



IT'S HARD TO WAIT FOR CHRISTMAS

Isaiah 40:27-31; Romans 8:24-25

First Baptist Church, Raleigh, NC

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The First Sunday of Advent

Much of our life is spent in waiting. If we do not learn how to live while we wait, we will likely miss much of life. As a friend of mine muses: "A lot of living is spent in the meantime." It has never been easy for people to wait in any age. But a flashing sign of our adolescence today is our glaring inability to wait. We are an age of impatience. We want what we want immediately. We want instant gratification. We want results on demand. Actions when requested.

In our world today, we do not wait very well. We want everything done instantly. We want news from overseas and even from astronauts in outer space immediately. We want information from those distant places speedily. And often we get it that way by television or the internet. Many today prefer instant tea or instant coffee and minute steaks. They want frozen food made available instantly. Microwaves cook our meals much faster than old-fashioned ovens. We have instant copy makers, fax machines, and many have cell phones and emails to communicate quickly. We have many gadgets and machines to get results quickly or to satisfy our needs immediately. Our lifestyle is one of impatience. We want to be satisfied right now.

Waiting Is a Part of Life

Yet I wonder how realistic that is or has ever been. I recall as a boy that I spent a lot of time waiting. I remember waiting to go to kindergarten, and then waiting until I was old enough to go to first grade. I remember waiting for the school bus. I remember waiting for Saturday so I could go to the old Trenton Theatre and see the "shoot-'em-up" movie. I remember waiting for Christmas day to arrive and then waiting to go to my grandmother's house for a meal with our extended family, and then waiting to get back home to play with my toys. I recall waiting to go to high school, waiting to go to college, and waiting to go to seminary. Later I remember waiting to get married, waiting for my first child, waiting for my second child and later for my grandchildren.

Much of life is spent waiting. Think about your own life. How much of your life do you spend simply waiting? Reflect on the time you spend at the grocery or the department store waiting at the doctor's or dentist's office. Time is spent waiting for a telephone call from that certain guy or certain girl, or waiting for a call or email from overseas or across the country from a friend or relative, or waiting for the bell to ring at school. "Will this class

never end?” you ask yourself. You spend time waiting to go home for Christmas, waiting to get your grades, waiting to graduate, waiting for a job, waiting for somebody else to meet you, waiting for piano lessons to end, waiting for the baby to arrive, waiting for the plane, waiting for the game, play, or concert to begin. We are busy waiting for something. But most of us are not very good at waiting.

J. Barrie Shepherd said that, when he was a very small boy, his father owned a bakery shop. His father would get up very early because he had to knead his dough for the morning rolls which he made the night before. After the dough reached the right consistency, he would drop it in an enormous barrel and then place a piece of yeast on top of the dough and go to bed. Then he would have to get up very early the next day before dawn. The fresh, light dough would have risen to the top of the barrel. He said that the rolls which his father would make from that dough were absolutely delicious. Then America invented a new instant rising substance called “flying dough.” His father could sleep later in the morning and prepare the rolls the night before, but Shepherd said that the rolls were never the same again.

Now let me tell you a secret. If you have never tasted a roll made from scratch, or a cake baked from scratch, or a biscuit made from scratch, you haven’t really lived! I have been especially blessed to have a wife that can make rolls, cakes and biscuits from scratch. The others that come from a can, the frozen department, or a prepackaged container are not the real things. But that is a part of the sacrifice we make to have everything ready instantly. Convenience or impatience sometimes may cause us to give up some of the better things of life.

The Frustration of Waiting

The prophet Isaiah knew something about the problem of waiting. He was speaking to a people who had been waiting for fifty years to be delivered from their captivity in Babylon. But they had heard no word from God. They longed to go back home to Israel. They wondered where God was. Our text notes first that the children of Israel were filled with frustration and anxiety. They had become faint and weary from waiting. Their long term burden of suffering and enslavement had affected their mental attitude and they were disappointed and depressed. Our bodily condition often affects our attitude. They had been demoralized from their long years of being away from home in captivity in a foreign land. God’s way seemed hidden from them. They cried out and asked: “Where is God? Why doesn’t God do something?” They were not concerned whether God was up in the sky or in the stars, but they wanted to know if God was near them in their time of need. They wanted to know if God could do anything to help them in their plight. “Does God care about us?” they asked. In their emotional fatigue and depression, they cried out to God. They were suffering from frustration and anxiety and in the depths of self pity.

You and I understand those kinds of feelings, don't we? There are times when our emotions overcome us because we are weary and faint from physical and mental burdens. Like Israel in Isaiah's day, we want to know where God is. I visited a woman recently who told me she had just talked with her doctor, "I am so tired of hearing him say, 'At your age you have to expect some of your parts to wear out.'" "Why?" she asked. "Why is life that way?" Her body had an affect on her emotions and depression had sunk in. Our body and feelings are tied together. Many of us are frustrated and weary with waiting for something to happen. We have some dream, goal, hope, desire or ideal that we long to realize. But it has not come to pass. Our hope has not been realized or our dream may be unfulfilled, and so we soon become depressed and hit bottom. We feel hopeless or trapped. And we ask, "Is there any word from God?"

The Call for Patience

Isaiah was aware of Israel's frustration and anxiety but note secondly that he encouraged the people to learn to be patient where they were. Even in their waiting, he reminded them that God was present with them. God is working in ways beyond your understanding; Isaiah informs them (v. 28). While they waited, God wanted them to learn to live in the meantime. To a degree, they had done this. They had married, built houses, and had families. They had planted crops and carried on life as best they could while living in captivity. While they waited to return to Israel, they lived in the meantime.

The Gospels record people waiting centuries for Christ to come. We read about Elizabeth waiting to give birth to their son. Simeon and Anna waited to see the anointed One before they died. Mary and Joseph waited for the birth of Jesus. They all waited with expectation and hope. But that did not mean that their wait was easy. We, too, in this Christmas season look for signs again of the coming of the Christ. We wait to celebrate his birth again. Harold Kohn, a minister and naturalist, said that man/woman is the only creature who has really learned much about how to wait. When the amoeba encounters its food, it doesn't wait, it just consumes it. If you want to teach a dog or a cat to wait before they eat, you have got a real job on your hands to train them not to eat their food when it is placed before them. If there is no training, there is immediate consumption. And the same is true with many animals in their mating process. There is very little wooing, only instantaneous gratification. But man/woman knows something about wooing and courting and the ability to wait. We plant crops because we have learned to wait for the harvest. We learn how to wait. But not many of us have learned how to wait very effectively.

Waiting requires a great deal of patience. Someone once criticized Leonardo da Vinci because he would stand looking at his canvas of "The Lord's Supper" for hours before he would take a single stroke. People could not understand why he would spend so much time just standing there and looking. He responded by saying: "My most telling strokes come after the longest pauses." His greatest creativity came from his ability to wait until his

stroke was clear to him. The best parents, the best teachers are those who know something about patience. Parents and teachers give guidance and knowledge and then wait for the child to absorb it. Education requires the ability to wait and see somebody blossom, develop, grow, and mature. We guide and instruct and then need the ability simply to wait.

Medical doctors have learned to cooperate with waiting. A doctor may remove a tumor or perform surgery and then, after he has finished his or her part, the process of healing must take place. Healing requires waiting. Healing takes time. Healing works on its own. The doctors have done their work. Now time and waiting must take place before their work is complete. Paul reminds us that creation itself is not finished. It is still in process of waiting to be completed. Nature itself waits for its final goal (Rom. 8:20-21).

Some years ago when I lost fifty percent of the hearing in one of my ears from a viral infection, my doctor gave me a prescription of rest. He said I needed simply to wait and let my body's natural defenses work on the infection to bring healing. "What kind of prescription was that?" I thought. I want some medicine. Give me something to get rid of this problem." But the doctor's prescription was wait. Wait! But that was not and is not an easy prescription for any of us to take. Waiting can be a hard pill to swallow.

The cartoon character Charlie Brown and Lucy are talking. Lucy says to Charlie Brown, "Do you know how many great moments in your life you have wasted? Here comes a great moment right now. This is "the moment. Bang, it's gone. It's wasted. And you didn't do a thing with it." Charlie Brown says, "You are not much fun to have around." And anybody who wants to tell us to live creatively is not somebody we usually want to have around. Nevertheless, we may often need some buzzing bee to remind us to live in the present and stop wasting some of the most precious moments by waiting to live later. We need to learn to live in the time while we wait.

The Anticipation of Something Better

Thirdly, notice that one of the reasons Israel may not have been able to live effectively where they were was that they kept anticipating going home. They continued to anticipate something better, something beyond, and returning to something that they did not have. That kind of anticipation is good and bad. Many of us are not able to learn to live right in the meantime because we keep looking down the road. You have heard people say: "Well, if my wife were only different." Or, "If my husband saw things differently or if he were like this.... Or, "If I had different circumstances," or "If I could live differently, or live in another place." So we live in the future and wait for tomorrow. We look to another place and time or when we graduate or get another job or have more money or the children leave home.

When I have ministered to people who have had heart attacks or bouts with cancer or some other serious illness which threatened their life, they almost universally tell me about the reordering of priorities in their lives. They are no longer looking way down the

road. They begin to look more seriously at the present moment. The meantime has become more sacred. Now they ask: “What can I do with the gift of this moment? How can I best live now?” Too many of us look down the road into the future and seek to find life’s meaning in a distant direction instead of living in the present.

Wait with Hope

The writer of our Scripture text offers us a fourth lesson. Isaiah says we have to learn to wait with hope. Waiting can teach us lessons about hope. We can wait or we can wait with hope. We wait with hope in the awareness that the Creator God leads us in ways beyond our ability to understand or grasp. This everlasting God never grows weary or faint. The Apostle Paul writing in the epistle to the Romans reminds us that we wait not as those who have no hope. We wait with expectation. We do not wait for the end to come with inevitability. It will not arrive with a boom and end in despair. We wait with eager anticipation and hope, because we have the assurance that God is in charge of the end of time.

In England the Christmas carolers who used to come by homes singing were called “Waits.” The “Waits” shared the Christmas message through music. While we are living in the time of waiting, we need to learn to sing the song of hope. Waiting can teach the Christian how to sing. The Christian cannot be caught up in the despair of the moment, whether there is illness or surgery or sickness or whatever the world conditions are, because we know we wait not without hope, but we wait with a sense of the power and presence of God in our lives to sustain us.

We have experienced his love in Christ, and we know that God loves us and cares for us. We wait in expectation that God will come to meet our need and strengthen us. We wait for God to come anew in our lives in this Christmas season. In a world filled with so much darkness, disease war, poverty, and injustice, we need to sing songs again of hope, love, peace, joy, forgiveness, and grace. We do not need more prophets of gloom and doom, but those who will deliver songs of encouragement and the possibilities of new beginnings. As Christians, we need to light candles of hope and light in a world filled with too much darkness.

God Is Constant

A fifth lesson from our text today is one about trust. Isaiah reminds the people of God’s faithfulness and constancy. God is from everlasting to everlasting. God is not a God who grows weary or faint. God is present even when we are weary, tired, depressed and beaten down by difficult circumstances or events. God is ever present. “Have you not known, have you not heard?” Isaiah asked Israel. Have you not known what kind of God we worship? We sometimes assume that faith precedes knowledge. Paul stated, “I know whom I have believed.” But sometimes knowledge about God precedes faith. That was what Isaiah was reminding Israel here. Remember that the Lord is an everlasting God. God is the

creator of the world. You can never understand the greatness of God nor fathom God's understanding. Isaiah was reminding them of some great truths about God to help them recall or stimulate their faith. Their concept of God was too small.

The basic meaning of the word "wait" comes from a Hebrew word which means "to wind or twist" like a rope or the fibers in a spider's web. "To wait upon the Lord" is to let God become your lifeline, to let God be your cord of escape and to find your strength in God. This concept of "waiting" is not passively doing nothing. It is waiting eagerly like a farmer who waits for crops from seeds he has planted. It is waiting linked with God knowing that no matter what our troubles or difficulties are, God is always present to sustain us.

Have you ever read or heard how an eagle builds her nest? The eagle makes a nest first with thorns and then places wool or other soft items over the thorns. Then the eagle lays her eggs. When the small eaglets are hatched, they live in the soft nest and are fed for a while. When it is time for the little eagles to fly, the old eagle removes the soft wool from the thorns in her nest with her talons and exposes the sharp thorns to the eaglets. The nest is very uncomfortable and pricks them. They have to fly out of the nest because the thorns cut them. The young eaglets fly with very weak wings at first. The giant eagle comes under the eaglets and lets the small bird land on his or her wings and bears them up and helps them fly. When the thorns of troubles, difficulties and burdens seem to pierce us that doesn't mean God is not present. God is with us and is seeking to bear us up under the wings of divine grace. We lean upon God knowing that we can feel God's presence and power in our weakness. God will bear us up.

Strength to Endure

Lastly our text reminds us about endurance. Isaiah states that we will "renew our strength" when we wait upon God. The words "renew your strength" are really more accurately translated that we will find "an unfailing strength or resource from God." You will find a strong resource that reaches beyond your own resources and strength. This renewal comes from God's strength, not your own. Here is a new kind of strength. It is from God. This strength will give you the power to endure. Paul reminds us, "If we hope for something we do not yet see, then, in waiting for it, we show our endurance" (Rom. 8:25).

Isaiah depicts a graduated or progression of faith. We are not always at the same stage in our faith. Sometimes we have faith like wings. By faith, we can lift ourselves up and fly to great heights. Many of the children of Israel wanted those wings to fly away and escape their bondage. Faith on this level gives us elevation and vision. At other times, by faith we are running. We may be running to avoid our difficulties and trials; running to sustain ourselves in the stresses and strains of living. But most of the time we are walking by faith. This is the faith of our ordinary days, regular rounds, and the steady pace of simply enduring. Much of life is plodding, not running or flying. The greatest work may be done in ordinary, routine ways by teachers, doctors, lawyers, carpenters, secretaries, store clerks,

farmers and millions of folks. This is the steady pace of individuals who work faithfully at their routine task again and again, day after day. In our daily work, we walk by faith that God is ever present with us.

In this Christmas season, let me encourage you again to learn how to wait. Now I know, we don't want to do that. We think actions are always the answer and that waiting is a weakness. Action seems stronger. But actions may not be the answer. We sometimes say, "Leave waiting to monks, weaklings and mystics. Give me action." But is it not possible that the greatest source of strength may come to us in waiting? There is a time to wait and a time to act." Knowing the right moment, discerning the time, is not always easy. But try we must.

So then do not give way to despair, difficulties, depressions or whatever those low moments bear. You wait with hope and confidence, because you know that God is present to bear you up. In this Christmas season that is the good news. There is good news of great joy. God has come into the world and we have seen his love. As we wait to celebrate Christmas again, remember that God loves you, sustains you and will never abandon you. The birth of Jesus Christ reminds us that God loves us and is present to us in a very special way.

Years ago when our children were preschoolers, we used to drive to church past a manger scene. Each Sunday our children would comment on that manger scene. It was a typical manger scene with shepherds, angels, and the small manger with the Christ child in it. The scene was on the lawn of another church. After Christmas was over, we drove past the church one day and our son, Bill, looked up and said: "They have put the Lord Jesus away until next Christmas."

For some of us we will place the Christmas decorations on the tree and we will get ready for Christmas. After Christmas is over, we will put them away for next Christmas, and we may never have experienced the Christ of Christmas at all. Let us wait for God's presence to come. Let us wait with the sense of the power of God's coming, and with the assurance that in our waiting God is present. We wait with assurance and hope that God has come and is coming anew within our lives to draw us closer to God's self. May your Christmas expectation be fulfilled in the strong sense of the presence of Christ in this Christmas season. May the Lord Jesus not be put away for another year but be a present reality with each of us each day of the new year.

Sometimes at Christmas season we can come aglow with the wonder of Christ but then during the rest of the year we don't really seem to sense much excitement about our faith. My prayer for you and for me in this Christmas season is that we will learn to wait for God and in our waiting sense God's presence sustaining us. It's hard to wait. But remember, bind yourself to God. In that kind of waiting, you find real strength.

O Lord God, strengthen us to wait upon You with courage and faith. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal God, we pause now to take time to speak with You. We confess that often we are so busy rushing from one thing to another, coming and going, walking and running, so that we will not waste time, and consequently, we seldom have time for You.

Excuse us God, we are just too busy. We haven't time. We have just so much to do. We would like to pray, but we can't think, read, or wait. We haven't time. We are too busy. We know You understand. Life for us, O God, is filled with busyness. There is the child who is busy playing. He has no time now; later on he says. There is the student at school, she has homework to do, no time now. Later on. There is a young man who has sports. He has no time now, but later on he says. There is the father who must play golf. He has no time now, later on he says. There is a mother with her club. No time now she says, later on. There are grandparents who have no time now for their grandchildren. Later on they say. O God, there are those who are ill. They haven't time. There are those who are dying, but it is too late for them. They have no more time.

Forgive us, Lord, for wasting time, for killing time, and for using time so foolishly. Teach us to accept time as a great gift from You. May we sense that it is a perishable gift that will not keep. Teach us how to learn to wait upon You. We are aware that we only have the time which is given to us from You now. The years, the months and weeks, the days, the hours and the minutes of our lives are all a gift from You. They are ours to fill quickly, calmly and fully.

Teach us to learn to wait upon You so that we can learn to live life in its fullest. Let it begin now as we pause to listen to Your spirit in this Christmas season and especially in this hour. We come waiting upon You. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, we pray. Amen. ■