

November 27, 2016 1st Sunday of Advent
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Isaiah 2:1-5, Psalm 122, Romans 13:11-14, Matthew 24:36-44

Not Just Waiting

In the first part of November, in the Adult Study group that meets before worship, we focused on a different kind of book. The book had parts that felt a bit stream of consciousness, and it quoted some long sections of poetry, some of it was somewhat impenetrable. We who meet for the Adult Study are a curious group of theologians—and good sports, open to a wide variety of takes on faith and the texts we read. As we finished that particular book, one person confessed, “This has confirmed for me my preferences in poetry. I’m just not that into beat poets. Give me Dr. Seuss.”

As it happens and as you may know, Dr. Seuss, otherwise known as Theodore Geisel, happened to be a life-long Lutheran. I wonder if that had an impact on his poetry, on his sense of repetition, if he got some of that from the rhythms of worship. In many churches, Lutheran and Catholic and many others that follow a liturgical calendar and order of service, there is a discernable pattern to what happens, a rhythm to worship, repeated phrases we say that may sometimes border on sing-song. Maybe some of that seeped into Dr. Seuss. But beneath the rhythmic pattern of his books—patterns he has fun with, and we try to, too—beneath the patterns Dr. Seuss often has a message. He writes about care for the environment (“The Lorax”) and compassion (“Horton Hears a Who” or “Horton Hatches and Egg”), and one of his most famous books, especially this time of year, a book by Dr. Seuss that describes how Black Friday doesn’t lead to December 25th (“How the Grinch Stole Christmas”).

Christmas is coming, and patterned people that we are, here at church we have shifted the rhythm of our worship. We are now in the season of the church that leads up to Christmas, the liturgical season that is known as Advent. In Advent we begin the service with a different set of repeated words, and then the lighting of the Advent wreath. The prayers we say together are different, too, as are the songs we sing to acclaim the gospel, and bring up the offering, and praise, and petition, and sing thanks to God. All of these repeated elements of worship in this church season are intended to help Advent seep into us.

There’s yet another book by Dr. Seuss that I think of when I think of Advent, a part of a book by Dr. Seuss that reminds me of one of the themes of Advent, a theme we said again and again at the beginning of the service today, it’s also on the cover of the bulletin: in Advent we wait. Well, there’s a part Dr. Seuss’s book “Oh the Places You’ll Go!” that has a place called the Waiting Place...

“a most useless place.

“for people just waiting.

Waiting for a train to go

Or a bus to come, or a plane to go

Or the mail to come, or the rain to go

Or the phone to ring, or the snow to snow

Or waiting around for a Yes or No

Or waiting for their hair to grow.

It goes on, as Dr. Seuss can and does, but you get the point. A book that was all about adventure, all life's opportunities, all its action and excitement and forward movement comes to plodding stop. "Everyone is just waiting."

The picture in the book shows people in a waiting room, slumped over, senseless, dazed looks on their faces. If you updated that illustration for today, the faces would probably have similarly dazed expressions, but they'd all be glued to little devices held in their hands. Nowadays, when people wait, they whip out their phones. At least I do. In line at the grocery store, or in the lobby at the eye doctor, or waiting for my body to wake up in the morning, I look at my phone. Too much. Especially in these last months and weeks leading up to and after the election, wondering what is and will be happening to our country, I find myself reflexively checking the news, scanning updates, reading various commentaries. One of them commented on the writer's very same pattern of reflexively looking: describing it in a way that felt all too familiar, the writer found herself regularly checking the news: like a rat pressing a bar for a pellet. An instantaneous, but short-lived, ultimately unsatisfying reward. We do this because waiting, as Dr. Seuss says, can feel "most useless." As if looking at a phone is any more useful.

We do a different kind of waiting here, in this room. During Advent we wait, but not for the mail, not for the train, not for the rain to go, or the phone to ring, or the snow to snow. In Advent we wait in hope.

Hope. How much we need this. How much our world needs this. How saturated we are by its opposite, and how toxic it can be, the lack of hope. You can die of it. It may not be listed officially, but it's the cause of death, just the same. People die of hopelessness. The scriptures tell us: without a vision, without hope, people perish. (Proverbs 29:18) Without it, without hope, life is nothing more than waiting to die.

We who gather here gather here because we believe life is more than that. This is why we come here, for that more, that more to come. To hear about that more, to pray for that more, to be patterned by that more, to learn the words of it by heart, so that they become part of us: to wait in hope. Especially now, this time, this season. When things are getting darker, that's when you need hope.

This is the waiting we do, in this place: we wait in hope. If you, like me, like Dr. Seuss, like patterns, find them comforting and energizing and a frame for delight, come to worship. Sometimes, what we do can tilt towards rote. You may feel that you are just repeating phrases, but even then, the rhythm has a way of sinking in. Sometimes, when you come here you may be feeling more hopeless than hopeful. You may have to look around the room to see someone else: maybe an old friend, maybe a young child, maybe a new face, you may feel hopeless but seeing them will fill you with hope—just as seeing you fills someone else with hope, too. I see it, when I see you. If you like me, need a little lightness as the world gets darker, come here and watch the wreath grow brighter. If you want to be glad, sing with the psalmist, "Let us go to the house of the Lord."

Come here and sing Advent's songs of expectation, hear Advent's ancient cadences of promise, for we are not just waiting, we wait in hope, for one who is coming, the one who says to us, Go! That's what Jesus says, at the end of Matthew's gospel Jesus says to his disciples, and to all who read that story, to all disciples to follow: "Go into all the world..." Those are the words of the great commission from the lips of the Savior, "Go therefore into all the world..." "Oh The Places You'll Go..."