

# **“WAITING, WITH A TWIST”**

**Isaiah 40:1-11; 2 Peter 3:8-15a**

**Market Square Presbyterian Church in the City of  
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania**

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**December 10, 2017 - Second Sunday of Advent**

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Looking at the bulletin cover, no one can accuse us of ambiguity in regard to this morning's theme! WAIT. WAIT. **WAIT.** Nice work, again, John Robinson!

You probably have noticed I do not do many of the children's sermons around here but I don't think I ever told you why. It happened many years ago in a previous congregation when I was talking with the children, like today, on the second Sunday of Advent. The topic that day, as on this one, was the Advent discipline of waiting. I wanted to help the children to see that waiting is not as bad as I supposed they thought it was and though waiting may be hard at times it usually is worth it in the end.

I asked the children how many of them were good wait-ers. Not a single hand went up. I asked how many of them liked to wait. Noone. I asked how many ever had taken a trip in a car with their parents and asked, "When are we going to be there?" Every hand shot skyward. Then I inquired how many of them ever had gone to the movies with their parents and whined, "How many minutes 'til the movie starts?" Unanimous! (I thought about asking how many of them ever had asked in church when the sermon is going to be over but decided not to go there.)

I told the children that waiting is an important part of Advent and life and how looking forward to something gets us ready to receive it more thankfully and fully when it comes. I explained to the children that we would miss a lot if we just skipped right from Thanksgiving to Christmas without waiting in between. It is in the waiting, I told them, that we can hear again the message of the prophets and John the Baptist and listen to the angels' comforting words not to be afraid. We can be moved by the soulful song of Mary and ponder in our hearts the meaning of the

Christmas story. I told the children that instead of having Christmas over so soon they can think and dream about it and get all warm inside for a whole month between Thanksgiving and Christmas!

I thought it was going well. The children seemed to be engaged and even the parents were sitting a little forward in their pews. I wanted to help the children to develop their Advent waiting skills so I gave each child one of those plastic candy canes filled with M & Ms - you know the ones I mean, the good ones - and then I told them, "But you have to wait until Christmas to eat them. Do not open them until Christmas morning." The congregation booed me. They booed me for asking the children to wait until Christmas to enjoy their gift. And I looked them in the congregational eye and said, "I am NOT backing down." And that is why I do not do many children's sermons anymore.

They made me feel like Scrooge. I think I have scars, though I guess it was all in good fun. Still, the more I thought about it, the more I rationalized that the response proved my point. It wasn't like I was asking the kids to go without food or shelter or their smartphones. It was M & Ms! Now I was especially glad I had told them to wait, to defer some gratification for more than an instant, to help them to discover they really can wait because, obviously, that news was not going to come from their parents! I had a conviction that the lesson some day would serve the children, maybe even the adults, well.

Oh, how we hate to wait. Once, when a carriage he had ordered arrived just in time, a not very happy King Louis XIV of France was heard to say, "I almost had to wait!"

One of the reasons Advent is good for us is that waiting gets institutionalized and liturgicized (if that is a word). No matter what we do, we cannot make Christmas come any faster than the calendar allows. There is no certainty, of course, that we won't fill up the weeks before Christmas with a flurry of activity or a blizzard of busyness and the season will fly by with hardly any time taken for attending to our lives and faith. But, for those who want to live more deeply into the kingdom of God that, along with Jesus, is given birth at Christmas, Advent affords us an opportunity to do so.

At Advent, we step into the beginning of the church year - that great circle of time that traces the eternal work of God in Jesus Christ - that culminates in the Sunday of Christ the King. Each year we are invited to align our lives, to live our lives in the light of the great story of salvation and freedom God makes known to us through Jesus and his church.

The first half of the church year, from Advent to Pentecost, tells the story of the earthly life of Jesus. The second half of the church year, from Pentecost to Christ the King, tells about the

continuing ministry of our Lord through his church into whom God pours the life-giving Spirit of Christ.

In the first half of the church year, we learn through the birth, baptism, teaching, ministry, and death and resurrection of Jesus not only the incredible length to which God is willing to go to bring us into God's kingdom and to get the kingdom of God into us. We also learn about the mercy, justice, freedom, joy, and hospitality that characterize the reign of God.

In the book about the German martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, some of us are reading for the gathering of the Reformed Readers group this week, the author many times points out how Bonhoeffer sought to rescue the experience of Christ from theological abstraction in favor of the reality of his embodied life.<sup>1</sup> In the first half of the church year, we meet not a set of theological principles but the "Logos," the Word of God, taking on flesh that is the same as ours, becoming as we are. The gospel life is not a matter of conjecture and intellectual jousting but a life to be lived in a long obedience to Jesus.

It would be cruel of God to show us the kind of robust, holy life that Jesus lived and issue a summons to us to live it, too, if we are not equipped to do so. Thus, Pentecost finds the Spirit of Christ being poured into the lives of those who yearn for the gospel life and the church is formed. The Spirit of God is the One through whom God's power is conveyed to us so that we may live Christian lives.

In the second half of the church year we learn how to be the Spirit-infused body of Christ, the community of God's inspired people, indeed, how to be the church in the world, the world that God both loves<sup>2</sup> and over which God sometimes weeps.<sup>3</sup> God wants what is best for us, for all of us, for all God's children and so gives the Spirit-led church as a gift to the world, as the light that illumines God's way in the world.

When the church does not live out of its connection to Christ but is simply a religiously-costumed reflection of the cultural and secular life around us, we hide the light, we hide God's light, under a basket and all of us lose our way.<sup>4</sup> That is why it is so vital that we continue to learn and to know the old, old story of Jesus and his love and for the church to live it.

So, we begin at the beginning, in Advent, and learn of our Jewish mothers and fathers who were exiled from their homeland and scattered abroad in Babylon by the invading Babylonian armies.

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<sup>1</sup> Marsh, Charles, Strange Glory. New York: Vintage Books, 2014, p. 57 (and many other times)

<sup>2</sup> John 3:16

<sup>3</sup> Luke 19:41

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 5:14-16

We learn how they had longed and waited for the promised Messiah of God to come to save them and to give them a new chance at life.

The exile had been the result of Israel's wandering from the way God had shown to them. God used their wilderness time not so much as punishment but as an opportunity to teach the people how to live justly, mercifully, and humbly in the world. The people waited for God to act to restore them. Not passive waiting, mind you, but waiting with a twist. Not waiting just as a passing of time, but as an opportunity for practicing the presence of God.<sup>5</sup>

So they in their time did what we are called to do in ours. They prayed and they sang their songs and they remembered how much freer their lives had been in captivity to God than when they departed from the Way and sought to live on their own terms. They recalled the acts of justice, peace, and compassion they had been called to visit on the oppressed, downtrodden, and vulnerable ones in their society but they also remembered they often failed to do so because of their preoccupation with their own privilege and well-being. They learned the lesson that nothing immoral is smart in the long run.

And then, by the grace of God, God turns toward Isaiah the prophet and says to him,

*Comfort, O comfort my people.  
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that  
she has served her term and  
that her penalty is paid.*<sup>6</sup>

And then this further word:

*In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God...*<sup>7</sup>

The God who promised to come among the people was coming. Watch and wait. Wait and watch.

From our vantage point a couple of millennia later, we know that God did come, though not in the way most people expected, but in a baby, in Jesus born of Mary. Through this Jesus, God invited and still invites people into a kingdom, but not the kind of kingdom the people expected.

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<sup>5</sup> A phrase commonly attributed to Brother Lawrence.

<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 40:1-2

<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 40:3

Rather, it is a kingdom that transcends all of the world's kingdoms...a kingdom rooted not in fear, but hope; not in triumphalism, but servanthood; not in duty, but joy; not in power, but love.

The waiting for Messiah, for Jesus, by our foreparents in the faith is a part of our story, too, and we reenact it ritually every year in these days of Advent. But we also do our own waiting. For what are we waiting? Listen to Peter:

*In accordance with God's promise,  
we wait for new heavens and a new earth,  
where righteousness is at home.*<sup>8</sup>

We are waiting for the reign of God to wend its way into every corner of the cosmos and into every nook and cranny of every human heart. We are waiting for every weapon of destruction to be turned into money for education and health care; we are waiting for every pang of hunger in every child's belly to be satisfied; we are waiting for cancer to be gone for good and for every enemy everywhere to be reconciled; we are waiting for every scourge of racism to be banished from the earth and every economy to be transformed so we do not have anymore a favored few while others grovel; we are waiting for civil rights to be equal and unequivocal for all; we are waiting for walls and rumors of walls to be broken down and for hospitality to rise up.

How do we wait? Expectantly. We do not finally know how God will bring to pass all that God has promised, or when. But we live expectantly, anticipating God to act in our lives, anticipating God to act in the world. Indeed, God already is doing so. Isaiah says, "*God is doing a new thing. Do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.*"<sup>9</sup> That is what we do in our Advent waiting time. We anticipate; we see and perceive; we trust that with God all things are possible;<sup>10</sup> and we follow where the Spirit of Christ leads us.

Do not despair that the world seems so often to be adrift or out of control. Wait expectantly. Do not get ahead of God. Wait. But wait actively. Advent waiting is not passive waiting. It is living faithfully and consistently with the gospel that has been revealed to us. It is joining God in doing God's work. It is engaging the world with the light and wisdom God gives to us. It is believing that, in God's time, a new heaven and new earth will come. Arrayed against the powers of the world that seem so formidable, the ministry of the church - like leaven in dough<sup>11</sup> - one day will cause the whole world to rise into righteousness, justice, and peace.

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<sup>8</sup> 2 Peter 8:13

<sup>9</sup> Isaiah 43:19

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 19:26

<sup>11</sup> Galatians 5:9

That Day of fulfillment for which we expectantly and actively wait will come like a thief, Peter says.<sup>12</sup> Not according to our schedule and wisdom, but God's. In the meantime, we wait...actively, expectantly, faithfully, with the gospel as our guide and the Spirit of Christ as our Guarantee.

Amen.

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<sup>12</sup> 2 Peter 3:10