

So it's Advent – a season of waiting, watching, hoping, shopping, decorating, wrapping, live – or artificial?, egad the whole family is coming for Christmas!? That's Advent outside. Here in church, we are remembering Christ's first, historical coming on Christmas day, we recognize His daily coming into our hearts, but we always begin the season with a focus on the final coming of Christ. How should we feel about Christ's return? Apprehensive? Fearful? Should we be on our best behavior? (I recommend it – always!) We've all seen the bumper stickers that read something like: "Jesus is coming back – and boy, is He mad!" Some people would be very apprehensive if they thought Christ really was about to return imminently.

It's like 2 boys who spent a sunny fall afternoon just outside of town. They gathered all the nuts underneath the huge walnut tree at the edge of the town cemetery. When they were done, they sat down under the tree, out of sight of the road, to divide the walnuts. One boy kept chanting, "One for you, one for me, one for you, one for me..." as they divided the nuts evenly. There were so many nuts that a few fell out of the sack and rolled down the hill and ended up next to the cemetery fence. "We'll get those later," said the other boy.

A young girl was cycling down the road outside the cemetery. As she got nearer, she heard the voices, so she stopped and listened: "One for you, one for me, one for you, one for me..." She shuddered as she imagined the awful truth: God and Satan must be dividing the souls at the cemetery! She cycled back to town as fast as she could and found an old man hobbling down the road, leaning heavily on his cane with every step. She said, "You've got to come with me. You won't believe what I just heard. God and Satan are down at the cemetery dividing the souls."

The old man didn't believe her. "Get lost," he said, "Can't you see I'm finding it hard to walk as it is." She kept pleading, and he eventually gave in and hobbled after her back to the cemetery. When they got to the fence, they stood quietly and heard, "One for you, one for me, one for you, one for me..." The old man whispered, "Man alive, girl, you've been tellin' me the truth. Let's see if we can get closer and see them." Shivering with fear, they got as close to the wall as they could and peered through the fence as they heard the same words, "One for you, one for me, one for you, one for me..." Then, after another minute, they heard, "One for you, one for me, and one last one for you. OK, that's all. Now," said the voice of the one doing the counting, "Let's go get those nuts by the fence, and we'll be done."

The boys found a cane lying on the ground near the last few remaining walnuts. And, oh yes, the old man got back to town 5 minutes before the girl!

OK, down to business. First, we always say that Advent is a season of waiting. But waiting is the unforgivable sin in our American, fast-paced culture. Waiting is the obstacle in our break-neck speed and efficiency. Waiting is boring. Waiting is wasted time. Waiting makes us angry. Think of all the road rage. I was in line this summer to go through the TSA screening at the airport and a man began to curse because it was taking so long to go through the line. We get angry when we just have to wait! We just do not like to wait. Period.

We want drive-through windows for our fast food. We want a surgery or a magic pill to lose weight, rather than the slow method of exercise and discipline. And why plant grass seed in the yard when we can just lay down sod and have the perfect lawn overnight? We will pay extra to sit in first class on the airplane so

that we do not have to wait to board or exit the plane. Just show us the express line, or the high-speed internet connection, and we can be happy, at least until the next delay.

Well, just wait a minute. Today I have a good word to say about waiting. And the Advent season is just the time to say it. Advent is all about waiting in the first place. Advent marks the beginning of the Christian liturgical year, the beginning of the cycle of the stories of faith by which we find meaning in our lives. Advent texts sing to us like Simon and Garfunkle, *Slow down, you move too fast. You have to make the moments last...*

So, what is so good about waiting?

First, waiting keeps us looking forward, facing the future. This is the implicit message, and the hope, contained in the Old Testament reading today. Isaiah tells the Israelites, while they are stuck in a 70-year long wait in Babylon, that God is not finished with them yet. Even in their seemingly endless exile, even though their once-proud tree of David's dynasty had been cut down by the Babylonians, God had nurtured a small, frail shoot of new future growth out of that stump. It was a sign of hope that new possibilities lay ahead, growing miraculously out of the cut-off despair of the past.

A shoot of new growth is not much to look at, at least not at first. But it is a start, and it is enough to encourage God's people to keep looking ahead, no matter how bad things may look at the present moment. Even so, a small frail baby, born to poor parents in a stable in Bethlehem, did not seem like a grand entrance for God to make into the world. But God seldom shouts. Mostly God whispers. Because hope is not born out of loud displays, but from quiet signs of possibility, held close to the heart. And the incubator of hushed expectation is waiting. It cannot be microwaved or hurried. Waiting gives us the opportunity to slow down, turn down the inner noise, and pay attention to small things – like shoots of new growth, or a baby's cooing.

For all of our complaining about waiting, some of our greatest pleasures come from waiting. Waiting for a favorite food to cook in the kitchen, smelling the aromas fill the house, makes the meal taste even better. For me, the best part of Thanksgiving is that heavenly smell of the turkey in the oven. We wait to unwrap a special present, saved for last, which makes it even more special. Waiting for a college student to arrive home after finals makes the homecoming even more tearful. We are wired for hope, made by God to lean into the future with faith and trust, believing that the best is always yet to be, secured by the God who beckons us forward.

Second, if we had nothing to look forward to, our lives would lose their discipline and purpose.

Hard to believe, but it is true that waiting and hoping can keep us on our toes, keep us alert to new possibilities, and keep us on a journey toward a destination. Without such hope, cut off from a sense of the future, our existence would spiral down in despair, or be wasted in sloppy living. The New Testament readings, from both the epistle and the Gospel, underline this truth. Waiting is good for us. It keeps us pointed ahead. Waiting keeps us from becoming trapped in the past or the present. If we need an example, consider the sad state of the person who can only talk about their past, as if all the good days are already done. Or the retired person who only retired FROM something in the past, but did not retire TO something in the future. After only a few weeks of golf and sleeping late, he or she is restless and bored, and feeling useless. Into this emptiness, some people succumb to self-destructive choices. Like Lot's wife, a person stuck only looking back is transformed into something less than human, symbolized by her becoming a pillar of salt. But to be fully alive, to become fully the person God created us to be, we must learn to cherish the sense of

expectation. It is this hope that keeps us from giving up when the present moment is dark. It is this hope that frees us from the tyranny of our past, and opens us up to the limitless possibilities of God's continued 'yes.'

So, next week when you and I are stuck in traffic again, when we are on-hold listening to MUZAK, let's use that rare and beautiful moment as a gift from God to exercise our muscles of hope. And let's pay attention in those moments, because God just might be trying to get our attention. Most people are just too busy in the sterility of haste. Head down, heart closed. But good things come to those who wait. No wonder. Those who have learned to wait graciously are the only ones who even recognize the good things when they come anyway. They are expecting. They are hoping. And thus insights and opportunities are born to them all the time.

Anyone here 'expecting' this Advent season? Men and women? Old and young? Are any of us expecting, hoping, waiting? I hope so. Oh, I hope so. Amen. (Adapted from GRACEWORKS, November 30, 2003)

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