Advent 2B, 12.10.23

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Mark 1:1-8; Isaiah 40:1-11; 2 Peter 3:8-15a

*We preach Christ crucified*

At the time of the writing of our first reading, the people of God had been waiting for a long time. It was the waiting known only by people who have had their city demolished, their temple – God’s own house – destroyed. It was the waiting of a people who had seen an enemy army advance and take everything by force. It was the waiting of a people who then had been forcibly moved, their leaders ripped from their families and taken to far away Babylon. The people of God had been waiting for an end to what felt like punishment for their unfaithfulness to God. At least it was easier to see it as punishment - a clear reason for suffering - and not just random violence, a world where nothing makes sense. Though in the decades that followed the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE, nothing did make sense. Life as they knew it before was over. Now the people were waiting for restoration from exile, for a return to home, for reuniting with loved ones, for the reconstruction of their temple.

Or as the prophet Isaiah put it, the people of God were waiting for nothing less than God. They were waiting for God to come with real comfort, deep and broad and wide, after decades of distress. They were waiting for God to comfort them with forgiveness, to hold them like a shepherd cradles lambs in an embrace.

We are not – at least most of us in this room – so desperate in our waiting as the exiled Israelites were some 2500 years ago. Our waiting is a little more mundane. Still, Advent is a season to ponder our waiting, here and now. We all *do* wait for something or someone most days of our lives.

And many of us are not that good at waiting. We do not like the uncertainty involved, the lack of control. It is not easy to wait for test results; or wait for healing that has already taken too long; or wait for an end to the pain of a loss of years ago – shouldn’t the relief have come by now?

We wait a lot: We wait behind a slow car on the road (and 30 seconds seems to last 1000 years); we wait on lift lines; we wait for more snow.

Sometimes, we share the wait with others, like when you stand on the platform waiting for the train to come. I grew up taking the NYC subway to elementary school with my sister and mother. I remember the subway, packed at rush hour, standing so close to so many armpits. Well-dressed workers in business suits, along with the homeless veteran who rode on a skateboard through the trains – he had lost his legs. I tried not to be scared. This past week on a trip out east, my daughter and I took many forms of transport: Cars and tiny planes, public buses and what Bostonians call the T. I was reminded again of the press of so many humans – we do not often feel this in Montana - all of us waiting to get where we needed to go, a three-year old crying in his stroller, 2 junior high Muslim girls in their hijab and braces, an orthodox Jewish family, a woman navigating the platform in her wheelchair. When you wait with others, you are reminded of all the many kinds of discomfort there are, even for those of us who are not living in exile, or – like so many of our neighbors around the world today - in a time of war.

Of course, we don’t need to go to a faraway city to wait together. We experience waiting everywhere. Including here. Today, there are members of our community waiting to become parents. And there is someone in our community waiting to die. And there is someone in our community waiting for a response, and if they hear “yes” it will sound like the most beautiful word ever spoken.

But right now, my siblings in Christ, it is Advent. Advent is a time - the time – to practice a particular kind of waiting. Waiting not for just anyone, just anything, but for God. Isaiah reminds us this morning; Along with ancient Israel and peoples around the world and across time, we are waiting for God. We may not think about it, we may have forgotten it. But underneath all our mundane daily waiting, we are waiting for the God who brings comfort – which is very different from making us comfortable.

We are waiting for the God who offers forgiveness for all the wrongs we have done, all the good we have left undone.

We are waiting for the God who comes to wrap us in that Spirit of mercy and compassion and love, in whom we were baptized.

We are waiting for the God who helps us wait with hope and expectation. For waiting can be a good thing, like a child eager for Christmas. Something wonderful is surely coming, just around the corner.

We are waiting for the God who at the end – our lives are like grass after all – will call us home.

In Advent, we practice this kind of waiting for God. We sing about our waiting, and we listen to the words of God’s promise: *This is my body given for you. My blood shed for you.* And the waiting is not so bad when there are others close by praying for you, and though it is cold outside, we are warm here. Perhaps, by practicing hopeful waiting in church, we can wait more calmly or joyfully in other parts of our lives. We can wait trusting that God is coming, with the comfort only God can bring.

But there is one more thing to say: Our texts this morning suggest another truth. It may feel like we are the ones waiting for God who seems rather slow in coming. But our second reading, from Second Peter, tells us this: *the Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with us, not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance.* Perhaps it is God who is waiting for us. Waiting for each of us and for all of us, because God will not be satisfied until all are ready, and God can welcome all to the table where all will finally be fed. Perhaps it is God who is waiting for us, and we simply missed the early train, or had car trouble and found ourselves on the side of the road with no service. Or we got distracted, or even lost on the way. Or like a child in wintertime, we just take a long time to get ready: First the long underwear, then the sweater with so many buttons, then the awkward snow suit, then the hat and both the mittens, and then -- everything needs to come off to go to the bathroom one more time -- and then, all the warm clothes on again and the boots. Finally, we are ready, and we can turn the door knob and step outside. There, God has been waiting patiently, all along, ready to take us by the hand and lead us out into a world hushed and white, peaceful, like everything has been made new.