

Advent 3; Year B; John 1:6-8, 19-28
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When I was little Thanksgiving meant the start of Advent, and Advent meant Santa Lucia day. Every December 13th, my mother would wake me up very early in the morning, and help me get dressed in a long, crisp, white linen dress with a beautiful red sash. And then she'd put a halo of greens on my head, a candle in my hand, and a small tray of saffron buns in the other hand. She'd send me upstairs to wake up my father and my siblings, each with a well-rehearsed little speech: 'Happy Santa Lucia. It's time for breakfast.' What I loved best was my little candle (which I was so excited to be trusted enough to carry) as it cast its humble, flickering light into the pitch-dark bedrooms. And then we'd come downstairs and eat together, on a finely decorated table with china and silver. All year I'd wait for that singular, special moment, for the honor that only the oldest girl in the household could inhabit, a tradition that adorns the homes of Swedes throughout the world. Sometimes in the summer, I'd crawl up into the highest shelf in our family's enormous linen closet and put my little hand into the cardboard box that held the dress, just to feel the cool linen, just to help with the waiting.

Here we are, in the very heart of Advent and it is, in its essence, all about waiting. In our Advent scriptures we meet a shaggy cast of characters – all of whom are *waiting people*. Each one is waiting in very particular ways, waiting in the midst of some kind of chaos and disruption. For each one their lives have turned side-ways, and nothing will ever be the same again. Elizabeth and Zechariah are waiting. Anna and Simeon are waiting. Mary and Joseph are waiting. John the Baptist, about whom we read this morning, like the others, is waiting.

According to the early 20th century French philosopher Simone Weil: *waiting patiently in expectation is the foundation of the spiritual life*. But on the whole human beings aren't very good at waiting. We prefer to reach out and grasp what we want, do for ourselves -- but the truth is that sometimes it's not there to be grasped. Maybe it's not ripe yet, a fig that is still a hard green knot no bigger than a gumball. Or maybe it's not even real yet, a dream of the future that is still a long way off. Waiting shines a spotlight on one of the five hard truths of liminal space: we are not in charge. We are not in control. Our lives are formed in the hands of a Great Mystery that never asks us for our advice. But there's the rub, there's the reason waiting is the foundation of the spiritual life – because we don't like being reminded of our limits, our not-in-control-ness, and for many of us, that is one of our most significant life lessons. We like *doing* – earning, buying, selling, building, planting, driving, baking, planning – making things happen, whereas waiting is essentially a matter of *being* – stopping, sitting, listening, looking, breathing, wondering, noticing, praying. It can feel pretty helpless to wait for someone or something that is not here yet and that will or will not arrive in its own good time, which is never the same thing as our own good time.

And yet, waiting is an essential part of the Christian life. Listen to what we say every time we break bread together: *Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again*. This is the mystery of our faith, that we are always waiting for Christ to come to us even though we believe that he has already come and that he is coming to us right now in word and sacraments. Is his coming is past, present, and future? It's all three, which means that just like all the people that populate our Advent stories, our waiting is not a

matter of entering into suspended animation. Spiritual waiting is not nothing. It is a very big something, because we are all shaped by *what* we wait for, and *how* we wait for it.

I see in John the Baptist, really in all of the Advent characters, a very particular way of waiting. John's is a way of being, yes, and also at the same time - a way of waiting that's active, attentive, focused. There's nothing passive about it. He doesn't know who he's waiting for. His life is just one big, long Advent – waiting in the dark for the light, a waiting without knowing for the one thing that will change everything. John's waiting is urgent, mobile, and fervent. It almost looks like searching. Instead of waiting for the one who is coming from a pew in the Jerusalem temple, John is doing his waiting out in the wilderness, under the stars, in dark and lonely places, in the vast expanse of desert. Walking, shouting, calling out.

Years ago, my husband Michael and I toured the home of the artist Georgia O'Keeffe in the nearly-deserted, desert town of Abiquiu, New Mexico, 70 miles northwest of Santa Fe. Her modest studio features an enormous picture window that looks out over the desert and the foothills of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. Near the window someone has placed a quote of hers that read: *In a way, nobody sees a flower, really, it is so small, we haven't time – and to see takes time...* We learned that every single day of her life in Abiquiu, O'Keeffe would gather up her art supplies, lace up her boots, drive her Ford Model A far out into the desert and walk. She walked far and wide, slowly, carefully, over decades cultivating her craft of being as present and awake as possible so that she would not miss whatever sacrament God put in her path: a bleached cow skull, a deep purple flower, or the setting sun, bathing the mountains red. Interviewed in her home at age 92, O'Keeffe referenced her paintings themselves as witnesses to the painstaking work of watching. "I tried to paint what I saw...the bones do not symbolize death to me. They are shapes that I enjoy. They are very lively. They please me and I have enjoyed them very much in relation to the sky." O'Keeffe did her waiting on foot, open and awake every single day to what God put in her path. O'Keeffe's waiting was urgent, mobile, and fervent. It almost looked like searching

There is also a bit of foolishness, too, woven into any sturdy spiritual practice of waiting. John the Baptist foolishly left everything behind to follow a vague promise, a wistful hope of God's coming. Remember, John was the son of Zechariah – a high priest and temple elite. Growing up John would have received the very best education, care, and attention. Yet somewhere along the line, John detached himself from privilege and comfort and chose the wilderness, literally trading in the life of an elite Jew for the life of a homeless man. And I wonder if John's self-segregation was because he knew, deep down, that his deliverance would not come through ordinary channels. His deliverance would come in his capacity to make a foolish choice, sacrificing safety and assurance in order to put himself in the place of greatest potential for experiencing the living God.

Ten years ago my family and I spent an evening with Jim Schwartz who was then the master canoe builder at Camp Widjiwagan north of Ely and also a local expert on the area's wolf packs for over 30 years. We had won an evening of wolf howling with Jim at a silent auction. The first thing to say about Jim looks like a kind of a modern-day John the Baptist with all of charm and intensity. He looked the part with his crazy hair, lumberjack shirt, and mud-clad boots as we met him on a deserted dirt road near camp late in the evening. Without saying hello, he jumped into our van and said, "Now I'm not promising anything, people. Finding these wolves is like a needle in a haystack. Don't get your hopes up. Just be quiet, pay attention, and do as I tell you." He terrified our kids who spent much of the remainder of the evening cowering in the back of the van. As we drove, deeper and deeper into the

woods, Jim went on long rants on all kinds of topics – religion, tracking bears, the education system, books he was reading.

After driving for an eternity Jim yelled at Michael to stop the car. As we sat in the darkness, Jim put his window down and without explanation pulled out his iPhone. “What is he *doing*?” I mouthed to Michael. Eventually he found what he was looking for, and holding his phone out the window pressed an iPhone app that projected the screams of a distressed jackrabbit into the darkness. Above the blood-curdling death screeches, Jim said, “These wolves, they love this stuff.” And at that moment, I started to worry. What kind of irresponsible parent was I that chose to cast my family out into the deep with this nut job? We were literally in the middle of nowhere in the pitch dark with no means of finding our own way home. This guy could eat us for dinner, and no one would ever know. And still, foolish as it was, the night was clear and cool. The stars were out in full force. The forest was electric with energy and movement. There was about us a surging, wild sense of possibility that felt as freeing as it did dangerous. Something fantastic *was* going to happen. We just didn’t know what.

We kept driving and eventually, we stopped the car, turned off the lights, and standing in the darkness Jim taught us how to howl like a wolf pack. Our kids howled like pups (wah, wah, wah), I was the juvenile (yip, yip), and Michael and Jim howled like the leaders of the pack, the dominants (upswing siren). Then Jim gave us the signal and we started up, howling for a good two, three minutes. Then the signal came again and we were silent. As we tilted our heads and strained our ears we heard....absolutely nothing. And so it went for the next three hours - we loaded up into the car, drove to the next place (which looked exactly like the last place), piled out, got the signal, howled, and strained our ears into the silence.

Discouraged and exhausted, we eventually turned back towards camp. And then – it happened -- a wolf pup crossed the road in front of us. “Stop the car! Turn off the lights!” Jim yelled. Again we piled out, got the signal, howled, heard a fleeting silence – and then -- an entire wolf pack – pups, juveniles, and one dominant – howling together in full force. I don’t know what I was expecting, but it wasn’t what we heard. The pack responded at very close range, just 10 yards away, and their voices loud and forceful and clear. Their howl lasted several minutes, enough time for us to actually discern their number and ages. Back and forth we volleyed – we howled, then silence, then the wolves. It was, in essence, a conversation that transcended the natural boundaries between human and animal. And the experience was – to its very core -- of God. It was silent in the car on the hour-long drive back to camp. Later when I tucked my son Coleman into bed he said simply, “Mom, that was the chance of a lifetime,” and he rolled over and fell asleep.

In the remaining weeks of Advent, I invite us to consider the fervent, active, holy work of waiting. And also, if we are so inclined, to insert ourselves into the places of greatest possibility and hopeful expectation even if those places are a little bit wild, or even a little foolish. God will meet us there, as promised. AMEN.