

“Expectations”
James 5:7-10
Matthew 11:2-11

A Tale of Three Trees: A Traditional Folk Tale, by Angela Hunt

Once upon a mountaintop, three little trees stood and dreamed of what they wanted to become when they grew up.

The first little tree looked up at the stars twinkling like diamonds above him. “I want to hold treasure,” he said. “I want to be covered with gold and filled with precious stones. I will be the most beautiful treasure chest in the world!”

The second little tree looked out at the small stream trickling by on its way to the ocean. “I want to be a strong sailing ship,” he said. “I want to travel mighty waters and carry powerful kings. I will be the strongest ship in the world!”

The third little tree looked down into the valley below where busy men and busy women worked in a busy town. “I don't want to leave this mountaintop at all,” she said. “I want to grow so tall that when people stop to look at me they will raise their eyes to heaven and think of God. I will be the tallest tree in the world!”

Years passed. The rains came, the sun shone, and the three trees grew tall. One day three woodcutters climbed the mountain.

The first woodcutter looked at the first tree. “This tree is beautiful. It is perfect for me.” With a swoop of his shining axe, the first tree fell. “Now I shall be made into a beautiful chest,” thought the first tree. “I shall hold wonderful treasure.”

The second woodcutter looked at the second tree and said, “This tree is strong. It is perfect for me.” With a swoop of his shining axe, the second tree fell. “Now I shall sail mighty waters,” thought the second tree. “I shall be a strong ship fit for kings!”

The third tree felt her heart sink when the last woodcutter looked her way. She stood straight and tall and pointed bravely to heaven. But the woodcutter never even looked up. “Any kind of tree will do for me,” he muttered. With a swoop of his shining axe, the third tree fell.

The first tree rejoiced when the woodcutter brought him to a carpenter's shop, but the busy carpenter was not thinking about treasure chests. Instead his work-worn hands fashioned the tree into a feed box for animals. The once-beautiful tree was not covered with gold or filled with treasure. He was coated with sawdust and filled with hay for hungry farm animals.

The second tree smiled when the woodcutter took him to a shipyard, but no mighty sailing ships were being made that day. Instead the once-strong tree was hammered and sawed into a simple fishing boat. Too small and too weak to sail the ocean or even a river, he was taken to a little lake. Every day he brought in loads of dead, smelly fish.

The third tree was confused when the woodcutter cut her into strong beams and left her in a lumberyard. “What happened?” the once-tall tree wondered. “All I ever wanted to do was stay on the mountaintop and point to God.” (Angela Hunt, *A Tale of Three Trees*)

Expectation. Waiting. Hope. *The Tale of the Three Trees*, has many Advent words. Words that are from our passages this morning, as well. James writes: “Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord.” Then he speaks to the seed-time and harvest—a farmer sows the seed and waits patiently for the harvest.

Some of you are farmers, right? You don’t plant the seed in the spring and then sit around and twiddle your thumbs waiting for it to hurry up and grow. You know it takes time for seeds to germinate and sprout, to strengthen and grow, to reach toward the sun, blossom, and bear fruit. Or vegetables, as the case may be.

This is the kind of waiting James calls us to... patient waiting with strong hearts. This is Advent waiting.

Our passage from Matthew this morning is also about expectation—though perhaps about expectations that are not met. I love that line from John's disciples: “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

In other words, we thought you were the one. We believed you were the one John was declaring in the wilderness. Remember last week’s Scripture passage about John declaring that while he baptizes with water, Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

But then it’s like John starts to doubt, because Jesus doesn’t seem to *act like* the one. Jesus tells them to report back to John, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.” In other words, Jesus says—no, I’m not a fancy King David ruling from a palace, but all that you had hoped for—all that Isaiah and the prophets had prophesied—is coming true. “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.”

In Jesus, these things came to be, and it was like the wilderness and dry land was glad. It was as if the desert had rejoiced and burst into blossom. It was as if waters broke forth in the wilderness. It was Advent.

This is what we hope for in Advent. We light candles symbolizing hope, peace, joy, and love in Christ. We remind ourselves that Jesus came to fulfill the prophecies, and that he is coming again. And when he comes again, our own deserts will spring forth with water and blossom. Our own blindness and deafness will be healed. Our own places of darkness and death will find life. Our own lives experience Advent.

My hunch is that you have experienced small advents here and there—places when your expectations were not met quite like you had hoped and yet what came your way was life-giving. Arrivals, advents, of something important. Can you think of such times—when something arrived that you didn’t want and yet now you can look back and see God at work in that time? These are Advents in your life.

Right now, we are in a time of expectation as well. Not only because we are in Advent, but also as a congregation in transition. This is a new chapter for you, and it is certainly full of expectation and hope.

How will things look in another year? And then after that, when you have a new called, installed pastor to lead you in the next chapter of your lives together as a congregation? The interim time is both exciting and anxious. And yet, we need the reminder to wait with patience and support

one another in the transition—to care for one another, to listen to one another, to continue the bond of fellowship that holds you together. As James follows up his call for patience: “Do not grumble against one another.” We wait for how things will unfold for you as a congregation with patience and strong hearts.

And even as we hope into the future, we live here in the present—celebrating Advent, worshiping, looking forward to the coming children's program next week. We are in Advent—that curious time of hope and joy and anticipation. May we rejoice like Isaiah. May we have patience like James. May we look forward to the Holy Spirit at work in each of us and in this congregation as we seek the arrival of Jesus in our lives.

We have left three trees wondering about what is in store for them. Let's see for ourselves. (continuing, *A Tale of Three Trees* by Angela Hunt)

Many, many days and nights passed. The three trees nearly forgot their dreams. But one night golden starlight poured over the first tree as a young woman placed her newborn baby in the feed box.

“I wish I could make a cradle for him,” he husband whispered.” The mother squeezed his hand and smiled as the starlight shone upon the smooth sturdy wood. “This manger is beautiful,” she said. And suddenly the first tree knew he was holding the greatest treasure in the world.”

One evening, a tired traveler and his friends crowded into the old fishing boat. The traveler fell asleep as the second tree quietly sailed out into the lake. Soon a thundering and thrashing storm arose. The little tree shuddered. He knew he did not have the strength to carry so many passengers safely through the wind and rain.

The tired man awakened. He stood up, stretched out his hand, and said, “Peace.” The storm stopped as quickly as it had begun. And suddenly the second tree knew he was carrying the King of heaven and earth.

One Friday morning the third tree was started when her beams were yanked from the forgotten woodpile. She flinched as she was carried through an angry, jeering crowd. She shuddered when soldiers nailed a man's hands to her. She felt ugly and harsh and cruel.

But on Sunday morning, when the sun rose and the earth trembled with joy beneath her, the third tree knew that God's love had changed everything. It has made the first tree beautiful. It had made the second tree strong. And every time people thought of the third tree, they would think of God. That was better than being the tallest tree in the world.