

“How Do We Wait?”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Advent I – November 29, 2015

Jeremiah 33: 14-16
1 Thessalonians 3: 9-13

Time. It wears on us. It doesn't stand still. We always seem to be chasing it. In many ways, it rules our lives.

As we gather for worship today, we all have time on our minds. How am I going to get my homework done before school tomorrow? When will I get my shopping done in-between work, family and church commitments? How long is this service going to be so I can get home and get my honey-do list done? Has it just been a year, two years, 10 years since my father, my mother, my spouse, my sibling, my friend died? For each of us here, time is on our minds.

And in the church, we have started a new chapter in time, and it is called Advent. It is a season of preparation, a period when we expectantly wait for the coming of God's Son. Advent is the church's time to get ready for what will come, and every year we are called to remember the difference between our time and God's time. That perhaps is the hardest aspect of Advent – we don't think there is a difference between our time and God's time, and it manifests itself in different ways. We pray for healing or resolution to our pressing problems, and we wonder why God doesn't respond to our needs. We do all the “right things” to foster an atmosphere of growth in the church, and we wonder why our attendance or giving doesn't grow more quickly. The difference between God's time and our time is hard for us to accept.

Which I believe also leads to the stress we often feel when we are forced to wait. How many of us like to wait? Yeah, not very many of us. Us human beings are an impatient lot, to be sure. And in our modern, American culture, we deem having to wait for something as a problem. If we have to wait too long for our meal in a restaurant, or in traffic on our way to work, then our schedule has to be altered, and our mood adversely changes. Most of the time, when we have to wait for something or someone, we feel anxious, nervous, and unsettled, until a resolution is presented and we don't have to wait anymore. Rarely do we wait well, or wait in a non-anxious way.

I had an experience with waiting just two weeks ago. Debbie travelled to Atlanta to meet with a national accreditation committee, to complete the six-year process she has been in to become a supervisor of chaplaincy students in her work at IU West Hospital. All of her preparation and work came down to this 90-minute meeting with five individuals, and they could either pass her or fail her. A year ago, she did not pass, but she worked her tail off this past year and prepared differently, and she felt much better going

into it than she did 12 months earlier. But it still was a waiting game. And it was not at all easy.

For me, the waiting consisted of this – my phone. It was a matter of waiting for the text message, waiting for this thing to buzz and let me know there was new information. While Debbie was meeting with her committee, I was attending a band concert for Heather with Erin and my parents. The phone didn't buzz until we were on our way home, and Debbie said it was over, it went better than last year, but now she was waiting to hear the committee's decision. More waiting. Twenty minutes passed, and then I felt my phone vibrate in my coat pocket. I knew that was the text that I had – we had – been waiting for. I couldn't read it in front of the girls or my folks. I needed to check it by myself. I took the dog for a walk, and halfway down the street, I pulled the phone out. I took a deep breath, and looked at the text. It read, "YAAAYYYYY!!!" I yelled out, "Thank you, Jesus!" And our waiting was over.

What did I learn about waiting through this process? That it is not easy, to be sure. But it was different than a year ago. Through the disappointment of last year, we all knew more fully what to expect this time around. We drew closer together as a family in our waiting for Debbie to complete this process. I felt I let go of more of my stress than a year ago, and that helped me to wait with a greater sense of peace. And sometimes, I believe we have to recognize that everything does not have to happen according to our schedules, or our timelines. When we stop trying to control everything, and trust that things are happening according to God's timing, then we tend to wait in less-anxious and more-hopeful ways.

As we begin the Season of Advent today, we are reminded of where we are and where we want to be. We are neck-deep in the stresses of our work, and we want to be retired and free of that never-ending strain. We watch a loved one suffering from illness, and we wait impatiently for a future full of health. We wait in the desert of uncertainty, and yearn for a future of direction and fulfillment.

In both of our scripture lessons today, we hear the message of expectant waiting for a hopeful future. The prophet Jeremiah speaks to a people in exile, full of despair, in a present that is hopeless and despondent. The Israelites yearn for a new day, but it is hard for them to see light amid the darkness that surrounds them.

"The days are surely coming when I will fulfill my promise, says the Lord." That promise is much deeper than happy holiday feelings or nostalgic sentiments. That promise is full of justice and righteousness. And it will come from "a righteous Branch to spring up for David." That righteous Branch will save Judah and keep Jerusalem safe. What are we waiting for? We await justice, righteousness, and peace, for it is the Lord who is our righteousness.

The church in Thessalonica was not in exile like the Israelites of Jeremiah's time. But they were spiritually confused about what their future held as followers of Christ. This letter is one of the earliest of Paul's, and it

speaks to a church that believes the risen Christ is coming back to earth in the very near future. It is an undeveloped yet eager faith that these believers possess. And Paul is eager to speak the gospel message to them.

“How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you?” There is great admiration by Paul for the Thessalonians’ faithfulness and commitment to this new hopeful faith. And he offers a charge and blessing to the church for living out this hopeful faith: “And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you.” H. Richard Niebuhr once asserted that, rooted in the Great Commandment, “the purpose of the church is the increase of the love of God and neighbor” (*Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2009: 16). What are we waiting for? The good, the just, and the true which comes with the in-breaking of Christ’s Kingdom.

John Buchanan writes: Near the end of his life Jesus began to prepare his disciples for something that was still to come. He told his followers to wait hopefully and actively anticipate the future. “Watch. Stand up. Stay awake. Be alert.” Christians trust that something is coming that is not yet fully here: redemption, fulfillment, wholeness, peace and the world as God intends it. The reign of God will be characterized by peace among nations and justice for all people – particularly for oppressed people. In this world, old and young will be secure and safe, little ones will not be shot in random street violence, people will not suffer for lack of access to adequate health care, and weapons will be melted down and recast into farm implements.

That’s why we do some serious waiting during Advent. Yes, Advent waiting is patient and unhurried, to be sure. But it is also living into the promised future. Advent waiting is gently but steadily working for the reign of God here and now. It is waiting for the birth of a child, and working for the future that that child promised and embodied and taught and lived (*Christian Century*, “Awaiting God’s Reign,” November 28, 2012: 3).

What are we waiting for? The coming of the Christ Child. What are we yearning for? Justice, peace, renewal, purpose.

But how shall we wait? Will we wait fearfully, anxiously, and passively? Will we wait expectantly, hopefully, and actively? Will we wait believing God will use someone else to achieve his kingdom, or will we wait believing God can use even us to bring about justice, peace, and renewal? Will we be active participants in God’s coming reign, so that the church might “increase the love of God and neighbor?”

May our waiting for God this Advent Season be a sign to our world of hope, as we all await what God will do.

Thanks be to God. Amen.