

Advent Sunday. 27 November 2022.

Sermon: Waiting in Hope by David Treharne

7 years ago the Treharne household (that's my household just in case anyone doesn't know) was turned upside down when just before Christmas, during the season of Advent, Kathy was diagnosed with bowel cancer that had spread into the lymphatic system. It was a bombshell that none of us expected and it knocked us sideways. When the Consultant gave us the news such was the shock that Kathy's watch stopped working at that precise moment. It certainly brought a new meaning to Jesus' words... "you do not know the day or the hour" (Matthew 24:36)!

5 years ago, during Advent Kathy had the last of her 4 operations... that one 4 days before Christmas to remove a second slice of her lung.

Mercifully, Kathy has been clear since then, but it is a large chapter of our lives that has had and indeed continues to have an enormous impact on us.

One of the features of that time was waiting... an Advent theme. Waiting often anxiously for news, for scans, for appointments, for diagnosis, for prognosis, for treatment. Waiting ... and not knowing whilst waiting.

Waiting in darkness not knowing when the light was going to shine, waiting in darkness not knowing where the next step would take us, waiting in darkness longing for light!

Such waiting in darkness is not unique to us Treharne's, as many of you know only too well. In fact waiting in darkness is a fairly universal human experience.

The people of Ukraine on lots of levels are facing a waiting in darkness longing for the light. The people of Afghanistan or Eritrea etc... The people queuing for food waiting, not knowing and longing with hunger. The people filling in application forms for University or a job, not knowing and longing. The people longing for love and for a child, not knowing if it will happen. The victims of domestic abuse... not knowing and longing. The person battling unwanted feelings and thoughts... not knowing and waiting. The family of a loved one in difficulty, distress or trouble... not knowing and longing... waiting in darkness. We have been facing the Ukraine stuff, political upheaval here in the UK and across the world, environmental concerns all on the back of the Covid pandemic... we wait not knowing what will happen next, but longing that it might be different.

The Christian season of Advent gives expression to this waiting in darkness. It names the darkness, acknowledges its reality in our heads, hearts, homes, relationships and in our world. Advent Bible readings tell of the fall, the darkness of sinful behaviour and humanity's rebellion and inattentiveness to God. The darkness is named.

But Advent is not just about naming the wait in the darkness. Advent itself means coming... the coming of the Lord. And therefore, Advent is about the difference the coming of the Lord can and does make to that waiting and the darkness itself.

Today we have lit the first of our Advent Candles on the Advent wreath... the candle of hope. ***Waiting in the darkness with hope is entirely different to just waiting in the darkness.*** The

circumstances of the situation may remain the same but with hope one's perspective and response can change entirely.

Now as the character Red in the film Shawshank Redemption said, "hope is a dangerous thing." Indeed, it is! The book of Proverbs says "Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life" (Proverbs 3:12). In other words waiting for something for ages and ages without the desired outcome can be agony. Disappointments and delays and unfulfilled hopes and dreams can lead us to despair and giving up.

However, the Bible does clearly advocate hope! Just read verses in psalms 31, 33, 39, 42, 62 or 71. It advocates hope in God. It is good to hope for better lives, better jobs, better relationships, better health but these things are transient. Hope in the eternal God of love as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ is a sure foundation. Hope in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ does not disappoint.

I read somewhere...

Hope is all over the life of Abraham and fuelled his steps as he marched with his family to the Promised Land. Hope is in the back of Joseph's mind as he lived a godly life as a servant, in prison, and eventually as the second in command of Egypt. Hope is sweating from the brow of the Israelites in Egypt and hope is in Moses' life as he faced Pharaoh in obedience to God to free them. Hope is certainly in the mind of Jesus as He called each of His disciples in the Gospels. Hope hung on the cross. Hope was on Peter's lips as he got up on Pentecost and preached his heart out to thousands of people... many of whom were saved. Hope was on Stephen's heart as he looked into Heaven as angry people threw stones to kill him. Hope was in the heart of the Apostle Paul as he sat chained to a Roman guard in Rome and wrote letters to churches. Hope is all over the pages of the Bible.

The hope of God and in God is all over the darkness.

We wait in darkness, but with hope. We wait not only *for* Christ who will come again at anytime (please Lord), but we also wait *with* Christ. As we look to him, long for him, hope for him, he does not disappoint. He comes to us!

It's part of one of my Advent sermons every year.

The Advent focus in Christian tradition has usually been on the first and second "comings" of Christ. However, I love the 11th Century St Bernard's description of a "**third coming**" which we also wait and prepare for i.e. ***the coming of Christ in and to our own soul!***

Many face waiting in darkness at the current time. St Bernard's Advent understanding speaks clearly into this reality. Yes, God came to us in the person of Jesus Christ that first Christmas (the first coming), and God will come to us again at the end of all things (the second coming), but ***God in Christ also comes to us with his light and life into the here and now!*** The coming of the Lord is not just a celebration of the past or a hope for the future. Crucially, it's something for the present moment too!

As part of our wellbeing project some folks have been doing a mindfulness course (mindfulness is absolutely a Christian practice) in recent months. Fantastic. While we wait, in the here and now,

if we have eyes to see and ears to hear... if we can be in some shape or form mindful... we will experience God's presence in what is happening around us. God's presence in the present moment however dark it might be.

Perhaps this is what Jesus and Paul were saying about 'staying awake.' "Wake up... he's with you... right now! Be alert and watchful for God's presence." **Notice** not only what's going on in us and around the world, but notice God in it all too. As we are alert and awake and waiting, we **notice**, and when we notice the light of Christ can start to penetrate the darkness and reign.

In my own journey with Kathy being ill Hope has been so important to us, however I'm not going to claim it was all rosy glow because of hope. It wasn't and on one level I don't know how I got through that time. But I guess that's part of the point. Something... or rather someone was present in the darkness with me and gave me hope and light.

As we wait in the darkness may Christ indeed be our light and our hope and may we fan the flame of the virtue of hope in us amongst us and around us.