

Highland Presbyterian Church
3rd Sunday of Advent – December 14, 2025
A sermon by Megan McCarty

Matthew 11:2-11

Isaiah 35:1-10

Waiting is hard.

It's hard for adults – think about waiting for test results to come back following a health scare or sitting in a hospital waiting room hoping for a positive outcome of a spouse's surgery or the joy of the birth of a grandchild. We all struggle to know what to do when we are waiting. We often try to simply distract ourselves away from it. Sometimes waiting can even cause decision paralysis – you feel like everything else needs to be on hold while you wait to hear back about one thing even though the rest of the world spins on around you.

Waiting is exceptionally hard for children and most especially around this time of year. My kids are in a Lego phase, so we thought an Advent Lego calendar sounded like a great idea. On the first Sunday of Advent, we opened the first box of Legos and put together the little figurine and then my three year old said what all three year olds say following something fun and exciting – “MORE!” And we spent a lot of time trying to describe Advent and the waiting process and eventually had to move the Legos to a higher shelf and deal with a meltdown. Happy Advent! Then, as things seem to go, in an attempt at working from home and teaching NTI on a snow day, I lost track of said three year old and found out that she had very happily opened every single box of Legos and was very proud of handywork.

Waiting is hard.

As we make our way through the book of Isaiah in this waiting time, we see some beautiful and interesting imagery in today's passage. This section of the book of Isaiah is prophesying about God delivering Jerusalem from neighboring rivals and enemies. It foretells of a time of reversal, when all things will be made well again. The desert blooms, weak hands and faltering knees are strengthened, the roads are no longer populated with danger - wild animals or people lacking moral credentials, the dry lands will break forth with water. This imagery would have connected deeply with the people of Israel because they knew what a precious commodity water was, they knew what dry and cracked earth looked and felt like and what it meant for their crops and their livelihoods. They knew the great joy that water and rain could bring to the land.

But for us, it's a passage that can seem rather disconnected. Especially as an Advent reading. It is currently not dry and certainly NOT hot. We are in a time where everything in nature has gone dormant and begun hibernating. This passage doesn't speak of a wintry shutdown, but of blossoming, blooming reeds and rushes, redemption and restoration. It's almost impossible to currently imagine the warmth of flowers blooming in the hot desert.

This prophesy would have seemed just as disconnected to those hearing it. At the time of its writing, the Judeans were preparing for war. They didn't know what was to come, they certainly didn't know that they would be in exile and taken from their lands, and they didn't know the hope that would be necessary to even make it to the day when the desert blooms. It is often difficult to think about the future when the present is so fraught. That's part of what makes hope and joy so beautiful and so dangerous.

The key to understanding why Isaiah is so prominent in our Advent readings for today actually lies in our Gospel readings for the day. The theme of "waiting" is what runs like a golden thread through the rest of the day's passages. Later this morning we will hear the incredible musical rendition of Mary's words from the book of Luke known as the Magnificat, or song of praise.

After learning that she was with child, Mary sings a beautiful song full of powerful imagery of divine justice. The proud and powerful will be brought down, the lowly will be lifted high, the hungry will be fed and the rich will walk away empty. The emblematic context of this song parallels Mary's experience. While the whole world is waiting for the time when this divine justice will take place, Mary is waiting in a long expectant time of growing a life within her. The waiting can feel agonizing. In Mary's case, God told her all that was to come. Mary, of course, knew that her baby boy was Lord of all creation and would one day rule the nations. But I don't think that made the waiting time any easier.

And that brings us to Matthew 11, our other text for the day. John the Baptist is in prison awaiting his own fate when he hears of all that Jesus is doing, so he sends word asking if Jesus is actually the Messiah or if they are supposed to keep waiting. Jesus, being Jesus, doesn't give a straight yes or no answer, but instead tells John's disciples to go back and tell him what they are witnessing – the reversals expectantly proclaimed just like in the other passages – the blind receive their sight, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. In his prison cell, John glimpsed the good news only through friends conveying what they saw in Jesus. But this provides a beautiful road map for us to follow.

John asks Jesus if he is the one or are we supposed to keep waiting. Instead of speaking an answer, Jesus allows his actions to speak for him. His actions, then, provide us with a glimpse of what we should be doing in the waiting time. Like John the Baptist, like Mary, like the prophet Isaiah, we might not ever see the full inbreaking of justice and mercy for which we wait. But our waiting does not have to be passive. We do not have to sit in decision paralysis waiting for someone to bring us news or tell us what to do. We have been told what we should be doing in the waiting time. While Jesus is waiting for his life's fulfillment, he is healing people, spreading the good news, working to reverse the gap between the rich and the poor, and working to bring about divine justice.

Holy waiting, as this is sometimes called, means that we are being spiritually present and attentive, and we are believing that God is active in the waiting itself. As

Christians, it is fundamental to our faith that we believe that the waiting period is purposeful, even when we can't see what that purpose is.

We live in a world that has frequently told us that waiting is useless and every second of our time should be occupied by something. But we know that's not true. We know that sometimes, the waiting is the point. We don't have to wait for change, we can be changed and we can be the change that is needed. We don't have to look for signs of change; we are the signs. Each of us can be the sign pointing to God's kingdom breaking in all around us.

Methodist pastor Jan Richardson is an incredible poet and writer. I often find myself drawn to her writings during this season because she has a way of writing things so simply that it feels overwhelming. Her poem *The Shimmering Hours* has been with me this week. It says:

There is so much
I want to say,
as if the saying
could prepare you
for this path,
as if there were anything
I could offer
that would make your way
less circuitous,
more smooth.

Once you step out,
you will see for yourself
how nothing could have
made you ready for this road
that will take you
from what you know
to what you cannot perceive
except, perhaps,
in your dreaming
or as it gives a glimpse
in prayer.

But I can tell you
this journey is not
about miles.
It is not about how far
you can walk
or how fast.

It is about what you will do
with this moment, this star
that blazes in your sky
though no one else
might see.

So open your heart
to these shimmering hours
by which your path
is made.

Open your eyes
to the light that shines
on what you will need
to see.

Open your hands
to those who go with you,
those seen
and those known only
by their blessing,
their benediction
of the road
that is your own.

As we wait for God's divine justice, we can work to love our neighbors as ourselves. As we wait to hear from God, we can do what is required of us: caring for the widowed, the orphaned, the stranger, the unhoused, the least, the lost, and the lonely. As we wait for God's mercy, we can extend as much grace to others as God has so lovingly extended to us. As we wait for the new heaven and the new earth, we can act as the hands and feet of God. And as we wait to feel the fullness of God's love for us, to feel affirmed and comforted, we can speak life to all that surrounds us.

Waiting is hard.
But oh, so holy.
Amen.