

## **“Abiding in Anticipation”**

Psalm 27:1, 13-14; Luke 2:25-38 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – December 3, 2023  
Dedicated to Polly Hamlen

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might find the courage to live as though we truly believe in the hope of the Incarnation. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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What's the longest you've ever waited for Christmas to come? I have a friend on Facebook who starts posting how many days it is till Christmas around the 25<sup>th</sup> of June, and then tells us again on the 25<sup>th</sup> of every month after that. I think at some point she must have decided she's one of those “herald angels” that we sing about. The French Christmas carol “He Is Born, the Divine Infant” notes that it was more than 4000 years between when the prophets foretold Jesus' birth and when it actually happened. That's a number that sort of hard for me to wrap my head around. Maybe you're thinking of a time when you were a child and Christmas was so exciting that the days leading up to it seemed like they lasted weeks. Or maybe you've been through a period of grief that lasted years, such that Christmas never really came for a few Decembers in a row.

In some ways, this is a year when Christmas isn't coming, on a global scale. The Patriarchs and Heads of the Churches in Jerusalem, representing communities across the West Bank and Gaza, have declared that there will be no Christmas festivities; none of the parades and feasts and decorations for which the Holy Land is

famous, just prayers and solemn services dedicated to peace. They have called for “all the focus [to be] directed at holding in our thoughts our brothers and sisters affected by this war and its consequences, and with fervent prayers for a just and lasting peace for our beloved Holy Land.” How long will we have to wait for Christmas? Will we, in fact, remain committed to abiding in anticipation, living with the sorrowful realities of our broken world that has not yet welcomed the Messiah? Or will we jump ahead and embrace a false Christmas, indulging in hollow joy and the empty promises of consumerism?

This is one of those years when it’s painfully obvious why the first candle on the Advent Wreath represents Hope. Hope is first because it’s the thing we have when we don’t have anything else. There is a lot of darkness, and just a little tiny bit of light. Just the one candle, flickering bravely but alone. I was at an event this week hosted by our friends over at the La Mesa UCC church and put on by Borderlands for Equity. The aim was to deepen our understanding of the context of the current crisis in the Holy Land. I was struck by something one of the panelists said. She reminded us that nobody can take away our imaginations. And she didn’t say this exactly, but it made me realize that imagination is often our only source of hope. We don’t hope because everything around us is making it obvious that things are going to get better. We can hope because we can imagine things being different than they are. As Paul asks, in the words we quoted in the Call to Worship, “who hopes for what is seen?” Hope is always an act of imagination. You might even call it a “discipline of

imagination,” that is, a focused, intentional way to use our imaginations to shift the way we’re experiencing the world and thus, change the world itself.

How long are we willing to wait for Christmas? Simeon and Anna both had been waiting a long time. The writer of Luke tells us why Simeon was there: he’d been given a promise. But we have a lot less information about Anna, except, unusually, her age. Her marriage was short, but her life was long. She’d been waiting a long time. It seems either one of them probably recited Psalm 27 often: “I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living.” It may be one of the boldest declarations of hope in all of scripture. It’s one thing to pray and wish that something will eventually happen. But to declare that it will happen in your own lifetime? Even Martin Luther King, Jr., didn’t do that.

But there they were, embracing this baby in the temple and generally carrying on such that you have to believe that everyone else who was at the temple that day was going to remember it. Had they imagined that this was how it would happen? Simeon had been promised that he would not die before seeing the Messiah. Once he did, he was full of cryptic proclamations that must have made Mary and Joseph uneasy: “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed, so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.” Did he know it would be like that? Does that sound like consolation? Would it give you hope to be told your baby is going to be “a sign that will be opposed”?

There is a lot going on in this moment. A healthy baby cannot help but bring delight, joy, even hope. But a healthy baby in the midst of occupation, a healthy baby born far from home into a precarious situation, a healthy baby living under imperial rule that will soon demand that all the babies be killed, for they have become a threat – this Baby brought delight and so much more, though it may have only been apparent to Simeon and Anna at the time. And now that moment stretches to this moment, when healthy babies and babies that are far from healthy are still arriving in the midst of war and destruction, when babies are still being killed by leaders whose fear has them bent on destruction. These babies hold hope and despair in their tiny hands; they are a sign that will be opposed; many are falling and many are rising.

Where is the consolation? Where is the redemption? How long will we have to wait for Christmas? “Emmanuel,” we sang, “God with us, revealed in us.” And that is the call, for us to live in ways that reveal God in our midst. There is a reason it feels as though a sword is piercing our own souls. Christ is trying to arrive in our world, and the light of this candle of hope that might illuminate the way is blocked out by the glare of bombs.

And yet we abide. The brokenness feels so big, as if there’s nothing we can do. But we can light this candle. We can liberate our imaginations and declare that another way is possible. We can lift our voices alongside the laments of those who mourn and demand that wars cease. We can abide in anticipation with every fiber of our being, longing, wishing, praying, envisioning, hoping for Emmanuel. We can

reject hollow festivities and instead inject the depth of true hope into the joyful activities we engage in.

We sing because the silence of death will be overcome. We dance because the paralysis of fear cannot restrain us forever. We light candles because it is so dark. We abide in anticipation, leaning into hope, because in so many moments, hope is all we have. The calendar tells us it will be but four short weeks. But we do not know how long it will take for Christmas to come. What we know is that hope will not disappoint us, and that, in so many ways, Emmanuel is already here. Hallelujah and Amen.