

ADVENT WAITING
Post Christian and Presbyterian Churches
December 14, 2008
John 1: 6-8, 14

“There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. And the word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth.” **John 1: 6-8, 14**

“We are not a people comfortable with waiting. Doctors’ offices and hospitals have waiting rooms and nothing ever happens in them. We wait at traffic lights, in lines at the store, post office, and bank, and the waiting is all frustration and aggravation, with time, precious time, fluttering away. Because after all, waiting calls for quiet perseverance. Waiting calls for a hopeful center in the midst of a swirling storm of shopping, wrapping, baking, and decorating. Where in our lives at this time of the year is there space and time for waiting? And what, pray tell, are we really waiting for? (**From**

**a sermon entitled, “An Urgent Waiting” by Rev. Patti Davis in
Lectionary Homiletics, 12/7/08)**

Our scripture for this morning reminds us that what we are all urgently waiting for in this season of advent is the coming of the light of the world---the presence of God in our lives that will bring joy, peace, perspective and new life to our worn-out souls. We are waiting for flesh to come into our lives and be with us in ways that will stimulate life and hope and faith.

On Wednesday, I visited one of our patients in the hospital a few hours before his death. I spoke with one of his sons about his father’s influential life and as I was leaving I said to him, “It looks like your Dad is very comfortable and from what you have shared, even though this has all happened so quickly, it seems that he has peace with both his living and his dying.” The accomplished son nodded and then I very casually asked, “What can I do for you?” He paused for a minute and then said something like the following, “I have no idea. I was raised by this great and giving man to be independent and to do for others, and I always knew he would be there for me and my brothers. Now that he is getting ready to leave this world, I have no idea what I need or how to ask for what I need if I figure it out. Thank you for asking and for being there for us and with us at this time. Everyone has been wonderful and in

spite of our feelings of overwhelming loss and sadness, we do not feel that we are alone.”

Our patient died on Thursday, December 11th and yesterday his obituary was in the Lubbock Avalanche Journal. As I read about his life, I was reminded of my conversation with his dear son and of the influence we truly have on the well--being of others. I would like to share with you what his family said about Erwin Earl Glover, “He was a loving and caring husband and dad. His three sons obtained doctoral degrees because of his encouragement and support. Erwin learned from an early age how to love, trust, and invest in others before himself. He was active until the last week of his life. He loved sports and was involved in the Prime Time Sunday School and Jubilee Choir, where he shared the love of the Lord with others.” Even though Erwin Glover has died, his long and good life has truly left much light, love and influential presence in our midst for generations to come!

As Mr. Glover’s family prepares to celebrate his life and legacy in this Christmas season, we are reminded again of how we need one another in this world. The great gift of flesh keeps us connected to others and to our God and continues to bring life, healing and greater wholeness to us on each leg of our journey. “And the word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth.”

So what is Christmas really about? How does God's incarnation in Jesus bring us light and life? As I pondered this question in my travels, I remembered a conversation I had with another Hospice patient several years ago, a few days before Christmas in the year 2000. One of the reasons this experience has stayed with me is because it occurred with a woman who I had known at Second Baptist Church for many years. Anita was a mover and a shaker and she had been a rock in many people's lives and a pillar in the Lubbock community all of her adult life. She had used her faith, gifts and passions in the service of others for years and was instrumental in starting Second Baptist Church, the South Plains Food Bank and the Sick Children's Clinic. She was an advocate for women's rights and the poor and always invited people who would be alone at Thanksgiving and Christmas to join her family in their festivities.

What I had hoped would be short and pleasant visit turned into a lengthy, disturbing, and soul-searching discussion of her doubts and faith. She questioned the existence of God, at least the existence of God then in her life as she was experiencing much physical pain and discomfort as well as great emotional and spiritual distress. I looked up to this classy, faithful and refined 81 year old woman and so I was startled me when she grabbed my arm and asked, "Elizabeth, is there really a God?"

I was also startled by my rather blunt response to this kind, gracious, giant of a woman. “I sure hope so, Anita. I want to believe there is a God and I want to believe that God is real to us,” I muttered. I went on to affirm her faith and her doubts at this time as she is facing great loss, feelings of grief, and much physical suffering. I reassured her that in life and in death we belong to God and how that is worked out is more up to God than it is up to us. As we addressed her fears and gave voice to her doubts and pain, Anita visibly began to relax and with a little giggle, she said something so profound, “All these years I’ve been telling God how it should be and perhaps now it is my turn to wait and to listen and to trust for God’s coming in to my life in a new way now at the end of my many years on this earth.”

As I left my friend’s home I was shaken by the essential message of this advent season---a time when we wait, and listen and trust that God will come in to our lives in new ways with new life and new vision. Whenever our foundations are shaken by the loss of loved ones, bodily functions or our independent ways of maneuvering in this world, it is normal for us to question our faith and our God and ask in whispered tones, “Is there really a God and if so, then how is God really with us?”

The Presbyterian writer and author Frederick Buechner pondered this question as he has reflected on his life and the impact of his father's suicide when he was a young boy. In the book, **Listening to Your Life**, Buechner has this to say, "As I understand it, to say that God is mightily present in our lives does not mean that God makes events happen to us which move us in certain directions like chessmen. Instead, events happen under their own steam as random as rain, which means that God is present in them not as their cause but as the one, who even in the hardest and most hair-raising of them, offers us the possibility of new life and healing.

For instance, I cannot believe that a God of love and mercy in any sense willed my father's suicide; it was my father himself who willed it as the only way out available to him from a life that for various reasons he had come to find unbearable. God did not will what happened that early November morning in Essex Falls, New Jersey, but I believe that God was present in what happened. I cannot guess how God was present with my father, but I can guess much better how utterly abandoned by God my father must have felt if he thought about God at all. My faith as well as my prayer is that God was and continues to be present with my father in ways beyond my guessing. I can

speak with some assurance only of how God was present in that dark time for me, in the sense that I was not destroyed by it, but came out of it with scars that I wear to this day, to be sure, but also somehow the wiser and stronger for it.”

Buechner continued to ponder, “Who knows how I might have turned out if my father had lived? But through the loss of him all those long years ago I think that I learned something about how even tragedy can be a means of grace that I might never have come to any other way. As I see it, God acts in history and in our histories not as the puppeteer who sets the scene and works the strings. Rather I see God as the great director who no matter what role fate casts us in conveys to us somehow from the wings, if we have our eyes, and ears and hearts open and sometimes even if we don’t, how we can play those roles in a way that enriches and ennobles and hallows the whole vast drama of life including our own small but crucial parts.

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.”

We make the celebration of Christmas so complicated. We load up the holiday season with activity that borders on frenzy. We place more demands on ourselves and on others than at any

other time of year. We hope and yearn, and sometimes demand that this season produce joy, happiness and peace. In the midst of it all, we totally miss the light and the flesh we seek and the light and the flesh we seek to be to others in our everyday lives.

Tom Tewell, who was pastor of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in Manhattan for several years tells the story of a little girl who was carried away with the excitement of Christmas and was hyperactive and underfoot and in the way and borderline obnoxious all day long. Her parents were stressed out because they had put off their shopping till the last minute and they were at each other's throat and the little girl and her brother and sister picked it up and were having a good old fashioned Christmas fight with threats of death and destruction and vows of eternal hatred. Everybody was cranky and irritable and finally, the parents had had it. In desperation, they ordered the children to bed. A few minutes later the little girl emerged from her bedroom and said, "Aren't we even going to say our prayers?" "All right. All right, we'll say prayers. Get back in bed," her exasperated mother declared.

The family gathered around and said their prayers, ending as this family did, with the Lord's Prayer. And on this occasion, when they got to "forgive us our trespasses" her parents heard her say,

“And forgive us our Christmases as we forgive those who
Christmas against us.”

The Presbyterian minister, John Buchanan says, “We make
Christmas complicated, but the heart of it is the same—the
miracle of God’s love born into history in Bethlehem and born
again into your life and mine where our needs are simple and
basic and real. Christmas changes us by reminding us that we
are loved. The birth of the baby, when we understand it as a gift
that conveys God's unconditional love, says to you and to me—
we matter, we have value. When we come to know the Birth as
God’s way of becoming vulnerable as a newborn infant in order
to best love us then our transformation and our conversion has
begun.”

An American poet, the late Anne Porter, put it so simply and
beautifully in a Christmas poem she called "**Here on Earth**":

Taken all together, or taken one by one, we are the holiest of all
of earth’s creatures. For he who kindled the Fire of the sun, he
who draws out the tender leaves from the dark twigs of winter
has also carved our names in the palm of his hand.

And he became a child-- the better to be near us. Born in the
winter-time, born on a journey, he grew to be a man and lived

among us--- to be our healing when we are sick, our bread
when we are hungry, and to be the wine at all our weddings.

**(From An Altogether Different Language: Poems 1934-1994
pp. 65-66)**

The holy message of Christmas is how God's love continues to be born in to our hearts and lives where we need to know that we are accepted and wanted and loved and valued and cherished. God's love is born where our grief and losses and sufferings are deepest and most profound. God's love is born where we are most vulnerable; God's love is born into our fears, anxieties, hurts, hopes, and dreams where we can be strengthened and moved to share our gifts, talents and passions so that our world is made more whole and we become more complete!

“The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. And the word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth.”

PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving and Holy God,

We gather on this third Sunday of Advent with the hopes and fears of all the years in our hearts. When all is going well for us and we feel that we have the world by the tail, it is often much easier to have faith. But when we have problems in our health and work and relationships and families, then we feel quite vulnerable and alone and wonder more deeply about the presence of God with us and the light of God in us. I sometimes wonder if all of our frenzied activity at this time of the year helps us to not think too deeply about the significance of Jesus' birth in our lives because it is probably much easier to be busy and tired than it is to look and wait and listen and prepare for the stirrings of new life.

Give us this Christmas, the eyes and ears and hearts of young children who give themselves over to the magic and the excitement and who remind us tired, worn-out and cynical adults of the new life that comes to us in our pain, boredom, failures, and broken places and waits to give us healing, courage, and much new life if we are willing to give up our need to control and tell God how it needs to be. As we listen to the

Christmas story again this year in words and songs, remind us that the people God chose and the events that unfolded were for the most part out of everyone's control and realm of predictability and imagination.

During this Christmas season may we be more fully aware of the love that comes to us as a gift and may we be willing to let our lifestyles and our choices reflect the love of God incarnated in Jesus. We ask that our loved ones and friends who are sick, grieving, distressed and not up to par this Christmas be blessed by the love and presence of friends and family as well as the love and presence of those dear ones who have gone on before them. In the days ahead, help us O god to hear once again the singing of angels, the baby's cry and your eternal, life-giving words to us, as we pray together, Our Father who art in heaven...AMEN.