

Everybody has certain landmark days which mark the course of the year. Some people mark time by remembering special birthdays or anniversaries. For others it is days like the last day of school, or the first day of fishing season, or the same time frame for vacation each summer. And then, of course, there are the religious or secular holidays which fill up our calendars – festivals like Christmas and Easter, Mother’s Day and the Fourth of July. Well, today is one of those landmark days for me. It’s not just because today is my wife Sylvia’s birthday. And it’s not just that I have a special place in my heart for the fourth Sunday of Advent – although both of those events are pretty special in their own right. No, because of something that happened yesterday at precisely 9:11 a.m., today is a special day. Because of an astronomical phenomenon involving the tilt of the earth’s axis and the angle of the sun’s rays, yesterday we celebrated the winter solstice, the first day of winter – which means we have turned a corner of sorts. It will hardly be noticeable, but today there will be exactly one second more of sunlight here in Santa Barbara than there was yesterday. And tomorrow there will be 5 more seconds than today. And the next day it will increase 8 more seconds, and then 11, and 14, and 17. Today is the day the light begins to return to the earth.

I am one of those folks who lives for the sunlight. I crave it. I devour it. So this time of year, when the days are at their shortest, I find myself at my most vulnerable. Maybe I have a touch of that Seasonal Affective Disorder caused by too much darkness and too little sunlight. Or maybe I am just a person who is at my best when I can be outside soaking in the healing rays of the sun from early

morning until late at night. Whatever the reason, though, there is probably no time during the entire year when I need a shot in the arm or an energy booster more than I do right now. There is probably no time during the entire year... more than right now... when I need a Savior.

It's no coincidence that this season of Advent – this season of hoping, and waiting, and expecting – should lead us to the darkest day of the year, that it should lead us to the point, both religiously and psychologically, where we just desperately need for God to come and be with us. Several times in the past week I've heard people, in a momentary fit of frustration, say something like, "I just can't wait for this holiday season to be over." And you know what? I can't either. I can't wait for this season of waiting to end. I can't wait for the sun to return to the morning skies. I can't wait... for the coming of the Messiah.

Scarcely 48 hours from now, many of us will be returning to All Saints for our Christmas Eve services, dressed in our holiday finest, to sing our favorite carols, and to hear once again that story from Luke's gospel which many of us almost know by heart – of shepherds and angel choirs, of sheep in the field and animals in a stable, of innkeepers and swaddling cloths, of Mary and the babe in the manger. Hearing Luke tell that tale, I wonder, "How could anyone not have known that something great, something monumental had just happened?"

But for all of Luke's wonderful images of the birth of Jesus, I think Matthew's version of the story might be a little closer to what really happened. "Matthew's story?" you might ask. "Is there some other account of the birth of Jesus besides the one we all know and love?" Well, yes... as a matter of fact, there

is. And you just heard it a couple of minutes ago when we heard the gospel lesson for this morning. That story went something like this:

“Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way... Mary was found to be pregnant... Joseph had a dream telling him that everything would turn out alright... a baby was born... and Joseph named the baby, Jesus.” End of story... that’s it... the whole thing. Quietly, unassumingly, in the middle of the night while no one was paying any attention, God took the ultimate leap of faith – and became one of us. While everyone was waiting expectantly for God to enter down the center aisle and make a grand procession to the middle of the stage so that the “King of glory” might come in, God instead slipped in quietly through a side door and found a seat amongst the audience. And as Isaiah had prophesized – as we heard in our first reading this morning – he will be called Immanuel, which means “God with us.”

I have figured out something rather startling in this process I’ve experienced lately of waiting in the darkness. I have come to realize that there are two sides to this season of waiting. On the one hand, there is nothing I can do to rush God into action. There is nothing I can do to make the sun come up any earlier in the morning or set any later in the evening. God – and the sun – will act when they are ready. So, while in the short term I might be frustrated by my inability to control either the Almighty or the rising and setting of the sun, in the long run I realize it is a great relief that I can allow God to be God, and I don’t have to assume that awful responsibility... and that is very good news indeed.

There is another side, however, to this season of waiting as well... a dark side to this waiting in the darkness. There is, sometimes, a tendency – a temptation

– to shift our focus from waiting for something to simply waiting... for nothing in particular, until the very act of waiting takes on a life of its own. Theodor Geisel, who wrote under the pen name “Dr. Seuss”, published over 60 children’s books during his illustrious career, from *The Cat in the Hat*, to *Green Eggs and Ham*, to *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. The final book he published before his death in 1991 has become a classic graduation gift, entitled *Oh the Places You’ll Go*. It begins in typical, upbeat, Seuss cadence and style:

*Congratulations!*

*Today is your day.*

*You're off to Great Places!*

*You're off and away!*

*You have brains in your head.*

*You have feet in your shoes*

*You can steer yourself*

*any direction you choose.*

This Seuss tale, however, ventures into unfamiliar territory for many of his readers, for this great journey of life he describes also has its challenges:

*You will come to a place where the streets are not marked.*

*Some windows are lighted. But mostly they're darked.*

*A place you could sprain both your elbow and chin!*

*Do you dare to stay out? Do you dare to go in?*

*You can get so confused  
that you'll start in to race  
down long wiggled roads at a break-necking pace  
and grind on for miles across weirdish wild space,  
headed, I fear, toward a most useless place.  
The Waiting Place...*

Seuss goes on to describe this “Waiting Place” as the place where people sometimes get stuck, unwilling or unable to move from their current circumstance, as he several times uses the refrain: *Everyone is just waiting*. That is, I fear, the challenge of waiting sometimes... that waiting can become an end unto itself, that we begin to confuse this step of the journey with the point of the journey in the first place.

So let's get on with it. This season of waiting is drawing to a close. The four advent candles on our wreath are lit, awaiting only the lighting of one final candle for Christmas. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness shall not overcome it. The sun is returning to the morning sky. The Son of God is coming into the world.

Amen.