Prepare and Wait

Narrative Lectionary

December 2, 2018

Habakkuk 1: 1-7; 2: 1-4; (3:3b-6); 3: 17-19 Russell Mitchell-Walker

Last week I was in Ontario for a planning meeting with the Skylight Festival of Arts, Faith, and Justice. We decided for this meeting to spend some time getting to know each other better, welcoming some new people to the team and do some intentional work exploring how we make space for more racial and ethnic diversity in our planning team and among the participants. We spent all day Friday on a process that helped us understand the dominant culture, racism, and we began to look at how we can function differently. This is hard, slow work and takes a strong commitment. At one point in the day our facilitators shared this poem with us, The Sacrament of Waiting by Macrina Weiderkehr

Slowly
she celebrated the sacrament of letting go.
First she surrendered her green,
then the orange, yellow, and red
finally she let go of her brown.
Shedding her last leaf
she stood empty and silent, stripped bare.
Leaning against the winter sky
she began her vigil of trust.

Shedding her last leaf
she watched its journey to the ground.
She stood in silence
wearing the color of emptiness,
her branches wondering;
How do you give shade with so much gone?

And then,
the sacrament of waiting began.
The sunrise and sunset watched with tenderness.
Clothing her with silhouettes
they kept her hope alive.

They helped her understand that
her vulnerability,
her dependence and need,
her emptiness,
her readiness to receive
were giving her a new kind of beauty.
Every morning and every evening they stood in silence
and celebrated together
the sacrament of waiting.

Today we begin a new year in the church season as we enter into Advent. Advent is a time of waiting, of preparing. We wait and prepare for the coming of the Christ child, the coming of Jesus, Emmanuel, the Messiah, the chosen one, the son of God. We prepare for the celebration of love and light breaking into our lives, into the world, in unexpected ways. It is a celebration of the now and the not yet, as we prepare for the one who is not just back then, in this place or that place but is everywhere and in every time.

Our reading today at first seemed an odd one for Advent. I have never read or preached from Habakkuk anytime, let alone in Advent. Yet as I got into it, it makes perfect sense as a reading for Advent. It is about the now and the not yet, it is about waiting. Habakkuk is lamenting the violence and destruction that is taking place in Judea and that God is not doing anything about it. Habakkuk is unique from other prophets in that he does not see justice in what is happening to Israel. The other prophets warn of impending disaster for Israel for not being faithful, and turning away from God. Habakkuk rejects this kind of theology and sees the suffering Israel is going through as disproportionate for the sins they committed and did not believe they could be the act of a just God. So Habakkuk laments that God seems to not be listening to their cry.

But then in Chapter two, an answer comes, maybe not the answer he or we are looking for. Wait. There is an appointed time and it will come. But now is the time for waiting and holding on to faith. Then Habakkuk ends the book with the message of rejoicing in God, even in the midst of despair and loss. He calls on the people to remember God’s faithfulness and to hold onto hope in the midst of the waiting. They are loved and not abandoned even though it may feel like it sometimes.

This is a good reminder for us. As we look at the world today, Families with children at the Mexican, US border being shot at with tear gas, famine and war in Yemen, increased nationalism and overt racism, disruption of democracy through the internet, economic crises as producers move elsewhere, and churches closing and struggling, there is much we could despair about. Yet Habakkuk calls us not to lose faith. To hold onto hope as we wait. Some would say the time of waiting that Habakkuk refers to is the surprising justice and love, compassion and grace that comes in Jesus. It is living in the now and the not yet. We are on the other side of Jesus’ coming yet we still are in the now and the not yet. We know of God’s loving example and what God calls us to do. Yet we also wait for justice and an embodiment in our lives of that love. However, our waiting is not passive, but an active faith, living out what we know to be just and following the ways of Jesus. Loving one another, our neighbour, actively responding to and challenging injustice. It is part of the preparing as well.

How do we prepare while we wait for justice, for the coming of Christ in our lives, in the world? We wait with hope. In this time of Advent, we prepare and wait.

We prepare and wait by seeking to build new community and understanding. This week I went to the Regina Multi-Faith Forum pot-luck. It was a gathering to build community and gather some ideas of how we can move the work of multi-faith forward in Regina, in a time when it is much needed, yet energies are waning. There was great conversation around tables of getting to know each other, sharing ideas and experiences of what is good, and what is challenging about multi-faith relations in our community and the world. There were some wonderful ideas of things we might like to see offered in in our community to continue to build community and understanding as we prepare and wait.

We prepare and wait by being open to new possibilities and celebrating what we have as a community of faith. On Wednesday the Leadership Team met and heard an update from the Joint Needs Assessment Committee as well as got input from the members of the Leadership Team. It is a process we find ourselves in because it is getting more and more difficult to continue financially. Yet there is a real sense that we have a strong community, that people appreciate and enjoy, a real feeling of family. We have people committed to the ministry, and some are burning out. There are greater financial needs than what we are bringing in. We know people are generous and to make it easier to share that generosity, today and during Advent we are renewing the tradition of passing the plate for offering. We continue to invite you if you are filled with gratitude for this place and what you experience, to give what you can, out of that gratefulness. We look as well to other possibilities for sharing ministry and resources as we prepare and wait.

We prepare and wait by knowing and remembering the gospel story and the surprising way God breaks into our lives. At our craft/study group, we read about the genealogy of Jesus and his birth in We Make the Road by Walking by Brian McLaren. We learned of the surprising naming of some people in his geneology, including Tamar, who posed as a prostitute, Ruth who was a Gentile, David who was an adulterer, yet these were all part of Jesus’ lineage whom God worked through. We learned and talked about the shepherds who were the poorest in the community, often sent to be a shepherd because they were not able to be married, or didn’t want to be married. We wondered if some of them were gay people of the time. It was to these people, considered lowly by the culture that the Angels appeared to. This is the surprising message, the anointed time that Habakkuk was saying they needed to wait for.

We prepare and wait by speaking our truth to injustice. This week I was called by Joelle Seal of the CBC, Clare and Mary-Jane Seals’ daughter because she saw that Film & Faith may be going to see Boy Erased and they were doing a story on gay conversion therapy, which is what the movie is about. I was shocked to learn that gay conversion therapy is legal in Saskatchewan. Friday, CBC followed up with a call to interview me for their story on this. They wanted to talk to me as a minister of an Affirming Ministry and know what I thought about gay conversion therapy and the churches who believe they are acting out of love and encouraging celibacy for those struggling with their sexual orientation. I responded that they are still coming from a perspective that homosexuality is a sin, which is not what I believe and that God loves us as we are. This interview should be on CBC radio and TV tomorrow or Tuesday. I believe we have some work to do to encourage the government to ban gay conversion therapy as we prepare and wait.

We prepare and wait by celebrating Advent and Christmas with families through Messy Church and working together with our Anglican and Lutheran friends. Today we offer our first Messy Church program, offering a fun filled way to share the gospel. Habakkuk writes that God told him to write the vision plainly so that a runner can read it. Messy Church provides an opportunity for busy families who are running from one place to the next to come to a program with their children or grandchildren so that they can experience the gospel message in a fun and simple way. We prepare and wait by finding new ways of being church.

So, as we prepare for this season and wait for the celebration of the coming of Christ into our lives and the world, may we take time to reflect and remember the reason we celebrate, preparing in ways that are faithful to the message and the meaning that we experience in our hearts and lives. May we hold onto the love and hope that this season offers, that Christ offers, especially in what can be these challenging times, that we will not despair but rejoice in the Lord, knowing we are loved and not alone. Thanks be to God.