

Waiting Well: Quick, Look Busy!

Matthew 24:36-44
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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December 1, 2019

If you're like me, you need another week between Thanksgiving and the First Sunday of Advent. While that's usually the case, not so on this year's calendar. So, don't feel bad if you haven't quite made the sharp transition from enjoying the Thanksgiving holiday to this church season which is meant to prepare us for Christmas Day.

As a reminder, Advent means "coming." It is a time of longing, watching, waiting, preparing, and praying for God's healing, transformative Presence to be ever more vibrantly present in the world. In this sense, Advent is a season in which we focus on that key phrase in the Lord's Prayer, "thy kingdom come." Or, as we often say here, the kin-dom of God. As Christians, the good news we strive to live by and declare, as represented in the four Advent Wreath candles, is that **love is stronger than hate, peace more enduring than war, hope more powerful than despair** – and the light of God's love will extinguish forever the shadows of shame cast by violence, suffering, sorrow, and contempt. During this year's Season of Advent, we're going to focus on a problem that is common among basically every human being – **waiting well**.

In our exceptionally faced-paced lives, where, for instance, we expect instant online answers to our questions, and expect instant responses to our texts and emails, waiting is both inconvenient and frustrating. Most of us are probably not as patient as we would like to be. **Patience** is defined as "the capacity to accept or tolerate delay, trouble, or suffering without getting angry or upset. It's the ability to remain calm and not become annoyed when waiting for a long time or when dealing with difficult problems or difficult people." And yet, **Advent is intentionally designed as a season of waiting**.

Former moderator of the PCUSA General Assembly, and a former seminary classmate of mine, the Rev. Bruce Reyes-Chow, wants to help us in this regard. He recently wrote, "Sure, there are times when the frustration of waiting is justified and worthy of challenge. But I believe that **learning to wait well, no matter the reason or the season, is a spiritual discipline that contributes to emotional health, spiritual vitality, and actions that are grounded in faith.**"

Therefore, during these four Sundays before Christmas Day, we will look at ways in which we can learn to wait well. In the process, the hope is to challenge "the negative assumptions that waiting means inaction, apathy, or a lack of passion, and moving toward waiting that is deliberate, disciplined, and just."

Let's see, then, what we can learn from this morning's scripture passages. Every year, the passages assigned to the First Sunday of Advent deal not with Jesus' birth, known as his first coming, but rather on waiting for Christ's second coming – some point in the future when God will make everything right. Though not overemphasized in the Presbyterian denomination, this is actually a theme that runs throughout the Bible and is

meant to be part of the focus of Advent. Theologians call it **eschatology - the study of the end times**, as described in ancient Hebrew and Christian literature.

Many progressive Christians agree, however, with a majority of modern biblical scholars that believe the **apocalyptic language about Christ's second coming is meant to be interpreted figuratively and metaphorically, rather than a literal coming of Jesus in the flesh**, appearing somehow in the clouds accompanied by trumpet blasts and followed by Christians floating up in the air to meet him, while others are simply left behind. Saying that, **Advent does remind us that we are living in the tension between the "now" and the "not yet", an in-between time.**

Today's Old Testament reading from **Isaiah 2** speaks of the ideal time in the future when all hostilities will cease, people will beat their swords into plowshares, their spears into pruning hooks, and all the nations will stream to the house of the Lord. Well, if world peace and non-violence describe what it will be like at the 'end of time,' then we certainly don't seem anywhere close to that, do we? Therefore, we wait. But are we waiting well?

The New Testament Epistle reading from **Romans 13** was written to a Christian community already living between the times. The apostle Paul warns church members that they must pay attention to the quality of the lives they lead. They are called, as are we, to lay aside the works of darkness and live honorably. And they are reminded that the second coming of the Lord is nearer now, with the passing of time, than it was at the time of their conversion to Christianity. It appears that the first Christians believed that the second coming of Christ was imminent, that perhaps it would come in *their* lifetime, and that it was, in fact, delayed for some reason. Therefore, they waited. But were they waiting well?

This Advent theme of waiting for the future is also echoed in the Gospel passage from **Matthew 24**. Like Paul, who focuses on how we live our lives in the present, the words attributed to Jesus by the gospel writer Matthew also focus on the need for Christians to live good lives, to be awake, ready, and prepared for the unexpected coming of Christ. In other words, **there is an urgency in being watchful**, because something big is coming. When it will come cannot be determined – but it will come, so be ready. This message has been humorously displayed on bumper stickers you may have seen. "Jesus is coming. Look busy!" But I think Jesus could probably tell if we were just faking it.

Reyes-Chow states, "That said, in a society that (over)values productivity, deliverables, and always being busy, too often it is easy to see how individuals, institutions, and communities fall into the trap of measuring faithfulness by what gets checked off the to-do list." How many of us actually wrote down a to-do list last week? **Just keeping ourselves busy isn't the best way of waiting well.** "There is value in waiting, in being still and remaining watchful, instead of filling those awkward spaces in life with action for the sake of action – that is, busy-ness. We are reminded of this time and again during Advent, when Scriptures focus our minds on some future event. We cannot rush God's coming through any particular action.

"At the same time, we cannot just let folks pretend that what we do has no impact on the world and God's hopes for it and for us. As today's Scripture suggests, we carry on with life – raising families and working at our jobs – but with the awareness and anticipation of Christ's coming." So, how can you and I, how can we together as a community of faith "find that space where what we do is a faithful response to God's calling upon our lives, while guarding against the danger of actions morphing into an

exercise of busywork? This is the challenge: to find and name those places in the world where God is calling us to be and act...and to be there, not with an expectations of instant solutions, but of relationship that lasts. At the same time, **we must find ways to determine what actions, while seemingly productive, actually take energy, time, and passion away from those things that we need to do.**"

Waiting well involves taking inventory of all those things that keep us busy, and discerning those kinds of things that draw us away from doing what God would hope. **Stop and remember what truly matters.** This Advent season is meant to provide a counternarrative to the consumeristic culture, divisive politics, and sensationalist clickbait headlines, to which we all fall prey. Our waiting can be a time of intentionally cultivating a sense of Sacred Presence and purpose as to be ready to respond faithfully to whatever comes our way.

Advent calls us to pay attention to the Divine already in the midst of the mundane so as to live in ways that reflect who we are created to be. For **the Presence of Christ comes into our midst each and every day** – a Presence that can be seen in the face of people we encounter on a daily basis – the light and image of God within each and every person.

Be on the lookout for the Divine already here and surely coming – a second coming, a third coming, a fourth coming, a millionth coming. And may that include the inbreaking of healing and wholeness, the hope of reconciliation, the possibility of peace and justice. May God give you, give us, the strength and courage of waiting well.

Amen.

Resources:

Bruce Reyes-Chow, "Advent Series: Waiting Well" from *A Preacher's Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series: Thematic Plans for Years A, B, and C. Volume 2*, 2019.

Jill Duffield, "1st Sunday of Advent" from *The Presbyterian Outlook*, 11-25-19.