

“Waiting for Christmas”
Isaiah 35:1-10; James 5:7-10
Advent 3

Isaiah 35:1-10

³⁵The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus ²it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God. ³Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. ⁴Say to those who are of a fearful heart, “Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.”

⁵Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; ⁶then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; ⁷the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

⁸A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God’s people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. ⁹No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there.

¹⁰And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

James 5:7-11

⁷Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it

receives the early and the late rains. ⁸You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.

⁹Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors!

¹⁰As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

¹¹Indeed we call blessed those who showed endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

The Sermon

Do you remember anything from when you were four or five years old? Do you have any memories of Christmastime from back then?

In our formative years, or at least in the first years where memories are beginning to lodge more or less permanently in our minds—three, four, five years old—a year is one-third or even half of what, as far as we can remember, is our whole lifetime.

I remember one time when I was five or six asking my Mom what year it was, and I said, “And don’t say 1973, because it’s ALWAYS 1973.”

(It was 1973.)

So, if you’re 80 years old right now, imagine that your most recent Christmas was 40 years ago. That’s what it felt like when we were just getting old enough to remember Christmastime from one year to the next.

Waiting for Christmas to come was like waiting half your life for something.

And for many of us, I daresay it was made all the harder by the fact that even when it was only two weeks away, or one week, or three days, or 24 hours, you still could hardly wait.

I realize that's not everybody. But again, if I may be so bold, I would suggest that even for those for whom Christmastime could be difficult, the dream of what Christmas ought to be—and therefore at least theoretically could be—was firmly in our minds: Maybe this year there would be sober parents and no frozen pipes and no shouting matches and no neighborhood bullies or drive-by shootings and the news from overseas wouldn't be too bad.

At the very least, you *hoped*. But more likely, you *longed*, you were agonized with anticipation: You just couldn't wait for Christmas to come.

And when we get a little older, or a lot older, we find that the holiday comes around all too soon, but still we find ourselves waiting.

Sometimes we're waiting for that Christmastime enchantment to grab hold of our hearts.

And sometimes we're more consciously waiting for all the things we have come to recognize that Christmas means, or promises, or leads us to hope for.

Generosity of spirit.

Peace on earth, goodwill to all.

And perhaps for many, in and out of the church, the most needed and the least expected: the coming of Christ into the world.

In Advent, we wait.

In an essay called *Waiting for God*, the 20th century writer Henri Nouwen said:

“To wait open-endedly is an enormously radical attitude toward life.

“So is to trust that something will happen to us that is far beyond our own imaginings.

“So, too, is giving up control over our future and letting God define our life, trusting that God molds us according to God’s love and not according to our fear.

“The spiritual life,” said Nouwen, “is a life in which we wait, actively present to the moment, trusting that new things will happen to us, new things that are far beyond our own imagination, fantasy, or prediction.

“That, indeed, is a very radical stance toward life in a world preoccupied with control.”¹

To wait is to be suspended as if in mid-air, like Absalom in the Old Testament, trying to get away on a mule, in the heat of battle, and getting his long hair caught in a tree branch, yanked off the mule as it goes on, and left, as the Bible says, “hanging between heaven and earth” (II Samuel 18:9).

Like kids who can’t wait for Christmas morning to come, those of us who are waiting for something else, maybe something we can’t picture or imagine and don’t even know to hope for, can sometimes feel like we’re hanging somewhere between heaven and earth. And it’s not always clear which one we are more longing to reach.

In western central Germany there is town with medieval origins, a thousand-year-old Benedictine monastery, and practically numberless surrounding hamlets and villages of unutterable charm and beauty,

much like the town itself, called Schmallenberg, where every year on the weekend of the Second Sunday of Advent, a Christmas market surrounds the church in the Old Town center.

Late one winter night 75 years ago, a young man named Nicholas Alkemade found himself sitting on top of a snowbank somewhere east of Schmallenberg, not far from some lofty pine trees—looking around, taking stock of his life, getting his bearings, feeling himself breathing in and out on a quiet, moonlit winter’s night.

Nicholas Alkemade had spent the previous two minutes falling more than three miles, without a parachute, from a British Lancaster bomber² which had been hit by air fire from a German night-fighter while Alkemade and his crewmates were coming back from a bombing raid on Berlin.

Flight Sergeant Alkemade was the tail gunner, and when the plane had been hit, it became a nightmare of fire and smoke, and young Nicholas decided to bail out as the lesser of two horrors.

Because of the way the plane was built, the tail gunners couldn’t wear a parachute, and as Alkemade reached for one to strap on, he realized it was already on fire. It wouldn’t do him a bit of good.

So, he just opened the hatch and tumbled out.

He later said, “It was very quiet, the only sound being the drumming of aircraft engines in the distance, and no sensation of falling at all.” He said it just felt like he was suspended in space.³

He found himself “strangely composed and at peace,”⁴ and accepted his fate philosophically, not even bothering to wonder if he was going to make it. Later he said that the whole experience “was so surreal and dreamy” that he could never be sure whether or not he ever lost consciousness on the way down.

His fall was slowed by the branches of some tall pine trees before he landed on a snowbank, ending up in a sitting position on a deep pillow of snow with no parachute and no boots, but amazingly, no broken bones either, in fact nothing more than “a sore knee and some minor abrasions.”⁵

The overlapping ironies of mass killing as the wretched business of war alongside the miracle of practically impossible survival; the inexpressible charm of a world of Rhineland Christmastime beauty and the abominable shame and horror of the Holocaust—those and many other ironies are so tangled up and multilayered that, for the moment, I beg your forgiveness if you’ll allow me just to leave that to be what it is.

Like Nicholas Alkemade on his fantastical way down to a flabbergastingly improbable safe landing, from war in the sky to war on the ground and in between, an infinitely peaceful glide through the air, maybe we are all, individually and as people on the globe together, hanging somewhere, somehow, between heaven and earth.

I wonder if, down there in the snow, newly reborn in a way, looking around in what I can only imagine to be a childlike wonder—I wonder if sitting there unexpectedly on that snowbank, Nicholas thought back to childhood memories of playing in the snow.

Did you ever have a chance when you were a kid to go out and play in the snow? I remember a sense of anticipation, getting on snow boots and coat and mittens and a hat, and going out with a sled and all that.

It wasn’t too many years later that those cold, snowy days meant trudging through sludge or sliding on ice to get home from school or work or whatever you had to do.

Either way, the reward, or the culmination, was coming in from the cold and damp and ice and wind,

coming into the warmth, and if it was Christmastime, the charm,
and love, and food, and a sense of belonging, and being at home.

And I wonder now if that isn't more or less a pretty decent description of joy.

Happiness might be another thing, or several other things, that you may or may not be experiencing at any given time. But maybe joy is that feeling of knowing that you can come inside and be home and safe and warm and in a place where you are happy to belong.

This Advent finds many of us, and our planet and our species and all earthly creation, in varying degrees of discord and rancor.

It's like we're out in the snow, whether we just came out to play or we're trying to make the perilous journey to get to wherever we need to go,

and our faces are red, and our noses are sore, and our feet are wet, and we can see our breath and our fingertips are frozen and we're cold and tired and starting to get nervous about how much more of this we can take.

We need to get inside and get warm and be at home. We need to find our joy again.

Sometimes we're waiting for that Christmastime enchantment to grab hold of our hearts again.

Sometimes we're waiting for all the things that Christmas means, or promises, or leads us to hope for.

And always we are waiting for a sign that Christ is truly coming into the world.

Waiting for that joy to come into our lives, we set up our nativity scenes with Mary and Joseph and the baby in the manger, and a couple of shepherds and some farm animals and the incongruous magi and sometimes an angel watching over it all.

And somewhere deep inside, something within us longs to get ourselves into that cozy manger scene.

In reality, it's a dark and unhygienic place stinking of animals and with a newborn in a trough and beleaguered parents and no midwife and the magi aren't actually going to show up for a year or more so there's no gold and no treasure chests yet, just a visit from some shepherds—which is nice, but they have nothing to offer and the stable doesn't offer anything for them, either, except to share this bizarre news they've been told by a celestial army which initially scared the heck out of them and probably still has them pretty confused.

I don't know what I would do if I were a shepherd working the night shift in a field, and all of a sudden a literal army of celestial angels not only blanketed the sky, but then, terror of terrors, this invincible supernatural platoon lines up high in the sky, takes direct aim at the helpless shepherds on the open plain below—and *sings*.

My laundry bill would be incalculable.

I had an opportunity in 2016, in the company of some dear friends, clergy colleagues in the area, to visit the cathedral in Bethlehem under which is the spot where tradition says Jesus came into the world.

We'd been traveling in that part of the world for a couple of weeks and had become accustomed to that word, "tradition," as in, "This is the traditional site where Jesus sent the demons into the pigs and they ran

off the cliff and drowned... Tradition has it that this is where Mary Magdalene was born.... Here's the traditional place called the Skull.”

“Traditional” means a place has been identified with a Biblical event, but nobody really knows for sure. And it's not just good guesswork; there are political and economic reasons why someone in the remote past, or the recent past, or the present day would try to make a case that such-and-such event took place right here, and by the way the entry fee is 25 American dollars, please.

So, I won't say I was exactly cynical going into the “traditional” site of the manger where Mary brought Jesus into the world, but I was pretty firmly in a mindset that nobody really knows for sure the exact point where it happened.

You go into the gigantic church, and make your way to a stairway going down below, and there's a throng of people there, and it takes a while. So I'm thinking about the possibility of claustrophobia, and wishing I hadn't drunk quite so much tea 45 minutes ago.

And we finally shuffle down to the floor, which is just a massively crowded room, a line that snakes around several times, and it leads to kind of an alcove, where you will look down and in, almost like into a fireplace. You may have seen photographs of, or may have been there yourself to see, the design on the floor kind of suggesting a crown, on the spot where, “traditionally,” Jesus was born.

You really have to think of the throng of people behind you. When you pass the spot, there's no time to kneel and pray, not even time to set up a picture—you're certainly not going to get a selfie there.

And just before I made it to the spot where I could bend down and look in, the thought suddenly washed over me:

Sure, maybe it isn't. But maybe it is. Maybe this is *the* point on earth—the point in the *universe*—where the Almighty Creator God, the maker and master of all time and space and dimensions, the High Holy God, came into the world in the flesh of a newborn baby, when all of this was just a rotten stable. And my heart was in my throat, and for half a second I was dizzy with awe.

Maybe it isn't, and maybe it doesn't matter anyway—hey, we're surrounded by God all the time, and the gift is already within us and around us.

But maybe things that are far beyond our own imagination, fantasy, or prediction, things that are well beyond our control, can truly *be*.

Maybe the distance between heaven and earth can be a soft landing, despite the utter implausibility of it even being possible.

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing.

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
and the lame leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

“Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.”

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¹ Henri Nouwen, *Waiting for God* (Crossroad Publishing Company, 2018) 1

² Bill Bryson, *The Body: A Guide for Occupants* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2019), 192-193

³ Bryson, *The Body*, 192

⁴ Bryson, *The Body*, 192

⁵ Bryson, *The Body*, 193. While most of the descriptive language about Nicholas Alkemade is derived from Bryson's 2019 book, other information about the surroundings and the events of that night come from widely available sources. Which is to say, in this case: Wikipedia entries for Alkemade, Schmollenberg, night-fighters, etc.