

Sermon Title: “Waiting for God Knows What”

Text: Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:46b-55

Preached At: Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

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We have reached the last Sunday of the Advent Season. Two days ago was the darkest day of our year. In two days, our waiting is over.

So, what are we waiting for?

What have we been waiting for *this* Advent season?

Of course, the “Sunday School answer” to quote Jonathan and Kevin’s Christmas drama from a few weeks ago, is “Jesus!”

We know that we are waiting for Jesus, that this season is pointing toward the birth of Christ.

But sometimes, familiar answers can become *too* familiar. What does this really mean?

I want to talk, on this last Sunday of Advent 2012, about longing.

From the ancient Israelites to modern day twenty-first century dwellers, the human propensity is to *always* look forward, to anticipate, to hope for something better. We are creatures who *long*.

We saw this human tendency this past week.

As you know, the world was supposed to end on Friday. In fact, I sort of delayed writing my sermon this week... you know, just in case the Mayans were right ☺.

Of course, like most people, I didn’t actually expect the world to end. I took the Mayan predictions about as seriously as I usually take the latest self-proclaimed Christian prophet predicting times and dates for judgment day.

But it was fascinating to observe how people responded leading up to December 21, 2012.

I’m going to read a few excerpts from a CBC story from Friday:

Ceremonial fires burned and conches sounded off as dawn broke over the steps of the main pyramid at the Mayan ruins of Chichen Itza Friday, making what many believe is the conclusion of a vast, 5,125-year cycle in the Mayan calendar.

Some have interpreted the prophetic moment as the end of the world. **The hundreds gathered in the ancient Mayan city, however, said they believed it marked the birth of a new and better age.**

Genaro Hernandez stood with his arms outstretched to the morning light, all clad in white, facing the pyramids' grey stone, to welcome the new era.

"This world is being reborn as a better world," said Hernandez, a 55-year old accountant who wore an expression of bliss....

Ivan Gutierrez, a 37-year-old artist who lives in the nearby village, stood before the pyramid and blew a low, sonorous blast on a conch horn. "It has already arrived, we are already in it," he said of the new era. "We are in a frequency of love, we are in a new vibration."

A bit later:

Yucatan Gov. Rolando Zapata said he felt growing good vibes.

"We believe that the beginning of a new baktun means the beginning of a new era, and we're receiving it with great optimism," Zapata said.

Finally:

"This is the beginning of a change in priorities and perceptions. We are all one," said Esther Romo, a Mexico City businesswoman who works in art promotion and galleries. "No limits, no boundaries, no nationalities, just fusion."¹

It's easy to make fun of responses like this. Nothing changes by rolling the calendar over one day. We know this. We know that this is a bunch of flowery language and media-fuelled hysteria, and not much more.

And yet... I think our culture's interest in December 21, 2012 points to something that is basic to who we are as human beings.

First, it points to our generic awareness that this world is not as it should be.

We are tired of things as they are. We are tired of violence in schools (Connecticut, China...) and drone strikes in Pakistan and violence against women in India.

¹ <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/story/2012/12/21/mayan-apocalypse->

We are tired of the greed and dissatisfaction that drive our economies.

We are tired of sensationalistic media and duplicitous politicians. We are tired of always feeling like we are being sold something rather than told the truth.

We are tired of the trivial being exalted and the exalted being trivialized.

We are tired of disease and fatigue that rob us of years.

We are tired of relational dysfunction that wounds our souls.

We are tired of the sin and selfishness that is so often a part our *own* lives.

We are tired of the many ways in which it is easier to locate our identities in falsehood and idolatry rather than in the reality that we are created and loved by God.

Yale theologian Miroslav Volf remarked on the Mayan stir this week, “Why are doomsday prophecies so popular? Because many people feel that something is profoundly wrong with the world—that it deserves to end.”²

We are tired of the world as it is and we long for something new.

We would, if we are honest, love a new age of fusion and love and harmony, even if we’re not quite sure what these things mean.

We are ready for something new. We *want* a world reborn. We are ready for any kind of good news or at least *better news*.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously described the human conditions as being “estranged from our origins.”³ To be human is to long.

It is to know in our bones that we were made for more than a few decades on this terrestrial ball. It is to have a deep and guiding conviction that this world is not as it ought to be and that *we* are not as we ought to be.

We can stifle these convictions. We can act in ways that are contrary to these convictions. We can close ourselves off to the best and truest parts of who we are. But I think that this longing exists, in some way, deep within each human being.

² Miroslav Volf’s Facebook page.

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Eberhard Bethge and trans. Neville Horton Smith (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995 [1949]), 23.

Throughout the Advent season this year we have been focusing on two texts each Sunday, one from the OT prophets, and one from the gospels.

We have had this image of a flood of mercy before us—this image of the reign of God that comes to bring comfort and mercy, but also to wash us clean and to purify us.

Each week we have heard, from the prophets and from the gospels the hope and promise of a Saviour who will come to put things right, *but also* of the need to repent, to prepare, to align ourselves with the coming of our Lord.

Our texts today represent the bookends of Israel’s hope and expectation.

Micah’s words of hope come in the midst of a rather severe warning to the people of Israel for their failure to reflect the character of their God in pursuing justice and truth.

They come in the context of the immediate threat of exile and destruction—with the Assyrian Empire rising in power and on the verge of conquering the people of Israel.

Most of the book of Micah is a harsh call to return to the Lord, to turn from sin, from meaningless religion and idolatry, and to live as his people, to remind them of what they had been called to (in Deuteronomy 28-30, among other places).

But in today’s text, Micah calls the people back to their hope. He reminds them to lift up their eyes to see:

- The coming of a Saviour who will bring about what is true and good
- A “ruler” who “shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.”
- A great one, from Bethlehem, whose name will spread “to the ends of the earth,” one will usher his people into a time security.

Mary’s song celebrates the fulfillment of Micah’s hope. *The Magnificat* celebrates the coming of Jesus, and with him the great reversal which has:

- scattered the proud
- brought down the powerful
- lifted up the lowly
- filled the hungry with good things
- sent the rich away empty

Above all, Israel’s God has been merciful. **He has remembered his promise.**

It’s interesting that Mary’s song is present tense! The Lord *has done* these things.

But Jesus hasn’t even done anything yet. He hasn’t preached or baptized or performed any miracles. He hasn’t overthrown any rulers. There are still plenty of poor people

who are exploited by the rich! The oppressive Roman Empire marches on. Jesus hasn't fixed anything! He certainly hasn't died or risen from the dead or ascended into heaven! He hasn't even been *born!!*

Yet Mary knows that her child will change things. She knows—somehow—that the baby in her womb marks the turning point of God's story. She knows that his kingdom, strange though it is, and gradual though its appearance might be, will *have no end*. She knows that her unborn baby is the object of her people's longing, that he is the object of all of creation's longing.

Neither Micah nor Mary knew every detail of what they were longing for. They didn't know about *how* the hope their words were pointing toward would be fulfilled. They didn't know anything about the upside down unexpected kingdom that Jesus would bring about. They couldn't have.

But they pointed ahead, beyond their experience nonetheless.

We are further along in the story than Micah and Mary.

We know more than Micah did. We know that Israel's king and his kingdom was far stranger than he could have known. We know that this child's victory over death came in a way that nobody could have predicted.

We know that this baby boy lived out what his people were always called to be—a light to the nations, a means of blessing, justice, and truth for all people.

We even, perhaps, know more than Mary did. We have seen the gospel of peace spread throughout the earth, to places she could not have imagined. We have seen Pentecost and the rise of the church. We have seen ordinary people around the world, every tribe and tongue, coming to identify with her little boy, to pin their hopes to the salvation he accomplished, and to align themselves with the kingdom he inaugurated.

But still, we long...

We know that Jesus' kingdom has not yet come in its fullness. We know that Christ's will is not yet done on earth, as in heaven. We are still waiting.

And there is still much that we do *not* know.

When we say, Come lord Jesus, there is a sense in which we don't really know what we are saying.

We have many hints, from our texts today and from all of Scripture. Indeed, the Bible could be seen as one big hint about the future that is coming!

But we can't really envision what this future will look like. Our imaginations struggle to stretch this far without settling into the vague comforts of clouds and harps and nice music.

The new world of Micah, of Mary... is beyond anything we have seen or experienced.

We are waiting for something that the world has never seen. How can we long for something we've never seen?

This was famously expressed by Plato in "Meno's Paradox." "[A] man cannot search either for what he knows or for what he does not know. He cannot search for what he knows--since he knows it, there is no need to search--nor for what he does not know, for he does not know what to look for."

(Philosophers are strange creatures indeed 😊.)

The obvious answer is that we will recognize the fit. Somehow.

When the object of our longing comes about, we will say, "so *this* is what I've been waiting for."

We don't need to have comprehensive knowledge of the future that all of the prophets and the poetry and the songs in Scripture point toward to long for it.

Even though we don't know the exact shape of God's future, we boldly say "come Lord Jesus" anyway.

There is a profound sense in which the title of our sermon today is true. We are waiting, *literally*, for *God knows what*.

Because regardless of how little we know, regardless of the smallness of our imaginations, regardless of how difficult we sometimes might find it to hope... God *does* know what we are waiting for and only God *truly* knows.

In a little book called *God is in the Manger*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer compared the season of Advent to life in the prison cell he occupied when he wrote the book.

He could imagine what life was like outside of his four walls, he could read letters and remember sights and sounds and smells from the past, but ultimately, his cell could only be unlocked from the outside.

In a similar way, the reality to which all human longing is directed can only come from outside.

It can only come as the gift of God.

We can't make it happen. We can't bring about God's kingdom, even though many have tried, and many continue to try.

We can participate, we can align ourselves, as best we are able, to the future to which we are called, but we are still "inside" the cell.

And inside, we can continue to give voice to our longing.

Because longing and expectation do not cease on December 25.

Our challenge is, I think twofold. The challenge is nothing new, but it is always worth repeating.

1. We must be people whose longing is shaped by the story of God who acted in Jesus Christ.
 - a. We must not settle for vague belief in a kind of fuzzy goodness that is coming from we know not where
 - b. We must not give up on hoping! Even when it seems a long time in coming. We must be people who cultivate the spiritual discipline of waiting
2. We must be people whose behaviour in the present is shaped by our vision of God's future.
 - a. We must hear Micah's call to lives of justice, truth, and proper worship
 - b. We must align ourselves with the new reality of Mary's song, the great reversal where poor, the lowly, the weak, the hungry are given new status and the mighty are brought down.

We are going to sing O Little Town of Bethlehem. It is a song about longing. It is a song that points to Christ as the response that God knows we are waiting for...

The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight!

Let's sing as a declaration of the shape of the hope brought about by Christ's first coming, as a baby boy, and the strength of our longing for Christ to come again to make all things new.

Amen.