

**Waiting, Watching, Expectantly—Isaiah 11: 1-10**  
*(December 4, 2022—2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Advent*

*Prior to the reflection the following excerpt from “Seeds of Hope: A Henri Nouwen Reader”, pages 257-259 was shared. In it Henri Nouwen relays his experience of faith, career and caring for Adam, a young man with profound intellectual disabilities.*

*“Out of this broken body and broken mind emerged a most beautiful human being offering me a greater gift than I would ever be able to offer him... Adam can do nothing. He is completely dependent on others every moment of his life. His gift is his pure being with us. Every time in the evening when I run home to “do” Adam—that means help him with his supper and put him to bed—I realize that the best thing I can do for Adam is to be with him. If Adam wants anything, it is that you be with him. And indeed that is the great joy: paying total attention to his breathing, his eating, his careful steps. Looking at how he tries to lift a spoon to his mouth, or offers his left arm a little to make it easier for you to take off his shirt; always wondering about possible pains that he cannot express, but that still ask for relief.*

*Most of my past life has been built around the idea that my value depends on what I do...I earned my degrees and awards and I made my career. Yes, with many others I fought my way up to the lonely top of a little success, a little popularity, and a little power. But as I sit beside the slow and heavily breathing Adam, I start seeing how violent that journey was. So filled with desires to be better than others, so marked by rivalry and competition, so pervaded with compulsions and obsessions, and so spotted with moments of suspicion, jealousy, resentment, and revenge. Oh, sure, most of what I did was called ministry, the ministry of justice and peace, the ministry of forgiveness and reconciliation, the ministry of healing and wholeness. But when those who want peace are as interested in success, popularity, and power as those who want war, what then is the real difference between war and peace?... Adam says to me, “Peace is first of all the art of being.” I know he is right because after four months of being with Adam I am discovering in myself a beginning of an inner at-homeness that I didn't know before...Adam keeps teaching me...”*

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Each of us is a collection of stories. Together those stories make up the story of our lives; where we’ve come from, what we value, where we put our trust. What is your story? We walk around with these stories hardly even aware that we have them or even how important they are to us until something happens that causes us to re-examine or change our story. Some years ago I have a friend who discovers she is adopted, it throws her into turmoil, who is she now? She has to formulate a new story about herself.

For many centuries, the people of Israel hear the passage from Isaiah as a resurrection story. The author of Isaiah is writing in a time when Israel’s kingdom, a kingdom that under David and Solomon stood as tall and proud as the mighty cedars of Lebanon, is reduced to a stump through the ravages of war. For Jews, the image of the branch

sprouting from the stump of Jesse is about the irrepressibility of life, the power of God to raise Israel from a seemingly hopeless situation.

Then Jesus comes along. Jesus' impact on Judaism is so profound that it causes many Jews to re-examine and re-evaluate their stories in light of his life. So, this story from Isaiah, filtered through the experience of Jesus' life and ministry becomes a story about promise, hope, and ultimately, fulfillment. From the stump of Jesse, King David's father, a shoot will sprout, a new king, a savior, who will be just and faithful and bring God's ways into the world. Early Christians, who still see themselves as Jews, now relate to Isaiah differently; Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promises.

Where in your story are you waiting and hoping for fulfillment? Is it a relationship that needs healing, a loss that you grieve, is it uncertainty and insecurity about where life is taking you right now? Does hope to seem absurd to you right now, unrealistic, a set-up for disappointment? Times of waiting can be lonely, as we drift in pain and confusion.

Within the Christian story the Prophet Isaiah tells us to live with an absurd sense of hope, but then listen, watch, and be open to the surprising ways that God emerges into our lives. Nobody expected the Messiah to be born amid manure, to be turned into a refugee fleeing for his life, to socialize with the unclean and impure and finally to be executed as a common criminal. Isaiah's message in the Christian story is to hope not for specific outcomes, but to hope in God.

Easier said than done though, isn't it? During times of trial we want things to happen the way we want them to—we want people to change, money to fall into our lap, we want to be able to get on with our lives, we want a plan, we want illnesses to go away. This is only human, but there is a spiritual danger in waiting on specific outcomes; it is to be so focused on what we want that we stop listening, watching, and locating God in our lives. We close ourselves off from the surprising ways that God fulfills hopes so absurd, that we dared not even let them enter our imaginations.<sup>1</sup>

The late Henri Nouwen is someone who during his life is always on the lookout for God. A Roman Catholic priest, academic, writer and activist, he writes honestly about these struggles. Nouwen first becomes known for his writing while studying and teaching at the prestigious Yale University. He becomes an associate professor, then a full tenured professor. Reflecting on those times he says, "I was doing well on the level of my ambitions...But I began to question whether I was really doing God's will...Was I really looking for God, and not for my own success and career?...During my time at Yale, my spiritual life wasn't deep....I was lonely and needy. I didn't have much inner peace."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Waiting for God*, in [Watch for the Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas](#), November 28 entry.

<sup>2</sup> Henri Nouwen in interview with James Lau at *My Inward Journey*, <https://jameslau88.com/2020/05/15/henri-nouwens-spiritual-journey-to-larche-and-finding-the-heart-of-god/Web>

In 1981 he resigns from Yale and travels to various countries in Latin America to work full time with the poor and politically oppressed. Reflecting on this time Nouwen says, "...I quickly realized that wasn't my vocation at all. God had not called me there. I was driven there. At some level I wanted to prove to myself that I could do something for the poor. I felt guilty for having been in academic settings."<sup>3</sup> Not having any clear answers he returns to the United States and a Professorship at Harvard. Nouwen uses this platform to tour the U.S. and raise consciousness about the plight of so many people in Latin America. At the end of the tour, he is exhausted. As Nouwen recounts, "Not just tired. My soul was somewhat broken. It was as if someone was saying to me, "Are you trying to save the world? Where is your heart in all this?...I felt I was losing my soul and that God was not supporting me."<sup>4</sup>

Broken and burnt out, he steps back, he finds his way to a L'Arche community, one of several around the world for people with intellectual disabilities and their live in companions and caregivers. It's through this experience that he receives an offer to become a live-in Chaplain at a L'Arche home in Richmond Hill, just north of Toronto. Nouwen says, "It was the first time in my whole life I felt called to anything. All the other times, I had made a lot of initiatives. But this time I felt God was calling me."<sup>5</sup> It's at L'Arche that he meets Adam, the young man for whom he cares in addition to his Chaplaincy duties. Asked why he thinks God wants him at L'Arche Nouwen replies, "To teach me what the seminary and theology didn't: how to love God and how to discover the presence of God in my own heart."<sup>6</sup>

In his life with Adam there are no prizes, no accolades, no audiences, all the things with which Nouwen struggles in his quest to live faithfully. Things that are so valued by the world and yet leave him empty, a disconnect that takes him to prayer, "God, You know what I should do. Let me know, and I will follow You. I will go anywhere You want."<sup>7</sup> What leads Nouwen away from the temptations and emptiness of his own ego toward wholeness and fulfillment is his hope not in a specific outcome, but rather his overriding hope in God to lead him to a place beyond his imagining. Throughout his life he is constantly watching, listening, paying attention to the movement and presence of God. It's because of this hope that he gives up on what he calls his own "initiatives" and surrenders to a call which is God's initiative. A call to humility, presence, healing, and wholeness. "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots."<sup>8</sup> Watch, listen, pay attention or you might just miss what God is doing. Place hope not in outcomes but in God to lead us to places beyond our imagining.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Isaiah 11: 1

So much talk on hope this second Sunday of Advent, the Sunday of the promise of peace. Hope is so important to peace. Hope calms the anxious soul. Hope gives us the patience and discipline to avoid acting out of our neediness and woundedness, the cause of so much outward and inward violence. Hope in God's activity compels us instead to be present to God. As Nouwen says, comparing the violence of his career ascent with the humility of living with Adam, "Peace is first of all the art of being."<sup>9</sup> Peace is the fruit of hope.

The Christian story tells us that some among the faithful wait for something very concrete and specific in a messiah, a king that will come from the lineage of David, a conqueror, a warrior. Others wait and hope in an expectant way, listening, and watching, open to being surprised. It is these that are able to locate God in the life of Jesus—a Messiah not of power, violence, and domination but of peace. So, a new story is told, a story of Emmanuel—God with us. It's our story, our Advent journey continues.

Rev. Joe Gaspar

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<sup>9</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Seeds of Hope: A Henri Nouwen Reader*, Robert Durbach Ed., 1997, p..259.