

2 Peter 3: 8-15
December 10, 2017
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
Second Sunday of Advent

If you think about it, there is no celebration of Christmas in the New Testament. Luke and Matthew tell stories of the events surrounding Jesus' birth. But take away the heavenly announcements in the hills of Bethlehem and what we have is pretty simple and earthy. A young couple comes to a busy town; unremarkable save that the woman is within hours of giving birth. Bethlehem not being a great tourist destination, there are not motels on every corner. No one is keeping the light on for anybody. I am certain that for many others there is no room in the inn. They find shelter in a stall for domestic animals. The woman gives birth. The miracle is that she does so safely, given the long journey and the dirty hay. She wraps the baby tightly in swaddling cloths and lays the baby in the manger, the feeding trough. This scene is interrupted by shepherds who have received a dramatic announcement about the birth of this child. That others are present is

indicated by Luke's phrase that "all who heard" the shepherd's message wondered at the meaning of this announcement. The mother wonders about the words as well, "pondering them in her heart." What the father thought will never be known. Sometimes fathers are like that.

Yet despite this profound and wonderful story, there is no recorded celebration of the birth thereafter. We catch a glimpse of Jesus at age twelve and then not again until he is thirty. And then all the action happens. And two years later it is all over. There will be no formal celebration of Jesus' birth for several generations.

So if the New Testament places relatively little emphasis on the birth of Jesus where is the emphasis placed? It is on the present and the future. For the New Testament writers, the entire significance of the birth of the messiah is about beginning of a new era in human history. It is about the reign of God breaking into in human events and ordinary everyday life. The birth, life, death and resurrection of the man known as Jesus, son of Joseph of Nazareth signifies nothing less

than the destruction of the grim cycle of birth, growth, aging, decline and death. The eternal life of God is now present and available to humanity, not in some future time, not only after death, but right here and now.

Read in this light, the writings of the New Testament are infused with anticipation of the spiritual vitality of the moment and the ongoing unfolding of God's revelation to come. The story begins with wonder and pondering at the words said about a new born baby and builds and builds to a crescendo of expectation which is crushed on the cross and raised with liberated power in God's raising Jesus from the dead. The Christian scriptures are all the more remarkable because they demonstrate the vibrant expectancy that survived Jesus' return to the heart of God.

As we have already seen these scriptures reveal a tension within the new community of faith. On the one hand there is the expectation that Jesus will return to complete the transformation of life which began with his birth. We hear the tension in Jesus' own teachings. Yes,

the son of man will come again and all would do well to be spiritually awake and in expectation his return. The lamps of spiritual alertness need to be kept full of the oil of faith, hope and love. Yet almost in the same breath, Jesus teaches that when the son of man does come he will want to see that faith hope and love actively put into practice. In other words he will not be impressed by people sitting on mountain tops or enclaves of spiritual purity waiting for him. The faithful will be known by their dirty hands and feet, their depleted bank accounts and their wounded hearts.

Such is the pull of the cycle of the seasons and of mundane life, that as the promised return of Jesus was delayed the community of faith found it harder and harder to maintain the expectation that the messiah would return in their lifetimes. The evidence of the cycle of the seasons was then as it is now, far more real than some promised spiritual event in the future.

Those who had become spiritually awake gradually fell again into the rhythm of the seasons and the resignation that, after all, we are

dust and to dust we return. The faithful may well continue to show up for worship, but slowly; surely, like the tides eating away at the shoreline, the expectation began to fade: *which was a crisis then and is a crisis now.*

We hear the concern and the urgency in Peter's words.

Do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow about his promise as some think about slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any of you to perish, but to come to repentance.

I would paraphrase the last bit to say, "not wanting any of you to perish, *but wanting you to wake up!*"

But for Peter, as momentous as maintaining expectation of the last days is, even more urgent is this question: *what sort of persons ought you to be...?*

Friends, the crisis which threatened the young faith then is eating the church alive now. It is a crisis of expectation. And the crisis of expectation is simply this: in American culture there is only the expectation of power in the moment, getting through the day, winning

at all costs, self-determination without regard to the consequences for people or the planet. There is no commonly held sense of destiny that gives people the willingness to put aside personal agendas for the good of the whole. There is no over-arching ethic or high common calling which asks of human beings, *what sort of persons ought you to be?*

The challenge of this holy season is to reawaken to the high calling of the expectation that God in Jesus is alive and that our destiny is to become more and more *like him*. We can sit back and be cynical or depressed about government and the blindness of those whose opinions we dislike. But it is not from the government that the question comes. It is from God by the Holy Spirit and the life death and resurrection of his son, our Lord. In this season where the holidays represent just one more turn of the impersonal wheel of time, will we witness to the reality of the presence of the kingdom of God in a small infant? How will that awareness guide us to Bethlehem?

What sort of persons shall we be?

Amen.