

*Life In Between* by the Rev. Barbara Stewart

I was thirteen the first time I came back to California to visit my grandparents. My father sat me down one day before I left, with this one piece of advice. If your grandmother – his mother – says you are going somewhere at 9, be sure you are dressed, downstairs, ready to go by 8:45 at the latest. And he was right – my grandmother had a very strict sense of time, and you were by no means ever to be late.

Not everyone's family is quite so rigid about time – thank goodness! – but we all do live in a world in which there is a very linear sense of time. There is some flexibility, at least in our perception of time – like how did it get to be December already? And how is it possible that my granddaughter is in high school? But we get the chronological sequence of hours and days and months and years.

Then along comes a new year – starting today! – the season of Advent, and we are invited to suspend that linearity, to look at time a bit differently, to consider *Kairos* time, deep time, God's time. Advent is a season in which we prepare for the coming of Jesus. The easier aspect of this preparation is to get ready to celebrate the birth of Jesus. But Advent is also the time we prepare for that time when Jesus will come again. The Messiah is coming, the Son of Man will return, there will be peace on earth, an end to war, and an end to the woes of humanity. But that time has not yet come; and in the meantime, Jesus describes a scene of distress, of roaring of waves, fear and foreboding. When will that be over, when will Jesus come again? What will it look like? The theologian and preacher Frederick Buechner has written, "Does he mean there will be real eclipses and strange comets that have never been seen before, maybe a reordering of the constellations themselves to scrawl some fateful starlit message across the night sky? Or is he speaking symbolically of some upheaval not of the world without but of the world within – an upheaval of the hearts and minds and spirits of the human race?" God knows what it will look like and when it will occur; I am content with that. God knows, and in God's time, Jesus will come again.

Jesus' birth has already occurred; we know that. Past. Jesus is yet to come again. Future. And here we are – in the already but not yet – the in-between times. Jesus has come, but has not yet come again. And those boundaries among past, present, and future are not all that rigid; they interplay and overlap.

So how do we live in this in-between time? We wait. We are waiting for the baby Jesus to be born. We are waiting for the healing of the world, for just and civil relationships between people and among communities and nations. We are waiting for a time of love, and peace, and justice for all people. We are waiting for Jesus to come again.

We wait. For clearly all these things are not yet here; chaos and confusion, war, injustice are in our world. Jesus bids his disciples, and us, to keep alert, to be on guard, to not let dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life overwhelm us. We could each probably make our own list of the things that shape our lives, the powers that exert undue influence over how we feel, how we act, how we treat one another, how we spend our time and our money. What do we value, and how do we live those values? What matters in our lives? How do we keep all the stuff, all the things, all the false Messiahs promoting feel good theologies, from overwhelming us, from keeping us from being alert?

We wait. We wait with hope. The prophet Jeremiah found hope during difficult times with challenges well beyond our own. The book of Jeremiah, which occurs in the seventh century BCE, warns of pending disaster, tells of actual war and destruction and the ways people and their leaders responded to the crisis. The prophet and the people search to make sense of their experiences of war and violence, chaos, and attempts at resistance, defeat, and daily life. This is what Jeremiah is doing in our reading: “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: ‘The Lord is our righteousness.’”

We listen to Jeremiah and know that we, too, are waiting for the Lord, the Lord our righteousness, the day when all will live in safety, justice and righteousness will prevail. We wait with hope.

We wait with hope, and also with the recognition that there will be challenges. There will be suffering, suffering that is the result of human sin and sinfulness, suffering related to disease and natural disasters, suffering that at times is a mystery to us – why? To wait with hope includes the willingness to deal with suffering as part of life – not necessarily to offer easy fixes or answers to suffering, but to respond to suffering with love, compassion, companionship. I see that here at St. Thomas; the caring, the support extended when life is challenging, when life is difficult – Jesus present in very real and practical ways.

We wait with hope, a hope that is shared, that is inclusive and welcoming. “God so loved the world,” we read in the Gospel of John, “that he gave his only Son”. There are no asterisks, no long list of exclusions, where only the following may apply.... God so loved the world. Which includes people who are hungry, and kids whose parents are incarcerated. People who look like us and people who do not. People who share political views and people who have different views. We wait with hope, with learning and growing in the gift of being able to see others as God’s own.

We wait with hope, with a hope that is sturdy enough to sustain us in this in between time. Jesus has come into the world, and in his life and resurrection we are reconciled to God – a life-changer to be sure. We live in that hope, as those loved and embraced by God. Do we get it right all the time? No. Is God still there? Yes! God does not give up on us; God is with us, through all our lives, the good parts and the scary parts, the parts where we mess up, the parts where we see God and God’s love. Always.

We wait, in this season of Advent, we wait with hope for the coming of the baby Jesus, for the coming again of Jesus. In this time in between the already and the not yet, may our lives reflect that hope, each day, in all we do and say.