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“Learning to Count”

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Second Sunday of Advent (Year B)

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Isaiah 40:1–11, 2 Peter 3:8–15

Only 18 days ’til Christmas! It is hard to believe that Christmas is so close! If kids are in the house, you don’t need any reminders!

As a child I remember those days before Christmas. It seemed like that day would never come! “How many days ’til Christmas?” we would ask. And it didn’t matter what the answer was—it was always too long!

A tradition in my family was counting down the days until Christmas, beginning December first. We had an Advent calendar with little doors on it, numbered from one to twenty-four. Each evening we would gather as a family and the kids could open up one of those mysterious doors. And behind each one was a message about the meaning of Christmas. Usually our time together was concluded with something sweet from the kitchen.

What a marvelous tradition that was! The family spent time together. We kids were motivated and eager to participate. There was an incentive to be good for goodness’ sake! And we learned about the meaning of Christmas in the coming of Jesus.

One of the educational side benefits to the Advent calendar tradition was teaching us younger kids to count. When we asked, “How many days ’til Christmas?” my

mother would say, “Well, go to the calendar and count how many doors are still closed.” And off we would go to count.

Being older now, the Christmases seem to flash by. Even with helpful reminders from the retailers—twenty shopping days until Christmas, ten days, three days—sometimes Christmas slips up on me and catches me off guard. Even though this season remains one of my favorites, some of its wonder has worn thin as I age. I no longer wake up December mornings counting the days. I no longer try to be good, for goodness’ sake. Something has been lost for me.

The season of Advent as it ushers in Christmas brings with it challenges. One challenge is the discipline of waiting. The season of Advent serves, in part, to remind us that God’s people waited centuries for the coming of the Promised One. Without rushing to the manger, we might tarry a while with the saints of old to wait. And while we wait, we could discover again that some values are not attained quickly or easily. We might learn that some things worth waiting and working for we may never see fulfilled in our lifetimes. We need to learn the discipline of waiting.

Other challenges of the Advent season are unmet expectations and the experiences of things we don’t want. Expectations denied, experiences of adversity, disappointment when things don’t live up to its billing. How do people of faith maintain hope while facing adversity? How might we let go of illusions about life or about ourselves or about God without becoming jaded or curmudgeonly or reactive?

The discipline of waiting and the loss of hope. These are challenges for the church in the season of Advent.

And when you think about it, the challenges of waiting and loss of hope confront every human being, whether it is Christmas time or not.

That is certainly true among communities of color at this moment. Ferguson, Missouri; New York City; Cleveland; Durham. Such communities might have a reasonable expectation that fifty years after the civil rights movement, they would

not need to fear for the safety of their children and families in the streets of their own communities. Yet events in those places and the names of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Eric Garner raise the question of our society's value of a black life, whether communities of color matter. How long do they have to wait for justice and peace? Is there any question why some in communities of color have lost hope? And when hope is lost, unrest and disintegration are sure to follow.

The discipline of waiting and the loss of hope were challenges addressed by this letter of 2 Peter. You see, this early Christian community was waiting for Jesus to come. Not his first coming, not Christmas, but the coming of Jesus to establish his kingdom on earth.

Those early Christians were familiar with the words of Jesus: great conflict between nations would occur, and God's people would suffer prior to His return. And that little band of believers found themselves in a culture hostile to their faith. They had believed in Jesus Christ and gave all their worries to him. But instead of things getting better, things became worse. On the edge of their seats, they had been counting the days: "Is this the hour? Will the Lord bring to an end our suffering today? Is the Kingdom of judgment and righteousness coming soon? How many more days until Jesus comes?"

The long wait was robbing these Christians of their expectations. For some, it even called into question the validity of their faith. If Jesus did not return as they expected, what else in their faith would prove faulty as well? Some of their illusions were being dispelled, and the mystery of faith was losing its grasp on their way of living. To these issues, 2 Peter is addressed.

Peter knew the cost of hope disappointed and meaning confused. He saw the dulling of the edge of faith in the life of the church. He observed the collapse of moral earnestness and ethical awareness. He, too, asks, "What does life mean now that our expectations have not been met, where we live in the shadow of uncertainty and possible danger?"

To these early Christians who had stopped counting the days until Jesus returned, 2 Peter reoriented their thinking and their belief. He challenged them to exchange

their misplaced expectations with valid ones, to replace their narrow vision with a broader one. 2 Peter's explanations sought to provide help and hope to a discouraged community.

Let me invite you to listen to what he says in case these words could provide guidance and hope to us as well.

The first challenge to their thinking is that the Lord's timing is different from human timing. Our awareness of the difference between God's rendering of time and human rendering of time is often a painful realization.

We want patience and we want it now. We long for something—and not just anything but something of real value like the healing of a loved one or justice or peace—and we want it now because the truth is that life and opportunity are ebbing away from us. Yet God seems to be in no hurry. God can seem indifferent or even absent.

Scripture says, "In the fullness of time, God sent His son..." Jesus did not come as soon as hoped for, and when he did come, it was not as expected. Yet his coming changed the course of human history.

You and I have experienced those moments in life when on reflection we could say, "Surely God was here; certainly God's hand has guided and protected us." And we have also endured those moments that do not yield the reasons of why or why now. In the mystery of providence, of God's loving and constant care for His people, God's time is just different than ours.

And Peter offers a further elaboration of God's timing. The purpose and providence of God are related to God's love for us and for our world. God is patient and merciful to his people. "The Lord is not slow about His promise as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." God's love is so great that he extends the time, so people may respond and receive mercy.

Did you notice that Peter was not shaking his finger at an obtuse and sinful world? He said, “God is forbearing toward *you*.” God is patient toward God’s own people, toward Christians, toward the church. The church, along with the rest of the world, is in need of the continuing grace of God.

There are times when false hopes must be dispelled, illusions illuminated, self-deceptions revealed. Such moments are painful, but they can lead to more realistic hopes, greater truth, clearer understanding. This is the very nature of Christian repentance and our continuing struggle to understand the Christian faith in new situations.

Such fresh understandings may upset long-held beliefs and assumptions. We may even see our own suffering as contributing to the salvation for others. It was Martin Luther King, Jr. who, after learning of threats on his life in 1964, said, “If physical death is the price that I must pay to free my white brothers and sisters from a permanent death of the spirit, then nothing can be more redemptive.”

Salvation is for all, not just for our friends and allies.

For those seeking hope and meaning, does that help?

2 Peter continues by reaffirming his confidence in God. “The day of the Lord *will* come... In accordance with *his promise*, we wait...”

Human beings frequently confuse our hopes with God’s promises. One human reality is that we filter our perceptions through our own needs and desires. If we are hungry, salvation is cast in terms of food. If we are unloved, salvation is love. If we are oppressed, salvation is freedom. Our particular filter can distort God’s promise.

This early Christian community was caught in turmoil and persecution. They saw the return of Jesus Christ as the remedy to their suffering. 2 Peter reaffirms the hope of the coming Kingdom apart from the miscalculated speculations of God’s people.

Do you know how your needs and wants are skewing your understanding of God? When our dreams and hopes fall apart, we have the opportunity to replace them with something of greater substance and lasting value. As our illusions about ourselves and about life crumble, we can find a confidence in God that transcends anything we have previously experienced.

Peter knows how critical a vital hope and empowering vision are to people in order for them to engage life fully. He says, “Don’t lose the dream, don’t put away the vision, hold on to the hope. It is not anyone we trust—it is God who has been faithful and will keep his promise, even if it is not according to our timing and wishes.”

For those seeking hope and meaning, does that help?

Peter goes on to say that a vision and hope are necessary to maintain a moral and ethical life. “In accordance with his promise we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.” I like that phrase, “Where righteousness is at home.” There will come a time and place where the moral and ethical life are not strangers to those who reside in that place.

2 Peter continues: “Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness...?” Hope misplaced and lost can breed moral laxity. When the Christians in Peter’s community stopped counting the days, they also stopped living as though their days counted. The author of this letter insists that this must not take place. False hopes must be replaced with a true hope in God. Their ability to embrace the righteousness God intends can be enhanced by holding on to a motivating hope. W. B. Yeats links hope and accountability together when he writes “In dreams begins responsibility.”

Too often I have seen the disorienting effects of disappointment and shattered dreams on the moral compass of those who are suffering. Because of some life situation or experience, have you stopped living as though your days counted?

Everything in life is wood for the fire that refines the quality of the metal of our lives. Possessions or poverty, power or obscurity, health or sickness—all serve to test and prove the character of our faith and values. A time of uncertainty and chaos is not the moment to lower our guard or abandon our commitments.

For those seeking hope and meaning, does that help?

Finally, Peter concludes with this admonition: “Regard the patience of the Lord as salvation.” Often we think of salvation only in terms of the future. The peaceable kingdom portrayed in Isaiah 11 is one that saints have looked toward for years, where the wolf lives with the lamb, and lion lie down with the kid. We yearn for the day when pain is ended, death no longer threatens, and all tears are wiped away.

Yet Peter indicated that God’s merciful patience was something to experience, not only in some distant future, but in the present moment. We can be counting today as a day of salvation.

It is often the day-in, day-out routine that makes life seem tasteless and flat. Yet life is to be found in our daily encounters. Today is the only day we have. Yesterday is held in God’s merciful hands and tomorrow is not yet ours. It is in the present that we are held in God’s grace. So don’t focus on the calendar with its passing of days which may seem slow or meaningless. Focus instead on opportunities of today. That is where God is at work; that is where our responsibilities lie; that is where salvation is to be found.

For those seeking hope and meaning, does that help?

That sums up 2 Peter’s effort to broaden the understanding and hope of a dispirited community. I find it fascinating that one of the remedies *not* offered in 2 Peter is one employed by many today. Many Christian communities seem to believe that the answer is to start the countdown again. “Jesus is coming soon, any day now! That should get us pumped up!” But Peter offers no such remedy.

We need to go back to the old way of counting about as much as we need to go back to our childhood understanding of Santa Claus and being good for goodness' sake. Experience can rob us of both mystery and illusion. We can live without the illusion and false hopes and misplaced confidences. But the mystery and the anticipation and the responsibility we still need—for Advent, for Christmas, for God's coming kingdom, for everyday life and work. Peter called on his community to learn a new way to count.

I remember when I would ask, "How many days 'til Christmas?" And my mother would answer, "Go and count the closed doors." And so I did.

But now I have a new way to count. Now I can count the *open* doors. The door of TODAY is always open before me. Perhaps the people who cross my path today are not chance encounters. The crossroads of life today are filled with opportunities to mend wounds, share joys, endure struggles, encourage faith, clarify and strengthen hopes.

This season of Advent, we are in desperate need of learning a new way to count, one that excludes none and embraces all. When we affirm the worth and dignity of every person, of every gender, of every color, today becomes a day of salvation. We cannot afford to leave any out: police or civilians, peaceful demonstrators or angry mobs, children on bikes and in hoodies or in gangs. Every life is precious. Today is the day we must fight for sisters and brothers to live in freedom and freedom from fear.

Let's learn a new way to count so that the most pressing issues of life are engaged with integrity, and no one is left behind. Let's learn a new way to count so that the true promises of faith are embraced more closely and shared more widely.

This Advent, let's learn a new way to count.