

*What* are we waiting for? What are we *waiting* for? There are at least two nuances in that question. The first prompts us to consider what is the subject of our waiting. It suggests that there are things that we wait for and inquires as to the particulars of our waiting. Not so with the second. It's the rhetorical question and it suggests the exact opposite. What are you waiting for? Means why are you *waiting* when you could be *doing* something. Throughout the season of Advent, we will be addressing questions of faith, and this morning I want to explore this question in both of its nuances, but I am going to start with the second.

Graham is now 17 months old and it's our habit to read a couple of books before bedtime. Recently, as we were nearing the close of the day, I stumbled upon some words that seemed appropriate from Dr. Seuss' "Oh, the Places You'll Go!" It's amazing how the literary references change when you have a child.

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 waiting around for a Yes or a No...

We are waiting – waiting for Christmas – for the time when we can celebrate Christ's coming, and waiting is hard. A couple of weeks ago I was talking with some of the adults who volunteer with our youth ministry and we were lamenting how each year it seems more and more difficult to wait for Christmas. In one way or another it seems our whole lives are spent waiting. Waiting for the arrival of family and friends. Waiting in line on Black-Friday. Waiting for our driver's license, waiting for the freedom of college, waiting for right person to catch us totally off-guard, waiting for the dark clouds to lift, waiting, and waiting, and waiting for the appropriate conditions to make the life changes we've always wanted to make. We are no strangers to waiting. Life is a walk through a vale of hopes and interruptions and half-fulfillments. By some conspiracy of grace we are able to understand that ours is a condition of unsatisfied desires and so we wait on our salvation. Advent is a season to explore that yearning – that restlessness that prods us to consider that there's something more.

God's people have always had to spend time in the expectant anticipation of salvation. The children of Israel endured years of harsh slavery before they were freed from their Egyptian taskmasters. They yearned for the fulfillment of God's promise to deliver them into a land flowing with milk and honey. When the promise finally came, it did not come for forty years and the Israelites were forced to take a circuitous wilderness route to the land of Canaan that took them through Sinai. But it was in that wilderness where they went from bondage to bonding, finally being formed as the people of God. Would they

have been a unified, coherent people had they not been made to wait? If they did not have a story about God's faithfulness throughout the long years of their wandering?

And now in today's text from Isaiah, they wait again – captives in Babylon, longing for the God that brought them out with a mighty hand from under the oppression of their captors – waiting for God to tear open the heavens and come down and to rid the world of war and destruction. Isaiah tells the story of a people who cry out for their God to be present and of a people who acknowledge their failure to uphold the covenant that God made with them - ultimately recognizing that the power and authority is in God's hands and they are but clay.

Liberation and the longing for freedom from bondage occupy a fair amount of space in the scope of the Bible's meta-narrative. The Bible is a testament to faithful, expectant waiting. Jacob waits in Laban's house for 7 years before he can marry Laban's daughter – 7 more before he can marry the daughter he chooses. Joseph waits for God to work good out of what his brothers intended for evil. Job and Habakkuk wait for God to show up and right what has gone wrong. They wait as those who expect resolution - God's faithfulness in the past makes it possible to experience God's faithfulness in the future.

The notion that “the Lord works for those who wait” seems to permeate the text of the Old Testament, and this is one of the ways that the strange world of the Bible seems so distant from our world of instant communication and real-time updates. Ours is not a culture that finds much value in waiting – we create technologies that speed us ever faster along.

I saw a television commercial the other day that made me laugh cause it was so ridiculous - and then I realized, hey wait a minute – I do that. I am the ridiculous person I am laughing at. That never happens to any of you, I'm sure. It was an ad for the new Windows phone. And in this commercial there are a series of scenes in which people are not paying attention to some thing or other because they are glued to their phones. The one that caught my attention was the scene of a father holding out his baseball glove while staring at his phone. The scene cuts away with his son waiting impatiently for his father's attention and then cuts back toward the end where he launches the ball at his father's head. It's funny because it's true. That's the world we live in – we buy these things because we tell ourselves that they are going to make us more productive and they'll bring us closer to the people who are important and they often end up pushing us further apart.

That reminds me of a conversation that I had with my friend who is a pastor in town – she was telling a story of when her son came home from school one day and showed her the picture of what he'd drawn. It was a family portrait, but my friend couldn't figure out why her hands were square – and her son said, “that's not your hand mom, that's your iPhone.” Her story reminds me that we need Advent.

We who live in this strange time called modernity are never free from the din of television or the radio, the Internet, or our iPhones. We are constantly bombarded with images and clips that tell us who to listen to, how to dress, where to shop, how to live. Our inability to focus has changed the very rules of the language that we speak and the sound-bites that permeate our living space have numbed and blinded us. We simply don't know

how to see God in the events of our lives because we never take time to look away from the whirring distractions.

That is after all the whole reason that we have Advent in the weeks before Christmas. We are asked to wait in order to prepare ourselves for the one on whom we wait. If we are to hear the choirs of angels we must first learn to be silent. Advent causes us to slow down our busy lives, it introduces us to a pattern of waiting. It causes us to meet God in silence and to be patient. What are the things that you can do in your family (or perhaps avoid doing) that will help you to slow down and listen for God's whisper among us? The people in the inn next door who were busily preparing for the census probably saw nothing more than another baby in that cold Bethlehem manger, but as they quietly tended their flocks, the shepherds saw a great star and heard the angels' proclamation.

Advent tells us to be still and know that God is active in our calm. It is a season to make ourselves quiet so we can receive the truth that we might otherwise miss. We are in the church's waiting room – a season to be ushered into a new kind of time in which we are neither hurried, not anxious, nor busy. Advent is God's time – it is measured not by clocks or calendars, because, God's time is but the expression of God's patience. We literally cannot imagine God's time, but it has not been left up to our imaginations. We have been taught how to wait in this time by the one who is God's patience – by the one who could have commanded legions of his father's angels to save him, but who instead submitted to the cross making it possible for us to live lives marked by God's patience.

We live in this time between times. It is in this place that we are introduced to a new kind of waiting; what the spiritual theologian, Henri Nouwen, calls "active waiting." He tells us "waiting is essential to the spiritual life. But waiting as a disciple of Jesus is not an empty waiting. It is a waiting with promise in our hearts that makes already present what we are waiting for. We wait during Advent for the birth of Jesus... We are always waiting, but it is a waiting in the conviction that we have already seen God's footsteps. Waiting for God is an active, alert—yes, joyful—waiting. As we wait, we remember him for whom we are waiting."

We are waiting for the one in whom the Kingdom of God has arrived. The one in whom our hearts can and finally will find rest. In God's time, those who wait are able to participate in the reality of his kingdom – are able to take hold of their salvation here and now. Christ has died; Christ has risen; Christ will come again. Dying, rising, and coming again makes it possible for us to be a people who refuse to be marked by desperate impatience. We are enabled to wait because of the one on whom we wait.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.