winter weather would make sailing on the Adriatic Sea impossible.

It is interesting that there were three things on Paul's mind at this stressful and yet rich time in his life. First, he wants to say goodbye to one whom he loves deeply. Secondly, he wants to vent a little bit about the mixed bag of people who make up the community that surrounds him. Even though he is in prison, he is able to be in contact with the Christian community in Rome. He complains about some of them, says he misses others of them, hopes that God will get one of them, a fellow named Alexander the Coppersmith. His last concern is very mundane; he wants his belongings - his overcoat, (remember winter is coming); he wants his books, and above all he wants his books that are made out of parchment.

Did Timothy ever bring the books and overcoat to Paul's prison cell? Did he get there before the Adriatic Sea was whipped up by the winter wind? No one knows. There was a Presbyterian minister named Clarence McCartney who every year for decades preached a sermon entitled "Come Before Winter" to his congregation on this text. Dr. McCartney imagines what might have happened when he received Paul's letter: "'Yes, I must go to Rome. I want to say goodbye to Paul, who taught me so much, but I can't go until I clear some things up here in Ephesus.' As he cleared things up, winter did come and he couldn't catch a ship until spring. Finally, when spring was about over, he made it to Rome. He went to the home of Claudia and knocked on the door. 'I am Timothy,' he said. 'I've come to see Paul.' Claudia answered, 'He wanted badly to see you; he prayed that you would come. His last word to me was, 'If Timothy does come, give him my love. Tell him goodbye for me. Tell him I hope I will see him again in heaven.'"

Go before winter. That's the word from God to you and to me this day. Don't put off whatever is good and loving. Don't put off that which will make a difference and affect other people positively. There is no time like now for some of the most important things.

When I reflect on our years together here at Morningside, I think how important the timing has been. Think of what would have happened if we had not called Chris Henry when we did, if Melinda had not come to us exactly when she came. What would have happened if we had waited to launch *Time of Promise*? The economy was just about to sink; the opportunity would have been lost. If we'd gotten all balled up in mundane matters that are of penultimate importance, we would have missed the urgent matters. Sometimes life says hold on and be patient, but sometimes life says *Hurry Up!* It takes the wisdom of God given to us to know what each situation calls for.

As I prepare to pass the torch of leadership to my young colleague and your fine pastor, Chris Henry, I find myself deeply grateful for what has been accomplished

during our years together. "The urgency of now" evoked in all of us a willingness to plan and to act and to give and to grow. There were days when patience was necessary. I'm thinking of not too long ago when the pulpit microphone and the lectern microphone were as likely to pick up the music from a local rock radio station as they were the Sunday sermon. We got that fixed. Mostly, we have acted in a timely manner. Before the roof caved in, we repaired it. Before the baby boom began in earnest, we refurbished the nursery. Before people got frustrated over whether they could find a place to fit into the faith community, we started the Women's Bible Study and the Men's Theology on Tap. Before the kids got away for the summer, we instituted Bible School. And before the organ, held together with paper clips and rubber bands, fell apart in a thousand pieces, we restored this great instrument. Like Simeon, we trusted that the God who had called us together would not abandon us or break promises made.

I believe that Timothy set out for Rome the minute he received Paul's letter, to see his beloved friend and to say goodbye. I believe that we have been Timothy-like, being willing to put down routine matters and to step up to where we are today, a community filled up to the brim with faith and hope and love.

My hope is that as 2010 unfolds, you will know what time it is - what things to let go for awhile and what things need immediate attention. I hope you won't just sit here. I remember a grandmother telling me about her granddaughter performing in a ballet recital. She says that all the little girls seemed to have a great time except for one, who couldn't figure out where to go next. So she stood on the little chalk X that was on the floor throughout the entire ballet recital because she was afraid to move. I trust that Morningside will never be afraid to move, that under Chris's leadership and that of the new senior pastor who will come after Chris, you will go forward in faith, not holding pity parties but trusting that change is a part of life. Morningside is no different. We all change. Institutions change.

I pray that you will keep your traditions. The one I like the best is answering the call of the community that needs you to be active in mission. I hope you will not miss this particular opportunity to respond to the incredible number of children and young people whom God is entrusting to your care. If you were not at the early Christmas Eve service, you do not know that not only was the eight o'clock service packed to the rafters, but so was the 4:30 service. As Al says, "At the new children's service, there were more shout-outs than I have ever heard in any Presbyterian church."

I close with one more word about life and the way we live it. Only those of us who've been around awhile remember Erma Bombeck. For years, she wrote a hilarious column on housekeeping in the newspaper that was read by millions. She fought back cancer several times. But after she had been told that she was on the final round, she wrote some words that remind me of how we ought to deal with time, whether we're 25 or 85 or somewhere in between:

“If I had my life to live over, I would've invited friends over to my house, even if there was a stain on the carpet, or I hadn't had a chance to change the upholstery on the chair. I would've taken time to listen to my grandfather ramble about his youth. I would have cried and laughed less while watching television and more while watching life. And when my kids kissed me impetuously, I would've never said ‘Oh, later. Go wash your hands.’ Mostly, given another shot at life, I would seize every moment, really see it and look at it and never give it back. I would stop sweating the small stuff. I would never worry again about who didn't like me, about who had more than I did. Instead, I would cherish the relationships with which I have been blessed. And I would do something every day to promote my own well-being, mentally, physically and emotionally.”

Great words to take with us into the new year. Wherever the ship of 2010 takes you and me, I pray that the Lord will be with our spirits and that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ will uphold us and sustain us everyday. Amen.