

Waiting in Advent

*“From ages past no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who works for those who wait for him.”
(Isaiah 64:4)*

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Advent is a season of waiting: waiting for God to come into our lives. We hear this theme throughout our lessons this morning.

In Isaiah, the people of Judah do not understand why their God is so slow to restore their treasured city of Jerusalem, as they return from captivity in Babylon only to find their home desecrated and in ruins. The prophet, however, reminds the people in verse four that God “works for those who wait for him.” (Isa 64:4)

So too in our psalm today do we hear the urgent cries of a people who are growing weary of waiting for God to show his face to them.

“O Lord God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people’s prayers? You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in full measure. You make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves. Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.” (Ps 80:4-7)

And in our epistle lesson, too, we hear St. Paul writing to a troubled church in Corinth imploring them to keep their faith as they “wait for the revealing of Christ” in his full reality. (1 Cor 1:3-9)

But perhaps the most urgent words of waiting we hear today are from Jesus himself, who in our gospel lesson tells his disciples that they must stay awake and keep alert as they await for the coming of the Son of Man at a time known only to the Father. (Mark 13:24-37)

Waiting. That is the watchword for Advent.

Well, we're learning something about waiting in this time of pandemic, aren't we? We are learning the hard way. We're waiting for the development of a vaccine and its distribution to save us from the threat of a deadly virus. We're waiting for an economy to recover as many of us are running out of money. We're waiting for life to return to normal, so that we can once again hug our friends, go to ballgames and concerts, and return to the pews. We're waiting for an end to this terrible time of social isolation.

Such waiting is hard, isn't it?

The truth of the matter is that most of us are bad at waiting. We modern Americans, especially those of us who are privileged, are used to getting what we want. And we like to get what we want when we want it. We have become a people of immediate gratification.

Technology has a lot to do with it, of course. For better or worse, most of us have come to depend on our smartphones or computers for nearly everything, and this technology is designed to eliminate waiting. You want to know what's going on in the world?; we have an app for that. You want to buy something right now?; amazon will have it on your doorstep tomorrow? You want music?; streaming services put the world's library of music at our fingertips. You want food?; Grubhub can deliver it in less than an hour. The list goes on and on.

Indeed, we've become so accustomed to having our needs met instantly, that we quickly become irritated when things go awry: when the wifi goes down, when our phone freezes up, or when that dreaded multi-colored windmill appears on our computer screens.

Our love affair with technology has utterly compromised our ability to wait.

The late Henri Nouwen, Dutch priest and theologian who lived and taught in the United States until he died, was a very astute observer of American culture. He wrote: "Waiting is not very popular in this country. In fact, most people consider waiting to be a waste of time. The culture says, 'Get going! Do something! Don't just sit there and wait.' For many people waiting is the awful desert between where they are and where they want to be." (from *Watch for the Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas*, Plough Publishing, 2001, pp. 27-37)

There are virtues to this "can-do" attitude, to be sure; but there are grave dangers too. For the truth of the matter is that nearly everything of any value in life requires waiting, patience, quiet and thoughtful anticipation.

Waiting for a child to grow in a mother's womb and to be born. Waiting for the darkness of night to give way to the light of a beautiful dawn. Waiting for a rose bush to bloom. Waiting for a painting to emerge from an artist's brush or a symphony from a composer's hand. Waiting for a relationship to grow from the excitement of an initial attraction into the depth of a mature love.

The wisdom of waiting is that it reminds us that we are not in control after all. That we are in fact dependent upon something bigger than ourselves for our very being, for inspiration, for guidance, for our ultimate flourishing.

It turns out that waiting is something that we have to practice to do well. For there is a difference between holy waiting and just biding time.

Holy waiting is grounded in the hope of a promise. To be a faithful person is to trust in God's promises and to be anchored by them in our waiting. If you are looking for a biblical example, think of Elizabeth and Mary in Luke's gospel. The scene of the Visitation is one of my very favorites where these two faithful women visit one another, with new life stirring in their wombs, each giving comfort to the other as they expectantly await for these holy infants to emerge, wondering who they will be and what God has in store for them. This is a holy waiting precisely because these women trust that God is at work in them and that the future is in God's hands.

By contrast, consider what some people regard as a great piece of postmodern literature, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. As Beckett sees it, humanity is waiting for Godot, or God, to come and save them, but he never shows up. The characters in the play are told to wait for Godot, for he might come tomorrow. And so they continue to wait in their dreary existence. The only prop in the play is a dead tree. The implication in all this is that there is no God and no Savior. Life, according to Beckett, is absurd. There is no ultimate meaning to existence, and so we have to create our own meaning, relying only in ourselves. Beckett's waiting is an ultimately empty exercise in despair and futility. It is mere biding of time.

Now I cannot disprove Beckett's point of view, but I can say that that his absurdist world is utterly and completely contrary to my personal experience and to the experience of God's people as revealed in our sacred texts. Beckett blithely ignores all the ways in which God has already come into our lives. God has come in the mystery of creation itself. God has come in the giving of the Law, which allows us to live moral lives anchored in purpose and meaning. God has come in the prophetic voices of those who have gone before us and who are constantly calling us back to God's ways of justice and truth. And God, most importantly has come in the person of Jesus

Christ, whose life reveals unmistakably how self-sacrificial love can change us completely and turn a mean world into a beautiful one.

The truth is that God is always and everywhere coming into our lives if we only open our hearts to his presence.

In sum, and contrary to Beckett, God's people wait not in despair, but in hope, because there is every reason to trust in God's promise that He will indeed come again, and again, and again.

The one last thing I want to say about holy waiting is that it is not something we do alone. It is, rather, something we do *together* as the mysterious Body of Christ on earth. Let me quote Henri Nouwen again:

“The whole meaning of Christian community lies in offering a space in which we wait for that which we have already seen. Christian community is the place where we keep the flame alive among us and take it seriously, so that it can grow and become stronger in us. In this way we can live with courage, trusting that there is a spiritual power in us that allows us to live in this world without being seduced constantly by despair, lostness, and darkness. That is how we dare to say that God is a God of love even when we see hatred all around us. That is why we can claim God is a God of life even when we see death and destruction and agony all around us. We say it together. We affirm it in one another. Waiting together, nurturing what has already begun, expecting its fulfillment – that is the meaning of marriage, friendship, community and the entirety of the Christian life.” (*Ibid.*)

What Advent teaches us, in short, is that we are a people who wait. We wait with patience. We wait with alertness to God's presence. We wait in hope, trusting in God's promises. And we wait together. For, as the prophet Isaiah reminds us, “they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.” (Isa. 40:31)

Amen.