

Summer was always a time of joyful anticipation for me growing up. Each summer was filled with joyful things, like our annual family vacation up to Door County, a couple of weeks spent at camp, and reading so many books I could barely keep track. Each of these things filled me with such joy and I realize now, looking back, they all laid part of the foundation for who I would be as a person.

I'm still insatiably curious, devouring books of basically any kind whenever I have the chance. This curiosity for words and stories has certainly supported and fed me in studying the scriptures and creating sermons each week. My anticipation to go to camp every summer led to some of the strongest friendships I had in that season of life, and laid the foundation for my love of being amidst creation, enjoying the world God made. The annual family trips to Door County taught me the importance of relationships with my family members, and helped me to know the joy of returning to a place, of having a routine of departure and returning, a much-loved familiarity.

Just as I joyfully anticipated the summers when I was young, I like to think many of us have been joyfully anticipating this day, this return to worship in the sanctuary, for these last almost 16 months. It's almost darkly humorous to think back to when the pandemic began last March, when we thought this would last a few weeks and we'd be back to normal, and we could have Easter just a few weeks later. We truly had no idea. Bless it.

Though there is joy to be found in this anticipated return, there is also a discomfort that can come with anticipation. This comes from how little we can know about what is to come - a fear that arises from the not knowing, or unmet expectations or hopes. We learned in a very real way this year that expectations can both be unmet in challenging ways but also exceeded in joyful ways. There is room for both.

Anticipation for an event, a day, a season, whatever it may be, impacts us deeply on both the physical and the emotional/spiritual levels. And anticipation is a combination of hope and fear - a fear of the unknown, paired with a dear desire for what the next chapter could and should be.

What we anticipate creates a foundation for how we exist in this created world.

The anticipation we experience in this season may feel different than other seasons of anticipation, given the all-encompassing nature of this pandemic. It's incredible to realize how drastically our lives were changed physically, yes, but also spiritually and emotionally too. In our anticipation for the return to in-person activities of all kinds, it's important to not forget what we have been through - to remember the sacrifices of so many people, including many of us, in this wild and painful time.

Though there has been a great deal of darkness, of pain and sorrow, there is light on the horizon too, there is new life to be found, and in what some may call an apocalyptic season of pandemic, it can serve to reveal new things and new ways of being in this world. What a gift to be witnesses to such a season. And what a journey it will be to learn and grow from this time that we cannot simply ignore.

Amidst all the fear and hope within our anticipation, we can take comfort in the reality that we are not alone in this sense of all-encompassing anticipation, with all its joys and sorrows. We are joined with generations of faithful people for whom anticipation was a way of life, including the church in Corinth to whom our second reading today was written.

I'd like to focus on the piece of this letter that we heard today, from 2 Corinthians. And specifically, I want us to listen closely to what the apostle Paul writes about what is physical and what is spiritual. How do both physical circumstances and our spiritual nature work together for anticipation?

*But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture--"I believed, and so I spoke" --we also believe, and so we speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God. So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed*

*day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal. For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.*

The people of the early church were not strangers to anticipation, for good or bad, and oftentimes a little of both. Paul, who wrote this letter, was often in a state of anticipation that was really tough, as he was in prison. Many of these early believers, faithful people of the church to whom Paul wrote, were persecuted for their faith and anticipated that it was only a matter of time before they were imprisoned and/or killed too, simply for proclaiming the truth of the one who deeply loved them and taught them to pray and minister. But one of the core beliefs of the early church was that Jesus Christ would come again. That Jesus, while ascended into heaven, couldn't and wouldn't abandon the people who so faithfully followed him for very long, and part of their prayers included anticipation that Jesus would come back to them sooner rather than later. These core parts of the early church faith are part of our communion liturgy too - it's why we say "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again."

Perhaps our faith, our belonging within the story of Jesus Christ can help us with the balance of anticipation as fear, and anticipation as hope. I think the two are more intimately connected than we give them credit for. Hope is the strongest force for reconnection and deliverance when we are in the midst of a fearful situation, and often our fear is rooted in losing what we have long hoped for.

It wasn't out of fear that the early church gathered and proclaimed the truth of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, God's love made human and divine, on earth as it is in heaven. No, it was out of great hope, great faith, great love for God and neighbors that the church continued on, even in the midst of incredible hardship.

And it wasn't out of fear that Christ lived, ministered, inspired, taught, healed, died, and rose again, but out of a revealing hope, a promise of new life rising from where he was, out of God's great love for us.

It is in the love we receive from God and the love we show for one another that we learn how to meet the needs of a season of anticipation. What relationships can be formed with hope for the journey ahead? How does God meet you in your fear to give you hope for the next step? How can love guide the way you interact with the world?

Friends, consider with me what foundation this season of anticipation will lay for you. Could you lean more on the story of Christ, the body to which we belong in balancing your fear and your hope? Could you truly embrace your inner world being made new?

I pray dear friends, that we work not just to ignore or diminish our fear, but instead embrace that we are not alone in it. I pray that in our hope it is not for simply a returning to everything that was, but instead it is an embrace of what can be, what is truly loving, what is rooted in the promises and teachings of Christ Jesus. I pray that our anticipation is for life itself, loving who and where we are, where we are headed, and glorifying the God who made us within it. May you be blessed in your foundational belovedness from God, amidst your fear, and in great hope for what is to come. Amen.