

## **“THE GIFT OF LONGING”**

Isaiah 40:1-11; Romans 8:12-26

December 4, 2016

Rev. Janet Robertson Duggins  
Westminster Presbyterian Church

Every year, I ask my friend what she wants for Christmas. Every year, the answer is the same: “World Peace.” I always roll my eyes at her, and tell her to come up with something a little more ... affordable. So she suggests jewelry, or a new purse, or a book. But I know what she really wants: reconciliation with her estranged daughter.

I can't give her that, any more than I can manage world peace.

We know this kind of want, this longing.

The ‘what-do-you-want-for-Christmas’ lists some of us make are one expression of the needing and wanting that are part of our human life in this world. But our deeper longings are not so readily articulated, or satisfied.

Maybe you long for acceptance and belonging, or to feel valued and appreciated.

Maybe you long to leave behind the weight of past hurts and mistakes and find courage for a new beginning.

Maybe you long for an end to family turmoil, or a job that is all drudgery and no joy.

Maybe you also long to see a broken relationship restored.

Maybe you long for love, intimacy, deeper relationships, someone with whom you can have a sense of home.

Maybe you long for meaning or a more purposeful life.

Maybe you long for health, release from pain, a lightening in the darkness of depression.

Maybe you simply long for rest.

Maybe you are longing to really feel the joy of Christmas this year.

Maybe you are longing to see loved ones who are far away.

Maybe there is someplace in the world you long to see, or something you have always longed to do.

Or perhaps you are feeling the troubles of the world, and longing for things to be different – less ugly, less violent; more hopeful, more kind, more green.

Maybe you long for the day when we'll no longer have to struggle against endless large and small manifestations of racism and sexism and homophobia.

Maybe you long for a time when the young, the old, the disabled, the mentally ill – all the vulnerable – are protected and cherished.

Maybe you long to believe that you can make a difference in the world.

Maybe you, like many of us, long for the impossible – for resources enough to fulfil a crazy dream, for talents you weren't given, for energy and strength you no longer have, for someone else to change, for the circumstances of your life to be different, for the presence of lost loved ones.

There's something about Advent that wakens those longings, brings them closer to the surface.

I think we don't deal very well with this. Longing makes us deeply uncomfortable. It admits a gap between present reality and a better day. It makes our need and our vulnerability evident, and we hate to admit to vulnerability and neediness. We tend to think we are supposed to be able to be strong, manage everything, and meet all our own needs.

So much of the time it feels safer and less painful to try not to feel those longings. We ignore them, deny them, distract ourselves, cover them up with busyness or holiday cheer, bury them deep inside. Sometimes we try to meet them in foolish and wrong ways, which generally prove inadequate.

But they are there and they don't go away. Some of them may eventually be met in something like the way we'd hoped; some of them are not. In any case, we benefit spiritually and emotionally when we learn not to deny but to acknowledge our longings – to accept them and live with them and try to be faithful in how we deal with them.

The spirituality of the Advent season, particularly, invites us to pay attention to our longings, and to see how God might speak to us in them.

It is really hard, I know, and kind of against the grain. We don't like to feel these feelings. Maybe we have somehow picked up the notion that people of faith are supposed to be happy and strong. But God doesn't ask that of us. The scripture readings we heard today are among many Biblical texts that articulate a sense of longing:

Isaiah speaks to people who are crushed by trouble and disaster, failure and loss. The promises of comfort must have been almost impossible for them to believe. They wanted nothing so much as to come back home, hear good news, live without fear, and know God's blessing and presence again.

Paul's letter to the Romans is addressed to Christians living in a culture that felt alien to them, struggling with events they didn't understand, trying to be faithful and live well but not sure if they had a future. They seem not to have been sure whether God still cared or whether they themselves had any right to consider themselves God's children. They looked around them, and did not see the much evidence that the kingdom of God was becoming established.

They looked at their own circumstances, and wondered why they were suffering. They looked at themselves, and saw that they were far from perfect and kind of shaky in their faith. But Paul assures them that this kind of longing, waiting, hoping is part of the life of faith. He tells them that they are not alone. They are part of a bigger longing – that the whole creation, in fact, is longing for something that is not-quite-yet realized.

Longing is about a sense of emptiness or absence, something needed or lacking, something promised but unfulfilled. It does not feel like a gift. But it is a gift, and God's Spirit is present in it.

Longing is part of what defines our humanity. Our longings express both our limitations and the expansive hopes we cherish.

Longing for knowledge impels us to learn, to ask questions, to grow and explore and invent and take risks.

Longing to protect and care for our loved ones keeps us doing what needs to be done, working hard and faithfully,

Longing is what keeps lovers connected when they are apart.

Longing for connection helps us to form community.

Longing for justice keeps us in the struggle.

Longing tells us that something is not quite as it should be... in us, in our relationships, in the world.

Longing gives us a holy restlessness that seeks to make some of those things right.

Longing leads to change.

Longing leads us to prayer.

Longing is what draws us to God.

It may be that all our deepest longings are really longings for God.

Augustine's well-known prayer says it as well as anyone ever has:

"Thou hast made us for Thyself,  
and our hearts are restless  
until they find their rest in Thee."

Pastor and writer Michael Lindvall says, "The very thirst we seek to quench is a gift from the very God who quenches the thirst." (Lindvall, p. 10)

And here is the most interesting thing: Our longings mirror God's longing for us.

We love because God first loved us.

We want justice, because God wants justice.

We seek truth, because God is truth.

We are driven to create and to love beauty, because we are made in God's image.

We want to be reconciled, because God wants to be reconciled with us.

We long for wholeness, because wholeness is God's desire.

We need God because we belong to God.

We long for God, because God longs for us.

The plea in Isaiah 40, that the people would be comforted, brought home, fed, cared for, healed... is *God's* voice speaking. It's the cry of God's heart.

Paul tells the Christians in Rome that *God's Spirit* is present in their longing, is the voice of their inarticulate pain and need and hope.

Our longings - for reconciliation, for wholeness, for hope, for belonging, for comfort, for justice, for love, for God - are more than empty spaces or depressing realities of the human condition. The gap between our present reality and what we desire is a place where there is room for God.

This Advent, may God be in that space, in our longings, filling us with hope, with comfort, ....  
... with Christ.

#### Resources:

Michael Lindvall, *The Christian Life: A Geography of God*

Jan Richardson [thepaintedprayerbook.com](http://thepaintedprayerbook.com)

*Feasting on the Word*, Year B, volume 1

St. Augustine, *Confessions*