

## **“Waiting in the Dark”**

Luke 1:67-79; Philippians 2:1-11 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – December 22, 2024

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might live in humble expectation. In Jesus’ name, we pray, Amen.*

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Our Advent theme carol has taken us from Angels to Shepherds to Sages, and now it is our turn. “Saints, before the altar bending” – that’s us! The word “saints” has been over-used to refer to spiritual super heroes, so we often forget that it’s older, more biblical usage was about all of us who are trying to follow Jesus. The best number of verses for a hymn, of course, is three, but most of our Advent and Christmas carols have four. I’m convinced that’s to make them work better with four Sundays of Advent, but who knows? In this case, however, it allows “Angels from the Realms of Glory” to move beyond the characters of Luke’s and Matthew’s birth narratives, and do what many other Christmas carols do in other ways, bring us into the story.

Sometimes we have a tendency to treat the Christmas story as something that happened long ago. But our carols are here to remind us that it’s a story that’s still happening, a story that goes on and on, a story that involves us – the saints who have been “watching long in hope and fear.” I like that line because I don’t think I’m the only one who’s struggled a bit to find Christmas this year. The only decorations up at my house right now are a Costco wreath on the front door and some cards we’ve received, displayed on the antique sled that sits in front of the fire place. I know my family isn’t

the only one that's been dealing with sickness and loss and uncertainty about the future this season. Motivation to do the work of celebration has not been high, and somehow that feels like failure. We have this idea that Christmas is supposed to feel warm and cheery, and when we don't, we may assume we're not pulling it off. But what if the most appropriate thing to be at Christmas is human? I would argue that is what the gospels and even many of our carols are trying to tell us.

The line about "watching long in hope and fear" reminds of a line in another song we love, "O Holy Night." "Long lay the world," it goes, "in sin and error pining." I love that phrasing! The idea of the whole planet pining is so evocative of the state of our souls sometimes. And then it goes on, "till He appeared and the soul felt its worth." On one level, carols that talk about how long it took for the Christ Child to come into the world are talking about the millennia before Jesus was born. But on another, very real level, that pining, that watching, this waiting is happening all the time. If Jesus coming the first time had fully satisfied the achings of our souls, we wouldn't need to celebrate Christmas every year! But here we are, every December, trying to muster up some hope and peace and joy.

Life is frequently incomprehensible. Just ask Zechariah. This song of his that we just read needs some context. Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were old. Not clear how old, but past the age when it made sense to think they might have a baby. But one day, as he's working in the temple, Zechariah has a vision. The Angel Gabriel tells him they're going to have a son. Zechariah is understandably skeptical, so the angel strikes

him dumb. He goes home from work, things happen, and nine months later, Elizabeth gives birth to a son. Everyone wants to know what they're going to name the baby. Elizabeth says his name is John, based on – I guess – a note Zechariah had passed to her at some point, trying to explain what happened to him. Their friends think that's weird, because nobody else in their family is named John, so they ask Zechariah what he thinks. He motions for something to write on, and spells out "His name is John." And suddenly, he can talk again! And at that point, he has been fully convinced of what the angel told him about this baby, and he bursts in prophetic song.

The song Zechariah sings about his baby is full of triumph and hope, but even there, we see recognition of our common human state. The "dawn" that John will herald is to be a "light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death." That's us, right? We saints who are watching long in hope and fear? I mean, not just us, of course, but all of humanity throughout history. Uncertainty about the future is nothing new. Sickness and loss are our constant companions. Those who live "in the shadow of death" is all of us.

What does it mean for the soul to "feel its worth" in such a world? If what we're aiming for at Christmas is merely to be human, it's good to remember what humans mean to God. The "kenosis hymn" from Philippians 2 is not a traditional Christmas or Advent scripture, but it fits in nicely here. Perhaps one of the most important verses about Jesus in all of scripture is there, when it says that Jesus, "though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited." In the act

of humbling Godself to take on human form, Jesus elevated what it means to be human. That is how beloved we are, in all our weakness and frailty. Despite our sins and errors, our souls are worthy of being inhabited by God Most High. Despite our selfishness and conceit, the consolation of Love is that Jesus comes, God-with-us, over and over and over. Christmas is not a simple cheeriness. Christmas is a wondrous paradox.

Historian and commentator Kristin Du Mez brought to my attention a carol from the Christian Reformed tradition that I had never heard of, called “Come and Stand Amazed, You People.” That compelling title leads us into a consideration of this astonishing paradox, in ways that give us permission to just be who we are this Christmas, saints who struggle to be holy, humans whose souls are a bit tarnished, ordinary people with hearts that are weary. Listen to these words:

Come and stand amazed, you people, See how God is reconciled!  
See his plans of love accomplished, See his gift, this newborn child.

See the Mighty, weak and tender, See the Word who now is mute.  
See the Sovereign without splendor, See the Fullness destitute.

See how humankind received him; See him wrapped in swaddling bands,  
Who as Lord of all creation Rules the wind by his commands.

See him lying in a manger Without sign of reasoning  
Word of God to flesh surrendered, He is wisdom’s crown, our King.

O Lord Jesus, God incarnate, Who assumed this humble form,  
Counsel me and let my wishes To your perfect will conform.

Light of life, dispel my darkness, Let your frailty strengthen me;  
Let your meekness give me boldness, Let your burden set me free.  
Oh, Emmanuel, my Savior, Let Your death be life for me!

Do you notice how this carol, like so many others, also involves us? This paradox – God made flesh – is a blessing on our weakness. It's not just that God is coming to save us from our weakness, but that in taking on human form, God is showing us something deeply true about Godself and God's ways. God's ways are not the ways of exploitation. God's power is not the power of strength, but the power of Love. God does not curse the darkness or deny that the darkness is there. God lights a candle; God brings the dawn. And sometimes, God just calms our hearts and gently helps us recognize the blessings of the dark.

All we have to do this Christmas is be human – aching for peace, a little afraid of the dark, trying to love, weary from grief, open to laughter, a bit too eager to make meaning, appreciative of humility – not even all of that at the same time. Christmas is coming again, and not a moment too soon. And Christmas will come again next year, in case it doesn't feel like it worked this time. Christmas might even come in July! Let us never stop watching for Christ to appear in any moment, in every moment. Hallelujah and Amen.