

What are You Waiting for?

Isaiah 35:1-10 Matthew 11: 2-11

Slide: Waiting

Advent is traditionally a season of waiting, of waiting for the promises of Christmas to come, of waiting for Christ to come again in our future, of waiting...waiting...waiting for what? What are you waiting for? What are we waiting for?

As many of you may or may not know, I love the season of Advent. It's really my favorite season in the church year. I love it because I always feel like I'm in a pattern of waiting. It often seems like waiting is more the norm than the actual goal of something arriving. Waiting is a practice, much like being mindful for being where you are in the present moment rather than always thinking about the past or working out the future.

Maybe that's why hearing Merry Christmas during Advent always makes my eyes twitch just a little bit. I mean, we can't wait for anything! This year, the day after Halloween, I was seeing the Christmas lights go up around town. And, I was

already hearing Merry Christmas right after Thanksgiving. I understand it, of course. I would not want to sap anyone's desire of joy. The Christmas is meant to be a joyful season. People want to just savor that as much as they can.

But, Advent, while it also contains joy, it also has similarities to the season of Lent, in that it's a time of pause, a reminder that things have not all fully worked out and even some melancholy that things aren't quite like we'd want them to be; at least, the world isn't.

Still, this period of waiting which we call Advent is something for which we as humans don't naturally like to do. And, if I'm honest, I'm just about as good at waiting for something as anyone else, maybe even less than many of you. And, due to the usual cultural pressures, concert schedules, and all sorts of holiday plans, Advent has since become the season not of waiting, but instead, I think it's become the season of impatience. Maybe that's always been true. We are waiting, but we don't want to. We want to get there now.

After all, if you are in an airplane in a waiting pattern too long, who really wants to be there? I don't.

Slide: What are we Waiting...

Sure, there are other times of the year when we experience impatience. The Christmas season is not the only time, but it has felt to me, and maybe for some of you, that the time between Thanksgiving and Christmas has become the season of impatience, when all our anxiety and hurry and worry are concentrated into four to five weeks.

Slide: Prison

Which is why I find this story about John the Baptist refreshing, not that the poor guy is in prison, but that he is tired of waiting. He wants to know now if Jesus is it and he has begun to doubt. Before this, he had been preaching a baptism of repentance. In the earlier chapters of Matthew's Gospel, John not only knew his mission, to prepare the way for the Messiah, but he was absolutely certain that Messiah was Jesus. He himself baptized Jesus for the sake of

all righteousness to prepare the world for him.

Throughout John's life, he had been waiting to fulfill his role and he had been waiting to see the Messiah. I get a sense that he doesn't know for what he waits anymore. He hears of Jesus and wonders if he was right after all. Is Jesus really it? I'm not sure he's what I expected! Do I have to wait some more to know? Is he the one, or are we to wait for another?

We can't know what John expected, but we can guess that he didn't expect Jesus to be what he was. In all his hoping and waiting, instead John finds himself in prison waiting to be executed and he is impatient to know if Jesus really is the Messiah after all. It turns out that John shows that he is human and even has fallen victim of his own preaching, fearing change and unable to see and repent. John has a crisis of faith.

Slide: Waiting Room

But, don't we? Isn't that the Advent question anyway: "Are you the Christ child or are we to continue to wait?" Is this the life I hoped would

make me happy? Is this the job I really wanted? Is this really the house we wanted two years ago? Is this really the person I love? This isn't what I was expecting, so how long do I wait for what I hoped for? How do I get to the place of promises? Waiting and expectation: The Advent theme. Maybe that theme should instead be impatience and doubt.

And we do doubt. We doubt ourselves. We doubt God. We doubt God's place in our lives. When the expectations don't match up with what we want, we doubt about things in life. And, so, when what we believe Jesus ought to be and who really turns out to be, it doesn't always match up to our own expectations. As people of God, do we not also have demands placed upon what God should be doing?

It turns out, so did John. After all his effort, and after believing God's will was going forward, John instead finds himself in prison knowing that it will lead to his death. Is this what he was waiting for this whole time? Is Jesus worth this?

Just as we may hope and expect Christmas to be other than it is, perhaps the crux of it is that John expected Jesus to be something other than who he was. Perhaps he didn't expect that Jesus would speak good news to the poor, heal the blind and lame. Perhaps John didn't see Jesus as the one who would open the eyes of the blind and unstop the ears of the deaf. Perhaps John wanted and expected Jesus to be...something John wanted Jesus to be instead, one who would judge the earth, remove the hypocrites and those evil occupiers the Romans!

For John preached that the Messiah would clear his threshing floor, chop down fruitless trees and throw chaff into the fire! And, instead Jesus heals, teaches, and speaks of dying for people. If I were John, I might be confused, too. I would wonder why I'm sitting in prison for him. Wouldn't John be impatient as his expectation soon became disappointment?

When I was a little girl, I couldn't wait to see the presents I got that were sitting there waiting for me under the tree. I can remember, as many of us may, the disappointment

of receiving gifts that I didn't ask for. Yet, as I grew up, those gifts, often family gifts or heirlooms, became significant. Part of growing up was in understanding the value of a gift that was unexpected and at that time misunderstood.

And, many of us are grown up, but our impatient expectations may still be like when we were children. We have a house perhaps, a spouse or partner; some have children, and many of us have worked towards being where we are in life. But is that all there is to it? Is this what we are really waiting for? Where is our meaning to come? How does God respond to our hopes? When will God fulfill all that scripture promises?

We have a lot in common with John. We are impatient in waiting for the promises of God to fully come to pass. And, in that impatience, we often can find ourselves expecting God to do what we want rather than what God is doing. So, what is God doing? Well, Jesus says it here in this chapter of Matthew:

Slide: Isaiah 35

“The deeds I’m doing are my witness. Consider the evidence – the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear, and the dead are raised.”

The prophet Isaiah had foretold these very things as proof the Messiah had come when the Jewish people then were having their own identity crisis. Jesus says it's what he has done that attests to his identity. John would have known this quote from Isaiah instantly. He would have had the confirmation from Jesus that God's work is to hang out with those most in need, with the outcasts and those who are made lesser by society, those for whom God had always shown a special concern. It was the answer John needed to hear.

Most of us, at one time or another, find it difficult to live with the difference between our expectations and the way Jesus comes into our lives. We may not be sitting in the bottom of a dark dungeon like John was, but that doesn't mean that we're not struggling with impatience and doubt like John.

It is then that we have to confront the most personal and most profound questions: "Who are you Jesus? What do you mean to me?" And we, like John, have to come to see that the Messiah is not necessarily the one we expect will just fix things, but instead is the one who calls us to bring healing and wholeness to a broken world.

Perhaps we should examine the quality of our witness, our words and our actions, the way we live, the way we think, and what we do as God's people. How are others experiencing Christ in us, Christ who gives sight, healing, strength, life and breaks forth waters in the wilderness? How are we getting in the way of this work Christ longs to bring to the world?

That is truly the Advent journey and challenge: not only to wait for God's coming in our impatience for it, but to join Christ in working for it, so that we may all be a part of God's vision as declared by the prophet Isaiah:

Slide: Isaiah 35:1-2

"The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing." Amen.