Sunday, November 27, 1983

"EXPECTANT WAITING"

Luke 1:26-31

Sometimes it seems that we have to do a lot of waiting in this world. Some of the waiting we do is in joyful anticipation and excitement, and other waiting is filled with fear and trembling, and still other waiting can be boring and dull. It all depends on where and when and what we are waiting for.

Waiting can be divided into two other main categories: 1) Predictable waiting -- that is, waiting for something to occur at a certain time. Waiting for Christmas is an example. We know that Christmas Eve is on December 24, but we have to wait for it. 2) A second kind of waiting is unpredictable. We know that an event is going to occur, but we do not know exactly when. For example, we all know that we are going to die sometime in the future, but we do not know the exact day or hour. Or another example: we are ill, and we know we are going to get well, but we do not know for sure how long it might take.

Some waiting is like being in a "holding pattern" on an airplane. Many's the time I have been a passenger on an airplane flying to Chicago or New York, only to have the pilot announce, "There's a lot of traffic in the area, so we're going to be in a holding pattern. Our arrival will be delayed."

So we have to wait, and not always do we wait patiently. This is a kind of waiting over which we as individuals have no control. Life itself is filled with such forced holding patterns, and there's nothing we can do but wait. Illness can put us in such a holding pattern. Grief over the death of a loved one can cause us to be in a holding or waiting pattern.

In addition to the holding pattern kind of waiting, there is simply a lot of routine waiting that comes to all of us. We wait in line at a store or the license bureau or at the post office. We wait at a stop light for the light to change to green. We wait on others as we prepare to go somewhere together.

The season of Advent which begins today on the church calendar is a season of waiting -- waiting for Christmas.

Advent on our calendars is only four weeks long, but it symbolizes the much longer waiting of the Jewish people for the coming of the Messiah.

Advent also symbolizes Mary's waiting. Once Mary knew she was pregnant, she and Joseph had to wait nine months for the baby to be born. That can be both predictable and unpredictable waiting. The child will be born in about nine months if everything is normal. But no one can know the exact day or hour. It is certainly "expectant" waiting.

I still remember how Rowena and I waited for our first child to be born. Sometimes the months seemed to drag by ever so slowly. And then as the time drew near, we often asked each other, "Will it be tonight? Or tomorrow? Will it be a boy or a girl? Will it be normal and healthy? Are we ready to take care of a new life? How will it change our lives?" Sometimes we waited patiently and sometimes impatiently. Mary and Joseph must've had those questions, too.

But more than anything else, Advent then and now speaks of our waiting for God to come into our lives in new and fresh ways. Or, to put it another way, Advent reminds us that if we wait, we will discover new ways of experiencing God in our lives and in the world.

How, then, do we wait for God? In at least these two ways:

1. First, we wait patiently. Life does not always run on our schedule. God does not always operate on our schedule. Sometimes God seems far away and the timetables of God seem exceedingly long. Some things cannot be forced. We have to wait.

2. Secondly, we are to wait expectantly. Certainly that's what Mary and Joseph did. That's what most parents do who are waiting for a baby -- they wait expectantly, with hope!

However, not all people today even wait for the coming of Christmas expectantly. Some wait with apprehension. Holidays can be even more lonely than other times of the year. For some, ghosts walk at Christmas: all the people gone from us, friends and relatives who have died, people far away from home that we would like to be with. Sometimes it's difficult to wait expectantly.

But if we can, then there will be some surprises. The Good News is that God is always entering our world and our lives in fresh and unexpected ways -- in ways we least expect.

The tragedy for so many of us is our unwillingness to recognize some of the saviors among us, because they do not fit our pre-conceived notion of what they should be like. So often we shut our eyes to God at work. To a large extent we see what we have been taught to believe.

What we can learn from Advent is to be open to God's workings in new ways and in strange places -- in ways we might not expect. So wait expectantly. Wait with broad expectations, not narrow ones. Wait with hope! When we wait for God, we will not be disappointed.