



## Sermon

Isaiah 2:1-5 / Romans 13:11-14 / Matthew 24:36-44  
The First Sunday of Advent  
December 2, 2007  
Historic St. George's UMC  
Rev. Alfred T. Day III

## The Waiting Place

*For many people will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. God will teach us his ways, so that we shall walk in his paths." The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. God will judge between the nations and will settle disputes among peoples. They will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nations, nor will they train for war anymore. Come, O house of Jacob; let us walk in the light of the Lord. Isaiah 2:3-5*

Of all the voices you might expect to hear in a sermon on the first Sunday of Advent, of all the words from Isaiah and the prophets, or John the Baptist, or Mary's magnificent magnificat, I'll bet you didn't think the preacher would turn to Dr. Seuss.

In a book called *Oh the Places You'll Go* there is this passage:

The Waiting Place...for people just waiting.

Waiting for a train to go

or a bus to come

or a plane to go

or the mail to come

or the rain to go

or the phone to ring

or the snow to snow

or just waiting around for a Yes or a No...

The Waiting Place.

Here ends the lesson. Here is our life. Waiting – on hold with that irritating music playing in our ears, softening the bad news that the order is still weeks away. Waiting for ALL the leaves to fall of the trees so you can finish cleaning the yard. Waiting for someone to finally understand us. Waiting for things to change at last.

Advent meets us in our waiting places and offers a different perspective. Advent is a waiting place. Advent is for people just

waiting. But not the kind of waiting we usually think of.

One of the Bible's defining stories tells about the children of Israel being slaves stuck in Egypt tired of waiting in bondage. I know its hindsight, but what if their waiting was an incubation period for living-into the freedom that was, by God, stirring in their souls? This might explain why they couldn't go directly to the Promised Land ("Do not pass go. Do not collect \$200") but took a 40 year trek through the wilderness. The wilderness was a Waiting Place that formed them into a nation strong, determined and focused enough to put the "promise" into the Promised Land.

From what we hear Isaiah say, the wait was still on years later. Forced to live in Babylon under the regime of a foreign king, Jewish faith and culture destroyed through assimilation, exiles hear a prophet of God telling them to bide the time imagining the day, in God's time, by God's light, when the things that make for destruction (swords and spears) will become things that make for a harvest (ploughs and pruning equipment).

Call this creative waiting. Call this waiting in hope. Call this waiting different from just waiting-around, passing time in boredom. I for one dislike waiting so much, I don't find much good in it. But then again, isn't it hoping and expecting, while waiting; isn't it hoping and expecting through waiting that stirs the vision to see through to what we're waiting for in the first place. What we are hoping at the end of the line is what makes the wait worthwhile. Just ask a woman who's had labor pains. Or a person who needs to shed 50 pounds. Or someone homeless moving up the list for permanent housing. Don't ask someone at the DMV.

Waiting places and times can feel like a waste of time. The God who works for those who wait is not the God we want. We'd

rather have a God who is some mountain to be explored or some argument to be understood.

How's this for a description of someone who believes in God? Someone who believes in God is one who waits on the Lord. Elsewhere, Isaiah says, "they that wait on the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up as eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. (Isaiah 40:31) Waiting on God is like Israel waiting in exile and a prophet stoking holy imagination. Waiting on God is like a mother carrying a child in her womb or like a father trying, not always successfully, to keep her comfortable along the way. Waiting on God is like a teenager or recent college grad waiting to become an adult or for everyone else to treat them like one.

We're quick to blame impatience with waiting on our culture and technology. But in the Hebrew Scriptures God says, long before computers and I-phones, "Be still and know that I am God." (Psalm 46:10) So, impatience isn't anything new. Advent tells us to slow down, sober-up and pay attention to what's holy long enough to receive something new because in our usual frenzy or sleepy routines, we're apt to miss God's something. Advent is the waiting place. Advent waiting is an incubation period for some new holy birth in us and through us to the world.

In the waiting place, the idea is to put ourselves into the position to be quiet and receptive like a child waiting to hear a bedtime story told by mother or father. Times like the Christmas Musical this afternoon or the Festival of Lessons and Carols on Christmas Eve take us into the waiting place, hearing again the stories in scripture and oratorio saying and singing us to become people of hope against hope instead of being submerged in the culture of fear projected on the video screens all around us.

My grandmother had a waiting place. It was the kitchen table or the chair beside the radiator in the living room. It was there she kept her Upper Room, her Methodist Hymnal and her Bible. Every morning at the kitchen table, every evening at the chair by the radiator, with the regularity of a religious at morning prayers and evening vespers,

she read her Bible, sang her hymns, and meditated on the daily devotional. Then there was the prayer list of family, friends, and all sorts of various circumstances and situations. I'm certain I (and my life) was on that list more than once.

But here's the thing. This waiting place was for her the place and time at which she remembered who, and whose, she was; what the soul, place and purpose of her life was all about. This waiting place saw her through a husband who returned from war mentally ill. It saw her through the Great Depression when she was the sole bread winner in the family. It saw her through the loss of another child in another war. It saw her through a life of minimum wage and meager pension. It saw her through it all with a sense of being centered, staid, solid, aligned and realigned (when needed) because in the waiting place she went up to the mountain of the Lord, like it says in Isaiah. She plotted a path with God, and kept vigilant for God's surprises all around a life.

"But when the time had fully come," it says in the epistle of the Galatians, "God sent forth his son." (Galatians 4:4) In other words, there was a waiting time for God to get the world ready. Now we wait for God to get us ready. The waiting place called Advent not only prepares the way for the birth of Jesus; it prepares each of our lives to receive him.

When I was in South Africa several years ago, I became even more aware of the dramatic story of Nelson Mandela than I would have from reading the papers and watching CNN. I came to understand him as a person of faith (and one whose church background was, like ours, Methodist). The man who was the first president of the new South Africa – the South Africa that dismantled apartheid – spent 27 years, that would be 10,000 days, as a political prisoner. How's that for a waiting time and place?

During this waiting time discontent with apartheid was stirring the soul of his country. Twenty-seven years of waiting and wondering. Ten thousand nights of loneliness and separation. Twenty-seven years of deprivation and humiliation. The amazing thing about ten thousand nights – those 27 years – is how this seemingly interminable waiting place became a place of focus,

strength, determination and vision so that when apartheid fell, Mandela emerged to preside over a nation seeking freedom in a new way. "It was during those hungry years," he writes he writes in his book, *The Long Walk to Freedom*, "that my hunger for the freedom of my people became a hunger for the freedom all people, white and black. I knew, as well as I knew anything, that the oppressor must be liberated as well as the oppressed. When I walked out of prison, I knew I would not be free until my mission was to liberate the oppressor and the oppressed."

Waiting places change the way our eyes see. Before the waiting place, Israel saw captivity in Babylon as their problem. But in the waiting place, they came to recognize that the growing despair and distance in their hearts and souls from God was the problem. Babylon was just the setting.

The waiting place changes hearts and souls — recognizing that we can do nothing but get ready and keep ready — because time is in God's hand.

The waiting place, within ear shod of the coming of Jesus, confirms that someone, somewhere, loves us enough to make a new way, and that this new thing can begin with us.

There is waiting and then there is waiting. There is passing time in line when everything in and about you is numb, and there is, as Frederick Beuchner puts it, the anticipation that comes when the house lights go down, and in the orchestra pits violin bows are poised, and the conductor raises the baton and the curtain begins to rise AND YOU HOLD YOUR BREATH AND LISTEN. Says Buechner, Advent is the name of that moment. Advent is the waiting place within that moment.

How will we enter this moment? How will we disengage from:

waiting for a train to go  
or a bus to come  
or a plane to go  
or the mail to come  
or the rain to go  
or the phone to ring  
or the snow to snow  
or waiting around for a Yes or a

No...long enough to hear God's "YES" in the Lord's coming again?

Deitrich Bonhoeffer, martyred Lutheran Pastor, while imprisoned by the Nazi's, wrote a Christmas letter in 1943 about the waiting place. He said: "Life in a prison cell reminds me a great deal of Advent. You wait and hope and putter, but in the end, what we do is of little consequence. The door is shut and can only open from the outside."

Christmas is coming. God in the flesh. Keep awake. No door can hold God's breaking-in. The extraordinary thing that is about to happen can only be matched by what's stirring in the waiting place before it does.

If you don't have a waiting place, find one. Like Paul said to the Romans, "Don't be so absorbed and exhausted in your day-to-day that you doze off to what God is doing."

(Romans 13:11 after *The Message* translated by Eugene Peterson.)

If you're in a waiting place just now, listen to Paul again: "The night is about over, dawn is about to break. God is putting the finishing touches on what began when you first believed."

(Romans 13:12 after *The Message* translated by Eugene Peterson.)

Amen.

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