

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Advent 1-A; 27 November 2016
Epiphany Seattle
(rev. 201611261539)

In nomine...

I. Advent = Waiting

In the waiting is where God works.

This is not an idea that is likely to win any popularity contests. In our culture of the here & now, waiting is not a welcome idea. Sometimes we choose food that is barely edible because it cooks so fast in the microwave. We pay extra for overnight shipping. We endure the indignities and absurdities of airport security because a week's worth of travel from coast to coast can now be accomplished in six hours. Our Internet providers want to upsell us to a faster tier of service so that the videos we watch won't take as long to buffer. It is the rare, ironic soul who sets out with the goal of purchasing a slower computer or a house with a longer commute to work. I used to have to wait for the bus, practicing faith that it would come eventually. Now there's an app for that: I can see when the next bus will be along and decide whether it is worth the wait or whether I should just start walking. Because waiting is to be avoided at all costs!

Do you remember when you were a child, waiting for Christmas? There were presents under that tree with my name on them. The anticipation of that day was nearly unbearable. But I had to wait. Oh, the agony of waiting for Christmas!

I didn't know it then, but we in the church have a name for that agony: it's called "Advent." Advent is a time of waiting and of preparation for that greatest gift: the coming of the Savior into the world.

Advent also marks the beginning of the church year, the annual cycle in which we tell our story of life and love. Today we move on from a year spent reading the Gospel according to Luke and we start over again with Matthew. In Advent we begin again with the promises of the prophets of old who foretold the coming of the Messiah, and we begin also with an admonition that we should be *ready* to receive the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

In the *waiting* is where God works. And so our church year begins with a pause... and a promise.

II. A Pause

In Advent, the church year begins with a pause.

Unlike a child waiting for Christmas Day to come, our Gospel today speaks of an hour and a day that *no one* knows. Instead we are encouraged to be ready; in other words, to wait. Jesus promises that the Son of Man is coming: the promises of God will be fulfilled. Promises of healing and fullness, promises of abundance and unconditional love. These things have been promised to us but we have, as yet, experienced only foretastes of their fulfillment. Perhaps you've noticed this implacable truth in your own life: some things simply will not be rushed.

A seed which has been planted in the ground will grow at its own pace. A baby in the womb grows for about 40 weeks. A person who has had a hip replaced is called "patient" as they wait for the body to heal itself from the traumas of surgery. All these processes are impossible for us to speed up. The best we can do is to not slow them down. In the *waiting* is where *God* works.

This is true not only in the physical realm, but especially so in the spiritual one. Broken hearts take time to heal. Maturity is not something we do or accomplish, but something we become over time. The broken places in our lives cause us grief and never just go away. But over time our experiences of those things can change and they can even become for us sources of strength and wisdom as well as of pain. And all these changes happen most often in imperceptible ways, like the wearing away of a canyon. Try as we might, we can't hurry them along. In the *waiting* is where God works.

III. A Promise

In Advent the church year begins with a pause... and a promise. The promise is articulated in the first reading of this new liturgical year: the reading we heard today from the prophet Isaiah. The prophet writes to a nation riddled with corruption, deceit, oppression, and bigotry. Isaiah had only to look at the nature and history of God to realize that these conditions could not last. In God's universe, the pain and the ugliness are only a temporary aberration, something God was already working to change.

As we anticipate the birth of the Christ Child, we look for God's continued work of healing in our hearts, in our communities, in our nation and in our world. Here at Epiphany this morning, and in churches around the globe, we are participants in a divine conspiracy to bring healing to every hurt and injury, every division and war. We are invited to take part in God's redemption of the entire world. And how do we do that? Principally by nurturing God's work in our own hearts. It is through the slow, subtle healing of individual hearts that God is changing the whole world. It is in *you* that God is changing the world. Sometimes the most effective thing you can do to make the world a better place... is to wait. For this reason we wait a minute or so after the sermon each Sunday. And today, in this season of waiting, we will wait another minute more. Because in the waiting is where God *works*.

IV. What now?

Waiting isn't always a place we like to find ourselves. In fact, it usually isn't. I could tell you stories about the DMV in the Bronx: I've served hard time there. We've all done time someplace or another, waiting. And most of us, most of the time, continue to wait.

Maybe you find yourself waiting in traffic. Or in airports. Or in line at the grocery store. Every year, this is the season of waiting not just for Christians, but for every person who joins the throngs shopping, traveling, and schlepping parcels to the post office.

Are you *waiting* for the holidays to be over, with their oversize freight of runaway emotions, unreasonable expectations, and tricky family dynamics?

Are you *waiting* at a stuck place in your job? Or are you stuck waiting *between* jobs?

Do you lie awake at night, *waiting* to go back to sleep while your mind wrestles with its latest anxiety *du jour*?

Are you waiting at a stuck place in an important relationship in your life, trying to figure out what comes next?

Are you waiting in a stuck place in your interior life?

Maybe the waiting that rings most true for you right now is of a different sort. Maybe you're waiting for your children to find their shoes. Or your parents to find their keys.

We all wait! The question is, what do we *do* while we wait?

A conventional choice, tried and true, is to get stressed out. To fret and worry and regret the lost time, to smack your own forehead because you chose the wrong checkout line. This is something you can do safely and you will receive much sympathy from those around you. Because it's the "normal" response.

But there is an alternative: the Advent response. The Advent response is to remember that this is the season of waiting. Advent provides extra opportunity to practice the spiritual discipline of waiting, to flex your spiritual muscles and to grow in your spiritual life. Lucky you, right?

Waiting is an opportunity to look around you with fresh eyes. It's an opportunity to notice what's going on. What is God doing in this situation? How might God's promise be found at play in the moment where you wait? Where is God calling you to cast your eyes with compassion or encouragement? For whom or for what situation might you pray in this moment of waiting? Listening, what do you hear as you wait? After all, in the *waiting* is where God works.