

## What's Next?

Advent is a season of waiting, so when I decided to retire at the end of the year, I assumed there would be something in the assigned scriptures that would relate to the occasion. I was amazed when the Advent materials arrived in July to discover this year's chosen theme, "How will we know?" How will we know how long? How will we know what now? How will we know what's next? Could there be anything more appropriate for a congregation and pastor in transition?

In July we didn't know if there would be anyone who wanted the newly created job of administrative assistant. Nor did we know how soon in 2024 there might be a transitional pastor available to lead the congregation. I'm thrilled that Carolyn's been on the job since September and that Luann will begin her work on January 14.

But, of course, many questions remain. We continue to wonder how long, what now, and what's next. I don't believe that God directed our denomination's Advent planning team to choose this theme just for us, but I'm certainly glad that's the way it worked out.

We began our worship with Mary's words of praise.

*With all my heart I glorify the Lord!  
In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior.  
He shows mercy to everyone,  
from one generation to the next,  
who honors him as God.  
He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones  
and lifted up the lowly.  
He has filled the hungry with good things  
and sent the rich away empty-handed.<sup>1</sup>*

The circumstances of Mary's pregnancy would have raised some eyebrows. She uttered these words of praise when she visited her relative, Elizabeth, who also was pregnant under miraculous circumstances. Even though she will continue to receive judgmental looks from some of her neighbors, even though the country she lives in is still occupied by Romans, even though the justice she sings about has not yet been realized, she expresses her trust in God by describing her future hopes as already being here.

We can follow Mary's example. We can praise God for what God will do even as we wonder what's next. We can remember what God did in the past and be confident that God is still at work in the present and will continue to work in the future.

In the drama this morning, we heard the words of John the Baptist.

*John testified about [Jesus], crying out,  
"This is the one of whom I said,  
'He who comes after me is greater than me because he existed before me.'"  
I am a voice crying out in the wilderness,  
Make the Lord's path straight,  
just as the prophet Isaiah said."<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 1:46-47, 50, 52-53, *Common English Bible*

<sup>2</sup> John 1:15, 23, *Common English Bible*

As Jesus began his ministry, he also quoted from the prophet Isaiah.

*The LORD God's spirit is upon me,  
because the LORD has anointed me.  
He has sent me  
to bring good news to the poor,  
to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim release for captives,  
and liberation for prisoners,  
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor  
and a day of vindication for our God,  
to comfort all who mourn,  
to provide for Zion's mourners,  
to give them a crown in place of ashes,  
oil of joy in place of mourning,  
a mantle of praise in place of discouragement.*<sup>3</sup>

When Jesus read these words in the synagogue in Nazareth, he told his listeners that the Hebrew Scriptures were being fulfilled then and there, in their hearing – that he was the one sent by God.<sup>4</sup>

The work of Isaiah, John, and Jesus continues. As we wonder how long, what now, and what's next, we need to continue to bring good news to those who lack the necessities of life, soothe the heartbroken, work to free those who are held captive without cause, comfort those who mourn, join Jesus in his work, glorify God, and spread messages of joy.

These actions align with what Paul wrote in his letter to the Thessalonian Church.<sup>5</sup> Paul and his co-workers Silas and Timothy founded this church. They were eager to visit them again, but many obstacles stood in their way. Because they wanted to continue the relationship, they wrote letters to be read to the entire congregation. They expressed gratitude for the dynamic faith, love, and hope of the Thessalonian believers. They addressed several matters of concern including persecution, sinful habits, disruptive people, the death of members of the community, questions about when Jesus would return and how to be ready for that event, and conflict over the role of congregational leadership.

Another suggested text for the third Sunday of Advent this year is found at the end of 1 Thessalonians. In the *Common English Bible*, this section is titled, "Final instructions and blessing." How appropriate that I can read this to you on my final Sunday as your pastor.

*Brothers and sisters, we ask you to respect those who are working with you, leading you, and instructing you. Think of them highly with love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. Brothers and sisters, we urge you to warn those who are disorderly. Comfort the discouraged. Help the weak. Be patient with everyone. Make sure no one repays a wrong with a wrong, but always pursue the good for each other and everyone else. Rejoice always. Pray continually. Give thanks in every situation because this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Don't suppress the Spirit. Don't brush off Spirit-inspired messages, but examine everything carefully and hang on to what is good. Avoid every kind of evil. Now, may the God of peace himself cause you to be completely dedicated to him; and may your spirit, soul, and body be kept intact and blameless at our Lord Jesus Christ's coming. The one who is calling you is faithful and will do this.*

*Brothers and sisters, pray for us. Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss. By the Lord's authority, I order all of you to have this letter read aloud to all the brothers and sisters. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with all of you.*<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 61:1-4, *Common English Bible*

<sup>4</sup> Luke 4:16-21

<sup>5</sup> This section draws from Jacob W. Elias, *Believers Church Bible Commentary: 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Herald Press, 1995, pp. 17-31.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28, *Common English Bible*

Fifteen years ago, on December 18, 2008, I traveled to Salina for the first time. Vera Zerger met me at the airport and hosted me in her home. I soon met the rest of the search committee. The first time I entered this building, I thought, “This feels right, I can see myself here.”

This was the first church I interviewed with, so when the search committee asked me to be your pastoral candidate, I said, “not yet.” After exploring one other option, I said, “yes.” I met many of the rest of you on a weekend in March of 2009. A week later, when you officially asked me to be your pastor, I said, “yes,” but again asked for a delay in the timetable. Instead of beginning in April as you requested, I waited until the end of May before moving to Salina. Thank you for your patience with me as you wondered how long it would take me to get here.

When I began my pastorate on June 1, I had a fair amount of life experience. I was 51 years old and had worked as a classroom teacher and a bookstore manager. I was full of book knowledge and theories about pastoring. I graduated from seminary one week before I moved here. I had a good understanding of what it means to be a Mennonite. I have been active in a Mennonite church my entire life.

However, I came to you with very little pastoral experience. I had completed two internships in congregations that were quite a bit different than this one. I had never pastored a church on my own. I recall pacing the floor in my apartment at 2:00 am on Sunday, wondering how in the world I would have a sermon ready by 10:00. I recall the anxiety of making my first hospital visit and the nervousness of conducting my first funeral.

The past 14 years and 7 months have included much joy and happiness, along with difficult challenges, discouragement, and exhaustion. I have never regretted accepting the invitation to be your pastor. You have encouraged me, questioned me, inspired me, and taught me. I apologize for anything I’ve said or left unsaid, done or failed to do that has caused you harm or undue pain. Please forgive me for my mistakes and shortcomings. Thank you for your love and support.

I’m grateful that when I decided to leave Salina Mennonite Church it wasn’t because of any conflict or dissatisfaction. I continue to believe that it’s time for this season of my life and of the life of this congregation to end. Although this comes with great sadness and transitions are always hard work, I am confident that endings make way for new possibilities – for me and for this congregation.

We live in a society that values answers over questions, results over the process, the destination over the journey. Scripture, however, reminds us that we often do not get the answers we are wanting, or at least not as soon as we want. Scripture invites us to sit with God, to ask our questions, and then wait for God. God will sometimes give us answers quickly; other times God will teach us using the questions themselves.<sup>7</sup>

Dear friends, while you wait and wonder how long it will take to discover what now and what’s next, my hope is that you will support, encourage, help, and comfort each other. Be patient with each other. Pursue what is good as it affects this congregation and also all people.

Show appreciation to those who lead you through this time of transition. As much as possible, refrain from comparing your next pastor with me. Each pastor has a different combination of strengths and weaknesses. No one person can do everything well.

Celebrate always, pray constantly, and give thanks to God no matter what circumstances you find yourself in.<sup>8</sup>

May your eyes be opened to see God’s face, your ears to hear God’s voice, and your heart to love like God. May God, who makes everything holy and whole, make you holy and whole - put together in spirit, soul, and body.<sup>9</sup> And may God’s grace and peace always be with all of you. Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> Advent 3 resources in *Leader, Fall 2023*, MennoMedia, pp. 43-44.

<sup>8</sup> Adapted from 1 Thessalonians 5:11-18, *The Voice*

<sup>9</sup> Adapted from 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24, *The Message*