

## Sunday, December 4, 2016 - All Things New: Pay Attention

Luke 1:67-79 CEB

Marysville United Methodist Church

Pastor Jenny Smith

This morning I want to tell you a story from my week, share why I want you to pay attention during Advent. We'll explore why it's hard to do that and finish with a story of how our church is paying attention lately.

So my daughter has been allergic to peanuts since she was 18 months old. Like epi-pen, hospital kind of allergic. About a year ago, she had her iGe levels checked and she was definitely still allergic. They mentioned we could do an oral challenge where they'd give her a small amount of peanut butter in the doctor's office and see what happened. I said no, thank you. The thought of doing that to my daughter sounded horrible. A year passed by and she returned in November to have her levels checked again. To our surprise, they had dropped significantly. Like a lot. So the question came again. My heart sank as I realized the decision before us. We took a couple days, weighed the risk and decided to trust the doctors knew what they were doing.

I haven't prayed about anything lately as much as I've prayed about this. I wasn't praying for God to jump in, make it all okay and take away her allergy. I was praying for God to change my heart, to remove my fear, to help me see the situation with clear eyes and to trust her doctor, my husband and God more than I ever have before.

And after a week or two of giving this a lot of focused prayer and reflection, I found myself at the sink one morning last week washing a dish with tears filling my eyes. I'd just had a conversation with my daughter and she was so excited to try peanuts. There's no fear in her little heart. She knew the basics of what could happen and trusted the doctor and her parents. I was filled with pure joy and I thought, "this is what peace feels like in the midst of a storm." Weeks before I had chosen to trust God in my head and I waited. Now, my heart felt the peace that comes from trust. At that point, I had released the outcome. I was okay either way.

This past Thursday was the day. Peanut day. It turned out she had a significant enough skin reaction to peanuts that the doctor decided against an oral challenge. She said to come back in a year and we'll test again.

We're disappointed but hopeful. Life continues as before. We do whatever we can to keep peanuts away from our daughter. And I'm most thankful I chose to show up and pay attention to my fear and to explore trust.

### **I too want you to pay attention this Advent.**

Out of the four steps we're exploring this month, I think this is the most critical one or the others don't really work. I can show up and not pay attention - and if I'm not paying attention, then I can't cooperate with God - and there's no outcome to release if I can't pay attention long enough to see what God is up to.

A couple weeks ago we talked about God always being in conversation with us and we get to choose if we'll sit down and listen. That's one of the gifts of Advent. We set aside time to sit down and listen (in whatever way that looks for you).

Because Jesus wants to do something new in your life this Christmas. **This season (the parties, gifts, food, lights, traditions) can make us feel good. But it's actually supposed to make us new.** And if we show up to Christmas with bruised, battered and exhausted hearts, we are not made new. We're given a nice sweet moment on Christmas Eve. But the change doesn't go very deep into who we are.

**God gives us Jesus because God longs for us to recover the wholeness of who we really are.** To be saved from the voices that tell us we're not good enough or smart enough or qualified enough. Jesus is born to show us a way to live and love that makes us new. That's what we're preparing for.

Zechariah is the father of John the Baptist, the cousin of Jesus. John pointed people to the coming Messiah. But before John was born, Zechariah was told his wife would have a child but she was quite old and they thought it impossible. Because he didn't believe the angel, Zechariah found himself mute for the next five months and his wife, Elizabeth, discovered she was pregnant. When John was born, Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed these words among others:

**Luke 1:78-79: MSG**

Through the heartfelt mercies of our God,  
God's Sunrise will break in upon us,  
Shining on those in the darkness,  
those sitting in the shadow of death,  
Then showing us the way, one foot at a time, down the path of peace.

These words come from a man who experienced a miracle and was willing to be used to share God's message with the world.

"God will show us the way, one foot at a time, down the path of peace."

This is what I want for you and for me this Advent. We're on a path of peace. And it begs us to pay attention to this path.

**So let's talk for a minute about why we don't pay attention sometimes.**

Imagine you're going through a tough spot in this season of life. You choose to show up to it instead of avoiding it. But then we think about really paying attention to the situation. Seeing what it holds for us. How might that feel?

I'd be afraid that I'll see something I don't want to see.

I might see something that *requires something from me I don't want to give*.

I'll realize I can't control the outcome so it's easier to not pay attention much at all.

We're afraid it might hurt too much.

So we retreat, pull back, protect ourselves. And we're the ones who end up missing out.

Because **there's a gift inside all the things we try to avoid**. A gift of healing, freedom, forgiveness, love, grace. **It's all hidden away under layers of pain we must face first**.

Or sometimes it's been hard enough to show up that I can't fathom now having the energy to pay attention. Are you kidding me? It's a miracle that I figured out another day of feeding a toddler who won't eat anything but crackers! Or maybe you're looking at the holiday season and feeling overwhelmed by a variety of things. You might think, "Fine, Jenny. I'll try to show up and really be present to people. But I'm not sure I've got it in me to pay attention in a deep way. It's just too hard sometimes." If that's you, I would say, "I get it. It is hard. I don't pay attention to every part of my life all the time. So just choose one thing. Pay attention to one person or situation and see what you start to notice."

There's a very interesting way the idea of paying attention is playing out in our church. Last February, our Administrative Council met in this sanctuary in a circle up front. We lit a candle and prayed together. I shared that I wasn't sure how to best discern where God was calling us as a community. Was there a specific group in Marysville we were called to serve? To help them know God's love is for them? I knew that wasn't my decision to make alone. So we sat together and wondered aloud where God might be calling us. Someone wondered if we could have a smaller team of 6-7 people who I could meet and pray with and we could discern some of

that. We decided our Administrative Council at 15-25 people was too big to make headway in vision conversations. We left that night with lots of ideas and chose to let it be for a while.

Then in April, the single board governance model came onto our radar. And now, eight months later, we will decide today if this is a way we want to arrange ourselves. I can't tell you how excited I am to potentially walk with a group of people whose primary task is to **pay attention** to who we are as a faith community, to who God is and to the needs of our town. I'm thankful our leaders were paying attention last February to the rustlings of the Holy Spirit. And I'm thankful so many of you have engaged with this single board concept and made it better with your feedback. This is the work of paying attention as the body of Christ.

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**Transition to communion**