

“We Don’t Know Yet”

Isaiah 35: 1-2; Jeremiah 33: 14-16; Luke 1:26-38

Preached at Redlands First United Methodist Church

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By Carolyn Bohler

Thank you, youth, for “Hanging the Greens” this morning, and thank you Worship Committee for transforming our sanctuary into a worshipful place for Advent. Advent is what we call the reflective time before Christmas. Today we lit the Advent candle of “Hope.” As we celebrate Advent, we know that Christmas will arrive. However, for centuries people looked forward with Hope to a day when the Prince of Peace would come on earth. *They did not know* when that would be.

Even though we affirm that the Prince of Peace was born, we still hope, for the Peace about which Jesus taught and which he lived to become a reality on earth. This week, when again there was so much un-peace, we ask, “When, oh when?” The answer is, “We do not know.”

When Advent comes, I recall the words of the mother of a good friend of mine. These words of advice to my friend, by her mother, were, “We Don’t Know Yet.”

How is that advice? Why did her mother keep repeating this? You see, my friend has a child I’ll call “Joy” who has a number of limitations that took quite a while to diagnose. Step by step, my friend did all in her power to expand Joy’s potential. Occasionally she would say to her mother, “What will Joy be like in school?” or “How will she relate to guys as a teen-ager?” or “Will she ever marry?” “How will Joy live as an adult?” To each of these worrisome wonderments my friend’s mother calmly replied, “We don’t know yet.”

I called my friend to discuss this sermon, telling her the title, and she asked, “Which Sunday of Advent will you preach this?” I said at that time, “I don’t know yet.”

Advent is THE time of the year when a calm response to questions of the future is extraordinarily appropriate.

The advising grandmother could have responded: “We don’t know yet” in a gruff, judgmental manner that communicated: “Don’t worry; just live today. Don’t ask stupid questions. Don’t think of the future.”

But the mother spoke so that the phrase shaped into a prayer, a gentle reminder that answers would be revealed only in time.

At the moment when my friend worried aloud to her mom, she was enjoying her little daughter. There were challenges with the development of motor skills and barriers to mainstreaming in school. Yet, every “now” she had with her daughter ended up being okay; the “now” moments were frequently even blessings.

There was profound wisdom in the grandmother’s advice. It was like a present that, unwrapped, meant: “There are many unknowns. Joy isn’t an ‘average’ child. Yet, day by day, year by year, we find answers and solutions. Admittedly, there are sometimes even bigger problems and issues. We know what we have today, and we are fine today. It is very probable that tomorrow we’ll be able to cope with tomorrow.”

Our parents told my sister and me a story about an earlier time for them. They had moved to Boston just before Christmas. Our dad was transferred there from

California. They didn't have much money, and the move was costly. As they unpacked, they looked at each other. How could they afford a Christmas tree?

What they did was to purchase a small scraggly tree and cut the worst side off, so that they had a nice *half* tree. Then they put that half against a mirror; voila! a full tree. As the story goes, it was beautiful.

They might have asked each other, leaving California for Boston, "How will it turn out?" The answer might have been, "We don't know yet." Once there, the mixture of blessings and troubles were a complex blend. But they enjoyed Christmas in a way they could not have anticipated as they began their journey.

We will soon have numerous poinsettias in this beautiful sanctuary. The tradition surrounding the poinsettia as a Christmas flower is a Mexican one. A little boy wanted to bring a gift to the church, as all were doing on Christmas. He thought that he had nothing to give. He stopped, prayed, and when he opened his eyes, a flower was blooming right before him, a poinsettia. He picked it up and took that flower to the church as his gift. The poinsettia was a gift of colorful beauty. When we decorate with poinsettias, we are adding colorful beauty to our surroundings, but we are also affirming that though we *don't always know* in advance what gift we are able to bring, our very desire to give makes life bloom around us.

The passage from Isaiah which we heard today tells of something very strange. The prophet suggests that Palmdale will bloom this year just like Honolulu. What? You think, "Carolyn, you're crazy!" The passage from Isaiah does not quite say that, but what it does say is the biblical equivalent of a promise that Palmdale will bloom like Hawaii. The prophet says the dry land will bloom and compares the blooming desert to luxuriant districts which would have been familiar to his hearers.

Of course people who know deserts might ask, "Couldn't the desert bloom simply because it rained?" It's not a miracle for a desert to bloom, if miracle means "not natural." Deserts do bloom; it's a fact of nature. However, for Palmdale to become like Honolulu *would* be miraculous. The prophet Isaiah, using this metaphor, was raising expectations quite high! If the people followed prophet Isaiah, they would need hope!

Let's turn to Jeremiah. Here God, called Lord, lights the Advent candle of Hope. That is, Jeremiah says that the day will come when God will fulfill the promise God made with the people of Israel. Out of the line of David will come one *who will bring justice*.¹ There is justice, surely, for some, just as there are some flowers in the desert. But, justice for all? That surely would seem as miraculous as Palmdale blooming like Honolulu. The prophet Jeremiah was raising expectations quite high! The people, to follow Jeremiah, needed hope!

Let's add Luke to our reflections. Angel means "messenger"—a messenger from God to humans. In this vignette, an angel appears to Mary, who is a virgin. (Virgin simply meant a young female, without its emphasis we have today.) The angel says something like, "Hail O favored one, the Lord is with you." Not surprisingly, Mary *was* troubled at this. She is said to have considered "in her mind what sort of greeting this might be." Realizing Mary's fear, the angel responds: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." This second comment does not sound altogether calming to me, "you have found favor with God." The angel then explains to Mary that she will conceive and bear a son, and shall call him Jesus.

Mary reacts: "How can this be?"

After a little while she says, “Let it be to me according to your word.” In other words, though *she does not know yet what is in store*, she is willing for God’s will to be done.

I was pregnant twice during Advent. It’s an awesome experience to KNOW you are going to give birth, but to NOT KNOW yet to whom. *The future is both known and it is not known.*

This is our predicament during Advent, hoping on the big scale, for justice for all, and in our smaller circles, for whatever we’re inclined to worry about to work out. With hope, the future is both known and not known.

In a symbolic way, our wrapped presents point to this knowing and unknowing. We know there is something in each present we see under the tree. But, we *don’t know* yet, what the present is.

The challenge in the big picture and in little things is to have the **right amount of hope**. If our hopes are too high, we can be disappointed. If they are not high enough, we may miss God-given opportunities.

My mom told my sister and me a story about when she was a child. One year, she peeked into the chest where Christmas presents were waiting and spied a huge tea set. When she opened the present on Christmas, it was a small tea set. Her anticipation had expanded it in her mind. I think that my sister and I were told this story to keep our hopes in perspective –also probably to encourage us not to peek.

How do we maintain the RIGHT AMOUNT of hope, in little things and big ones?

How will my friend’s daughter face young adult challenges? When/how will there be justice for all, as promised?

We don’t know yet, but with hope we are calm today.

One of the most basic tenets of Christianity is that Life is good. Even though Christianity affirms the goodness of life, Christianity also acknowledges the reality of problems.

In a little book about Christmas, Methodist Bishop Melvin Wheatly points out that at Christmastime we celebrate Jesus who showed us:

Not a world that has in it nothing but good, but a world that is good, while having in it so much that is bad.

Not a life that knows no darkness, but a life in which even those who walk in darkness have seen a great light²

If you and I solidly and spiritually KNOW deep in our being that life is worthwhile, good, if we truly know that, then we can *not know* many other details about the future and still have hope; we can be calm, even sometimes bloom.

Waiting for peace: we don’t know yet.

Waiting for justice: we don’t know yet.

Waiting for surgery: we don’t know yet.

Waiting for birth: we don’t know yet.

Waiting for friendships: we don’t know yet.

Waiting for teens to come home: we don’t know yet.

Waiting for a response to that application. . .

Waiting for word from loved one. . .

Waiting for an answer. . .

I've noticed this theme in Christmas Carols, even in stories told at Christmastime.
"Mr. Policeman!" the children cried, "Where has Frosty the Snow Man gone?"
"Oh," said the policeman.
"Frosty the Snow Man has gone away
Where all snow people go on a sunny day.
But he'll be back at your bidding and call
Whenever great heaps of snowflakes fall."
When? *We don't know yet.*

¹ This is one of the prophecies that is fulfilled if we trace Jesus' heritage through Joseph's lineage

² p. 22 *Christmas is for Celebrating*