

The Days of Waiting are Upon Us
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Jeremiah 33:14-16
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Holy God of Living Hope, we seek your presence in these darkening days. We seek a calm within and an absence of conflict between people and nations. But more deeply, we seek your deep and abiding peace that will come only through the justice of your grace-filled realm. Let us reflect that hope in everything that we say and do in this Season of Advent. Amen

I was in a hurry! Do you find yourself saying that a lot? Can't talk now... I'm in a rush!

The other day, I was standing at the elevator of an office building. I had pushed the call button. The button was obviously lit. The elevator was on its way. Suddenly another man standing next to me decided to push the same lit button. Just to be sure! Maybe my push was inadequate. A feeble push! Then, for good measure he began pounding on the still lit button in repeated fashion hoping the elevator received the very clear message that it needed to make its way to the first floor pronto. Mr. Pushy Button needed to be somewhere RIGHT NOW!

Have you ever witnessed this before? Have you ever done this before? Ridiculous isn't it! I am afraid I am not much better...

The other day, I was at a fast food drive up hoping for a quick bite. I pulled in front of the brightly covered sign. Made a note of what number I would need to request. And waited for the attendant... a long time. I think at least 26, 27... seconds! Maybe more!

So, you know what I did? And I am NOT proud of it...I honked my horn. Immediately I heard the sweet voice of the young attendant exclaim, "Ow!!"

I blasted the poor girl's ears through the extra sensitive microphone in the menu sign! She will probably have hearing loss for the rest of her life because of my impatient desire for a Quarter Pounder with Cheese! Friends, there is not one part of that last sentence of which I am proud!

Would you agree that our world is stuck on fast-forward and our already limited capacity for patience has all but dissipated? Think about it. It used to be that if you sent a letter, you would have to wait at least a couple of days for it to be delivered, and another few days for the person to respond. Now, if you send an e-mail message in the morning and don't hear anything back by midday, you wonder if something is wrong. *Doesn't he know I need an answer now?! How can she be so inconsiderate! It's been...minutes!*

Patience as a virtue is on life support in this country!

Yet, here we are in the season of Advent, a period of time devoted to waiting. It is a time when we celebrate patience and revel in pausing, when we honor those who waited for the coming of the Promised One, and seek to learn something about how we might join them in waiting for the Spirit of Christ to be born again in our midst.

In fact, faithful waiting is such an important part of the Christian story that we celebrate the first day of Advent—that is, today—as the first day of the Christian year. This is where the story begins, not with the birth of the child, not with his life, not even with the Easter story. We begin before the beginning, before all of that, with expectant waiting and hearts traced with unfulfilled longing.

This goes against the fast-pace, get it now before its gone, wisdom of the world.

As you know, in shopping malls Christmas carols have been playing for several weeks now. Waiting doesn't sell very well. But, here in the church, this is the season when we sing Advent carols, *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, Come Thou Long Expected Jesus*. Now, honestly, it's hard for us to remain in a waiting posture, so as we get closer to Christmas we may sneak in a few Christmas Carols into worship. It's a little like lifting up the corner of the Christmas wrapping, just to see if we can get an early peek at the gift inside. For the most part, however, in this season we are told to wait.

Like many things that are difficult for us, it's probably good for us, this waiting, this Advent waiting. It reminds us that we aren't in control. We're not in charge. We can't have all that we want and need just when we want it.

As difficult as it is to wait, certainly it is preferable to the alternative.

Those who have ceased to wait generally are those who live without hope. When all that you see around you is all there is to be, then there is no need to wait. But there is also no hope of progress, movement, revelation, transformation.

To wait is to be open to the future. To wait is to be open to God.

So there are ways in which this Advent waiting is a different kind of waiting. It is richer, fuller, and even something that can be savored. It is different from most of our experiences with waiting. We associate most waiting with passivity. There is nothing for us to do but wait.

Advent waiting is more active. Waiting for the Spirit of Christ to be born in our midst is not like waiting in a waiting room, flipping through magazines. Such passive waiting would not require much in the way of our attention or energy.

Rather, in Advent we wait as the psalmist waits: "I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning" [Psalm 130:5-6]. It is a waiting filled with eager expectation... a waiting on tiptoe. And this kind of waiting does require quite a bit from us.

Think of the sudden burst of energy of expectant parents who begin in the final month of pregnancy to make room for the little one's arrival. The baby is coming! We need to get ready now! Where are the drapes we bought! I want to repaint the room... again!

Advent is sort of like that... a kind of Holy Nesting. A time of preparation marked by a little anxiety, with hearts leaning in expectation, because you never know when the expected one will arrive.

You know, in a way it's unfortunate that we always celebrate Christmas on the same day of the year, because that makes the coming of Christ seem almost predictable. But Christmas is more like a surprise party.

For centuries God's people awaited the coming of the Promised One. Then, when it happened, most people missed it. They were watching the ceremonial gates but God sneaks in the servant's entrance. God is always slipping into town when we least expect it, and where we least expect as well. Even at the darkest time of year, in a forgotten corner, as a baby with milk on his breath. We never know when the Spirit of Christ will appear and so we never know when the celebration is about to begin.

So, although December 25 is fixed on the calendar, we never know when the Spirit of Christ will be born in our midst. Ours is not to know the when or the where. Ours is to live with an air of expectation that says, it could be any time, anywhere. For, as Jesus says in his parable, "Take heed, watch, for you do not know when the time will come. Watch therefore lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Watch."

At our home gatherings two and a half years ago, I asked the question, "What brings you back to First Congregational Church each week?" One of our members said, "I'll tell you what keeps me coming to church. It's strange, I know, but I get the feeling here, like nowhere else, that something is about to happen."

I believe she lifted up a profound truth. This is the place where we gather around an expectation that something is about to happen, and we may even be able to say that it's the Spirit of Christ made real in our midst.

We don't know when. We don't know where. We don't know how. But we wait in hopeful expectation.

As the famous composer, Benjamin Britten, prays in song, allow the Christ Child to "Prepare thy cradle in my spirit." In these bright and promising days of Advent, let us be mindful of the ways to wait expectantly and actively for the coming of the Christ child into our midst.

Let us live into the words of our Advent hymn, "All earth is waiting to see the Promised One and open furrows await the seed of God." Let us ask ourselves...are we ready? For the days of waiting are upon us! Amen.

Scripture:

Jeremiah 33:14-16

¹⁴The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ¹⁵In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ¹⁶In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness."