

Coming home again this Advent
November 29, 2015 | Anita Retzlaff

Advent has arrived once again. With it has come all of the longing and expectation that we experience as Christmas approaches. It brings to mind a question; at least one that reappears for me every year along with the beginning of the advent season. Why do we wait for something that is already here; for someone who has already arrived? Our faith story is rooted in the Jesus story: that he was born 2000 years ago, taught and healed and stirred up the systems and structures of his day and was crucified as a young man of 33. Jesus has come and gone according to the stories from the bible. And yet we wait for Jesus to be born this Christmas one more time. We say that the Kingdom of God has come near in the birth of Jesus the Messiah and we also say that the Kingdom remains something that we are still working to establish with God's help. Jesus is here but once again this advent we wait for him and the Kingdom of his influence. Maybe these are the musings of someone who spends too much time pondering the imponderables.

This year, for me, these questions may have a plausible explanation, a heightened reality. This year has been a time of considerable upheaval for our congregation and for me personally. In the latter hours of the previous year Patrick and I performed the marriage of Matt and Craig. This set off a firestorm of protest from some areas of the church locally and across the continent. It provided times of deep reflection and intimate conversation within our congregation and over the last eleven months has been a unifying bond for some and a source of disappointment and estrangement for others. Patrick and I have had many conversations with folks who express deep convictions on all faces of this event. After eleven months we do remain divided about past events, divided especially on a provincial and national level. Our actions have had consequences. So, this year, it does not seem at all strange to me that we await the arrival of Jesus, the baby, born in Bethlehem.

We await a new start; a new inspiration; God come to us again, returning to encourage us and make all things new. Hope is born again and again and again. The prophet Zechariah in a totally other time from our present realities proclaims that the Lord has returned to his people, has returned to Zion. This implies a time of trouble and disconnect; that God and Israel were not in sync and that the relationship was cut off. Yet after a time of disorientation and disruption God re-appears or appears again for a new time. "Thus says the LORD: I will return to Zion, and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem; Jerusalem will be called the faithful city, and the mountain of the LORD of hosts shall be called the holy mountain... I will save my people...They shall be my people and I will be their God, in faithfulness and in righteousness."(from Zech. 8: 3,7-8)

So too for us, God comes again, in the baby Jesus of Bethlehem, as renewed hope and fresh encouragement. Fresh and intent on starting over again, God gives to the world new hope in Jesus Christ. Fresh and intent on starting over again, God returns to us with the desire to lift us out of our troubles in order that we continue to build heaven on earth, the Kingdom of God come among us.

This year has also been a year of great international turmoil. We have been caught up in the deadly attacks in Paris, the ongoing and intensifying civil war in Syria and the massive movement of refugees across the face of this planet. 60 million people are displaced around the globe – 60 million do not have the comfort of home! Exile of this proportion has surely unsettled all peoples worldwide – you and me included. The scale of those wandering in search of a home has to be the biggest threat to world peace imaginable. Though many miles from the largest dislocation in the Middle East we become a part of the anxiety and fear that such exodus produces for all of God's creation. Surely it makes us realize the ways in which many of our own indigenous neighbours have been displaced and continue to search for a habitable home.

All of these realities combined have placed many of us on high alert. Anxiety is expressed in many forms and I don't think we even realize this for what it is. Exchanges, personally, nationally and internationally, are laced with intolerance for the others' perspective. Snap judgments are made about policies that attempt to deal with this global catastrophe unfolding all around. Worldwide the rising incidence of PTSD, the occurrence of depression and other situational mental health stresses have produced an environment in which many of us feel acute distress. There are too many challenges to overcome, too much pain of the dispossessed and a lack of clear solutions. Terror stalks the world in various ways. At the root of such anxiety is a niggling sense of hopelessness that we try to keep at bay. As it turns out much of what we read in the prophets describes this kind of trouble just as so much of what we watch on the news today is profoundly unsettling.

This is why we come home to advent year after year. As much as there is distress on the face of the earth there is the promise that this is not the last word; this is not the end of our story. God says in many and various ways, that through God's **return** to Zion the world is about to change through Him. So too in the birth of a baby in Bethlehem 2000 years ago, Hope returns to inspire courage and strength. In Zechariah's story God reminds us yet again: "Even though it seems impossible to the remnant of this people in these days (and in our days) should it also seem impossible to me?" (8:6)

With images of comfort and care Zechariah paints wonderful pictures of return and a new start. "Thus says the LORD of hosts: Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of their great age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets. Thus says the LORD of hosts: Even though it seems impossible to the remnant of this people in these days should it also seem impossible to me?" Imagine the streets of Syria's cities once again filled with the peaceful rhythm of daily life where the frail elderly and the young and exuberant live out their days. Imagine the farmlands, the towns and the churches of the

Old Country; whichever country that might be for our immigrant nation; imagine the peaceful days of old. Though these days are long gone through the Kingdom of God's ways there is always hope of return.

“Rejoice greatly O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” (9:9) God's return comes about through peaceful ways. Instead of war horses and chariots the return of God is imagined as arriving on the back of a donkey. Such is Zechariah's image of the Kingdom. Victory and strength are known in building peace and safety. Such is the salvation we receive from God. And so is it also the trademark of Jesus' saving acts. He too returns to Jerusalem for the last time riding on a beast of burden, not a tool of war. His gift is not that of domination but that of goodness and beauty and wholeness.

God's return to Zion and our expectation in Advent's return reflect a desire, a yearning for health and peace: shalom. “On that day the LORD their God will save them for they are the flock of his people; for like the jewels of a crown they shall shine on his land. For what goodness and beauty are his! Grain shall make the young men flourish, and new wine the young women.” (9:16-17) Bread and wine: images of wholeness and relationship to God. Bread and wine: images of feasting at our Lord's Table; the supper which Jesus shared with his disciples.

Advent is here. We have come round once again to the time of waiting for Jesus; waiting for the peace that comes from the teaching of our Saviour and Lord. In light of the strife we experience as people these days whether it is due to the disagreements we have over biblical interpretation as it relates to sexuality, divorce and peacemaking or whether it is the religious extremism that fuels so much terror and violence, the

message of Jesus come to earth as a baby, once, many years ago, is what we yearn to hear.

I would like to share with you some words from my father, Bernie Retzlaff. In clearing out some of my old files the other day I came across the handwritten script of the presentation Dad made to the Adult Education class probably about 10 years ago. It was a series on the Bible and our journeys with the Bible over the years. In these words I find the reason that we wait for Jesus in advent.

“For at least the last ten years, while reading the four Gospels, one question has become a consuming passion. How could Jesus, who was the epitome of righteousness, relate so effectively to sinners of all kinds? To put the same question a little differently, ‘Why did the tax collectors and sinners come flocking to Jesus rather than running away from him?’

It seemed that Jesus was able to overlook the general categories into which society placed people. He was not a careful observer of strict male/female roles. He did not pay attention to saint and sinner distinctions. Upper and lower class divisions had little influence on who he associated with. Jesus did not let the corruption of a tax-collector keep him from going to the home of Zaccheus. The sin of the woman caught in adultery did not keep Jesus from coming to her defense. The crudeness of fishermen did not keep Jesus from calling them to be disciples. Jesus did not exclude Mary from sitting with the men when she desired to receive instruction from a master teacher.

Somehow Jesus was able to respond to the innermost needs of individuals. Jesus knew how to appeal to the highest and best in others, to lift them out of a decrepit existence to one of inner fulfillment. Sometimes Jesus defied convention in order to reach out to someone. At other times Jesus would meet human need by healing on the Sabbath. Jesus risked being branded a glutton and a drunkard while he visited with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus forgave sin to save a soul as readily as he healed the body to restore health.

The common people flocked to Jesus because he had an uncommon depth of understanding. They wanted to be with him because Jesus had food for the soul. Crowds gathered round him to feel his healing touch. Losers came running to him to gain inspiration so they could become winners. The outcasts and rejects of society came to him to feel the beauty and warmth of acceptance.

The greatest gift that I have received from reading the Bible is to have been introduced to Jesus. My firm desire is that I could be like Jesus in as much as possible: that I might be an understanding, healing, nurturing, inspiring presence wherever I may be, with whoever I might be." Thanks Dad!

This is why we come home to Jesus once again this Advent season. AMEN