

Anhelamos/We Long
Advent 1 Sermon
Seattle First Baptist Church
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Time...time...time...there are all kinds of time. There is a time to get up in the morning. There is a time to go to bed. There is a time to go to school and work and church, and a time to come home. There is a time to play. But what is time? Some people say that time is a line, but I wonder what that would look like. Wait, what is this?

Time. Time in a line. Look at this. Here is the beginning. It is the newest part. It is just being born. It is brand new.

Now look. (pull the string slowly)

Look. It is getting older. The part that was new is now getting old. I wonder how long time goes. Does it go forever? Could there ever be an ending? (pull to the end)

It ended. Look at the beginning.

The beginning that was so new at the beginning now is old. The ending is the new part now. We have a beginning that is like an ending and an ending that is like a beginning.

Do you know what the church did? They tied the ending that was like a beginning and the beginning that was like an ending together, so we would always remember that for every ending there is a beginning and for every beginning there is an ending.

This is how we teach about the circle of the church year and the sacred times with children in our Godly Play Sunday school. Today is a special day because it is the first day of Advent. It is the beginning of a new church year! Even though many of us don't celebrate a new calendar year until January, today is the first day of the Christian church year.

I like the way Godly Play explains time. This gold ribbon reminds us that time is not always linear, not always marching on towards a great climax the way some history books tell us it does. The circle of time represents how time repeats, how sometimes events repeat themselves, how time folds in on itself and endings become beginnings.

Sometimes we begin advent with the gospel of Luke's words, "In those days..." and we look backwards in time, remembering what came to pass so long ago, when the first century of the Common Era began. "In those days..."

But sometimes we begin advent with reading the prophets, ancient writings that came even before the Common Era, even before Jesus, even before the Roman Empire. Way back even to the 6th or 7th or 8th century before Jesus was born, we read what the prophets wrote. As we read them, a funny thing happens. We read something from the past that calls us to look into the future.

And that's what our advent theme already/not yet is all about. Things that have happened in the past, like stars that are already born but whose light has not reached us yet, or the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, are always still already unfolding. The time that was the beginning is old now, so it is like an ending, the Godly Play story says. This upside-down, topsy-turvy, time-twisting, folding and unfolding theme of already/not yet is descriptive of advent. Gary W. Charles writes in the Feasting on the Word commentary: "Advent...leaves us dizzy over time. Advent is not a steady, constant, "time marches on" kind of time, a persistent drumbeat of day after day, year after year. Advent is unpredictable time, unsteady time. In this time-tumbling season, we look for a baby to be born while we know that the baby has already been born, and still is being born in us--this Emmanuel who came and is coming and is among us right now. Not only is Advent not well behaved, neat and orderly; it contorts time."

This is church time. This is God-time. This is advent time.

God-time is what Jeremiah wrote about in our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures today. The prophet Jeremiah wrote our Scripture today either during or after the Babylonian exile. Remember that the people of Israel had come into what they called "the Promised Land" and set up kingdoms and laws and families. And then people from outside the land came into the land and tried to take them over: the Assyrians. After a long and arduous and devastating siege, the Assyrians went away. Then the Babylonians came, and they did not go away. Instead they destroyed the Holy City of Jerusalem, they destroyed the Temple where the people of God went to worship, and they took people from their homeland. John Calvin writes of the exile this way: "As they were then exposed to slaughter...the children of God saw thousand deaths; so that it could not be but that terror almost drove them to despair; and in their exile they saw that they were far removed from their own country, without any hope of a return." The people of Israel, long persecuted, were homeless again. The prophets we read on the first Sunday of advent were writing against this backdrop, writing with the knowledge of their people's despair in their hearts. Theologian Jennifer Ayres writes, "Despair is characterized primarily by the conspicuous absence of theological hope. Humans meet despair when they cannot imagine God's promised alternative future."

The promised alternative future is named in Jeremiah 33:14-16 this way: "The time is coming, declares the LORD, when I will fulfill my gracious promise with the people of Israel and Judah. In those days and at that time, I will raise up a

righteous branch from David's line, who will do what is just and right in the land. In those days, Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is what the leader will be called: The LORD is our righteousness."

Even though these promises felt like they would never be fulfilled, the prophets gave words to the longing of the people for the day that they *just had* to believe would come. Again, Jennifer Ayres: "The inclusion of prophetic literature in the Advent lections points to the importance of waiting, anticipating, and trusting in a promised future that seems very removed from our current circumstance. And it is in the season of Advent that we engage in the strenuous and crucial Christian task of imagination. Together with the prophet, we are called not only to name suffering and injustice, but to lean into God's promised alternative future...although we do not bring about [this future] through sheer force of will, in our waiting we do try to place ourselves in a posture so that we might become partners with God in the advent of a new reality."

This is the call of advent: "to engage in the strenuous and crucial Christian task of imagination" towards a world characterized by "a new social context in which we live together in safety, peace, and righteousness. God will do this, as promised, and even bring about new life for the city."

Whew! What a daunting task the prophets call us to today and throughout the next four weeks of anticipating the Christ child's birth. This season of the church year, though shorter than Lent and Pentecost, encompasses a lot. The story of Heidi Neumark, a Lutheran pastor in the Bronx, is told in the Feasting of the Word commentary. Rev. Neumark says that she never feels quite connected to the season of Lent, when some dwell in guilt and shame and deprivation. She doesn't feel connected to Easter, either, when we are supposed to be full of joy and victorious. But for her, she says, "advent unfailingly embraces and comprehends my reality. And what is that? I think of the Spanish word *anhelo*, or longing. Advent is when the church can no longer contain its unfulfilled desire and the cry of *anhelo* bursts forth: Maranatha! Come Lord Jesus! O Come, O Come Emmanuel!"

Anhelo. It means "I long." *Anhelamos*, the collective form means "we long."

The sermon writes itself this week. The southern border crossing of San Ysidro near San Diego and Tijuana was shut down this week. Tear gas was used on children. People literally killed themselves trying to climb over border fences into the United States. The sermon writes itself for this first Sunday of advent, when we name our "*anhelamos*." This sermon, like the Scripture for today, like Advent itself, must be bilingual. It must speak the language of current realities while also speaking the language of the future. We must speak one of the languages of the thousands who seek asylum in our country, even as we speak the

language of the empire that shuts them out. We must speak the language of despair even as we adopt the lexicon of hope.

Anhelamos/We long.

One of the people walking in the caravan is a woman named Olga Suyapa. She and her family left Guatemala and were heading north towards the United States. A coordinator of the Joint Action of Churches, Sean Hawkey, wrote the following about Suyapa on his Facebook page: "I spent 22 hours in a hospital with Suyapa...The name Suyapa is symbolically significant because the Virgin of Suyapa is the patron saint of Honduras. Suyapa had walked for nearly two weeks in the migrant caravan, with her husband and three of her children, and she was eight and a half months pregnant. They had decided to leave because of abject poverty and insecurity. Her waters broke amid a crowd of 8,000 people in Juchitán, Oaxaca. In the following minutes, she was separated from her husband, and was taken to the public hospital where she was told they couldn't attend to her. A human rights promoter, called Jesus (I'm not making this up) grabbed the trolley she was on and with my colleague [sic] she went to a private hospital, and after a very long labour [18 hours], gave birth to a baby girl. She is calling the baby Guadalupe, the significance of that won't be lost on any Mexican, as the Virgin of Guadalupe is the patron saint of Mexico." Suyapa and her husband are grateful that their daughter was born in Mexico because that gives the family certain rights in that country.

And how appropriate that Guadalupe is named for the mother of Jesus, who is called La Virgen de Guadalupe in Mexico, a young woman who spoke with angels and cried out, "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for God has looked upon my humble situation...God has scattered the proud and brought the mighty down from their thrones and exalted the poor; God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty." The Mexican newspaper that reported Guadalupe's birth did not shy away from the religious overtones of the event when it wrote that Guadalupe is the first woman born in "exodus."

Suyapa and her family say that baby Guadalupe gives them hope. I wonder if the advent of the new life come into the world helps them lean into the nearness of a promised future where they will have economic opportunity and be together as a family.

Erich fromm, in the Revolution of Hope writes, "Hope is *paradoxical*. It is neither passive waiting nor is it unrealistic forcing of circumstances that cannot occur. It is like the crouched tiger, which will jump only when the moment for jumping has come. Neither tired reformism nor pseudo-radical adventurism is an expression of hope. To hope means to be ready at every moment for that which is not yet born, and yet not become desperate if there is no birth in our lifetime. There

is no sense in hoping for that which already exists or for that which cannot be. Those whose hope is weak settle down for comfort or for violence; those whose hope is strong see and cherish all signs of new life and are ready every moment to help the birth of that which is ready to be born.”

In the book we are reading this month for adult education, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan talk about the eschaton, the fancy theological word that means “end things.” In one version of the eschaton imagined by ancient peoples, there is a final cosmic battle where victory comes through destruction. When the Babylonians came to destroy Jerusalem, some thought it was that final battle as they watched their temple burn. Another version of the eschaton is an ultimate feast celebrating victory through peace and justice. In *Godly Play* we ask “wonder questions,” so I wonder which version of the end things we want to be ready for.

Theologian Jurgen Moltmann wrote in his book *Theology of Hope*, “I tried to present the Christian hope no longer as an opium of the beyond but rather as the divine power that makes us alive in the world.” Just as the aid worker Jesus was ready to jump into action to help Suyapa deliver her child even though there was no room in the public hospital, we must ready ourselves to jump into action, awake to the circumstances of the world and help deliver the world that is possible, that has already been promised and that is always on its way.

When I saw a picture of Guadalupe a few days after her birth, part of Hawkey’s post I just shared with you, I saw the Christ child. (*show photo*)

I thought to myself, “Anhelo un mundo donde los niños sean seguros, sanos y fuertes.” “I long” for a world in which Guadalupe is safe and healthy and strong. Anhelo para un mundo de paz, justicia, y amor. I long for a world of peace, justice and love.

Una pregunta, one question: ¿Qué es lo que anhelas? What do you long for? Turn to someone next to you and share your longing with them.

Y tambien, ¿Qué anhelamos? What do we long for as a body of Christ?

I think we long for justice for those who are pushed to the margins. We long for a world where people have what they need to live healthy, happy and safe lives. We long for a world where children do not have to stand trial for deportation alone, but can receive sanctuary. We long for a world where freedom of movement is accessible to all. We long for a world sin fronteras, without borders. We long for a world where toda la humanidad es bienvenida, where all humanity is welcome. We long for a world where we show la gracia de Dios, the grace of God, to each other in our speech, our actions, our hospitality and our witness.

We must wake up. We must watch for la luz del mundo, the light of the world, that is already here and yet always on its way and coming forth in each of us during this advent season.

Give voice to your longing.

Anhelamos el nacimiento del niño cristo.
O ven, o ven, Emmanuel!
O Come, O Come, Emmanuel!