

Chapel Hill United Church of Christ

Sunday Sermon

Looking Forward

Philippians 4: 4-7
Luke 3: 7-18

Rev. Dr. Galen E. Russell III
December 13, 2009

“I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming.”

Prayer: O God, Emmanuel, you are near. We look forward to your coming. Amen.

I remember going through Lamaze classes when Joel and Cydney were about to be born. Any of you parents do that? A few. Remember breathing through our teeth? “Hee, hee, hee, hee, hee, hoooo. Hee, hee, hee, hee, hee, hoooo.”

Rev. Elizabeth Boulton describes her experience in childbirth. She was doing the breathing exercises which helped to mitigate the pain of childbirth, until she hit what is called the transition, which is the most intense phase of labor for women. It is that moment when even the strongest of women momentarily lose faith in their ability to bring new life in the world. Elizabeth wrote that after six hours of labor, transition arrived, and “I grabbed my husband by the collar of his shirt and pulled him close.” I thought for sure she was going to say to him the famous Bill Cosby line, “You did this to me!” But, no. She groaned and said, “I can’t do this anymore! It’s too hard. I can’t do it.”

The midwife who was helping at the time said to her with a clear, steady voice words

that came from the present moment as well as from ancient days, “Liz, you *are* doing it. Right now. This is what you were created to do—and you’re doing it.” So, Liz and her husband and midwife breathed while Liz pushed, and after some of the most painful, difficult hours of her life, a slippery little baby came into the world. She wrote, “We took one look at him and fell in love” (Boulton, Elizabeth, *The Christian Century*, December 1, 2009, pg. 20). All the struggle of childbirth was quickly forgotten. There was nothing better for Elizabeth and her husband to do but to love their son and to look forward to the great potential found in him when he was born.

It seems to me that Advent is the church season that is all about looking forward to the great potential that comes with the birth of Jesus Christ, our Savior. But when most anything is birthed, often there is a struggle prior to the birth, isn’t there? When John the Baptist was out in the wilderness proclaiming that the one who is mightier than him was coming, he first told the people that they were a brood of snakes because he knew of their bad behavior and bad habits. Then he told them to repent, which can be a struggle by itself, especially if poor behavior is deeply embedded and second nature. He demanded that they turn away from conduct that was not in keeping with God’s ways, behavior that damages health and wholeness for others or for the individual themselves. Sometimes, that’s easier said than done, isn’t it? John pointed out to the religious hypocrites who thought they had it made because they were sons of Abraham that they should act with justice, sharing food and clothing with those who need it. He confronted the swindler tax

collectors, and told them to stop cheating people. He demanded that the soldiers stop threatening to take money from people by making false accusations; rather they should be content with what they have and with the money they are paid. They had work to do.

In order to get to the great potential of the one who is coming, work must be done. Personal work. Corporate work. Work on a global scale. Sometimes it's painful work. Sometimes it's difficult work. Work done to change bad habits, or inappropriate behavior, or challenging tasks is never easy. But, sometimes we have to go through the toughest moments, the most painful activities, the most difficult of circumstances in order to get to the sweetness of what lies ahead.

I think this is true in our world as 30,000 troops are getting set to go to Afghanistan. We've been at war for more than eight years. We're in it so far now. Thirty thousand more, plus those already in Afghanistan, plus those still in Iraq who will not be at home for Christmas. It's been too long. There are too many lives in harm's way. After all this struggle, we might be tempted to say, "We can't do this anymore! It's too hard. We can't do it."

It remains to be seen if this is the only way to get to peace in the world, but we *are* doing it. Right now. We've embarked on this most difficult, painful journey. We are encouraged to bring everything to God in prayer, letting our request be known to God. I pray that the sweetness of a peaceful world and a deepening love of humanity might be

waiting in the not-to-distant wings, and I look forward to the someday in the future when all our troops will be home.

For us here at Chapel Hill, we can look forward to a new year approaching. We are going to wrestle with an unbalanced 2010 Ministry Spending Plan at our congregational meeting right after today's worship. It will require work on our part all next year to do the ministry we hope to do in this place with the resources we have. We might get exasperated and say "We can't do this anymore! It's too hard. We can't do it."

But take heart! John the Baptist proclaimed that one who is mightier than he is coming, which means that we do not do this ministry all alone! God, our God, our Emmanuel is with us! God, our God will be our midwife speaking to us words that come from the present moment as well as from ancient days, "Chapel Hill, you *are* doing it. Right now. This is what you were created to do—and you're doing it. Keep pushing. Keep breathing. Keep ministering."

For each of us individually, we all have problems. Some have pre-existing conditions that have nagged at heart, mind, and spirit. Some for decades. Some have struggles that just won't leave. Oh, they change every now and then, or they are held at bay for a period of time, but they still show up, basically as the same struggle. Some have bad habits. Some have addictions. Some have medical problems. Some have holier-than-thou attitudes. Some have prejudices and ill-conceived ideas. Some are mean-spirited.

Some ignore family time or quality time with spouses. Some work waaay too much at our jobs. All of us are pre-disposed to sinful, human behavior. All of us have work to do.

But, all of us know that there is one who has come who is mightier than any struggle that we face. There is one who has come whose strength and power can enable us to work through our difficulties, giving us hope as we look forward. There is one who has come who loves us profoundly, who forgives us, who desires the best for us, who knows our every weakness, who knows how difficult it is to keep growing, to live life in Christ.

So, when you find yourself saying, “I can’t do this anymore. It’s too hard! I can’t do it,” remember that God is still speaking words that come from the present moment as well as from ancient days, “My child, you *are* doing it. Right now. This is what you were created to do—to live life in my name, and you’re doing it. Keep pushing. Keep breathing. Keep growing. Keep learning. Keep loving me and others.”

There is one who is coming and has come. Do you feel the new birth on its way? As Paul says, “Rejoice in the Lord always. The Lord is near.” There is nothing better for us to do than to work hard opening our doors to receive the Christ-child, to love him, and to look forward to the great potential we have in him. This is the sweet promise of Advent. Amen.