

Kirby Lawrence Hill Abington Presbyterian Church
November 29, 2020 First Sunday of Advent
Isaiah 64:1-9
1 Corinthians 1:3-9

AS WE WAIT

Today is the beginning of the season of Advent, a period of waiting and anticipation as we prepare our hearts to welcome the coming of the Lord. We have already been almost captive to a lot of waiting this year. So why would we intentionally move into a season called Advent that involves more waiting? What can we learn or how can we grow from the purposeful waiting that this Advent season brings?

Oh, The Places You'll Go was the last book that children's author, Dr. Seuss, published in his lifetime. One of the places he describes in his stylized poetic format in this book is what he calls the waiting place:

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 No
or waiting for their hair to grow.

Everyone is just waiting.

Waiting for the fish to bite
or waiting for wind to fly a kite
or waiting around for Friday night
or waiting, perhaps, for their Uncle Jake
or a pot to boil, or a better break
or a string of pearls, or a pair of pants
or a wig with curls, or another chance.

Everyone is just waiting.¹

Or here would be a version for all ages I would offer today:

Waiting for the turkey to enter the room and waiting for the family to get on Zoom;
Waiting for the chores to be through and still waiting for Uncle Jake to ask, “Can I help too?”

Waiting also for the pandemic’s end, waiting for a more positive career trend;
Waiting for cancer’s cure, waiting for motives that are pure, waiting for politics that don’t smell like manure,

Everyone is just waiting.

Waiting for hunger to be addressed, waiting for stress to get unstressed, waiting for life to be full of zest,

Waiting for gaps of achievement and opportunity to be un-gapped, waiting for the flow of justice to be untapped,

Waiting for enemies that become friends, waiting for peace that never ends,

Everyone is just waiting.

Well, Dr. Seuss, I am not. And yet, whether it is described in poetry or prose, we frequently find ourselves in the waiting place. At times, the One on whom we are waiting is God. And much of the biblical story frankly involves stories of waiting. Abram and Sarai are left expecting the birth of a little one for a long time. Jacob’s struggles with family issues get extended through a large part of the Book of Genesis. The descendants of Israel are held in slavery for generations until God calls and enables Moses to demand their freedom. They then are in the wilderness for forty years more before they get to enter the Promised Land. They longingly wait for effective leadership and they wait to be safe from enemies around them. When taken into captivity they wait for release and they wait for a temple and for a stable society to be built and rebuilt. The Hebrew people wait and wait for a messiah to come and deliver them. In each experience of waiting, they are changed.

At a time when the advertisements and much within our society and even much within us says, “Don’t wait,” we have entered a season which has as part of its purpose to train us in waiting. Advent is set up with that as part of its purpose. We

tend to buck against waiting and there are few who fondly think it is a believer's delight to wait for God. But when God is the Prime One who takes the initiative, it seems like there is a need for God's people not to think of the Divine as our Cosmic Bellhop. We need to grow in our ability to wait, for waiting can be a time of great spiritual growth.

In today's passage from Isaiah, we hear of a longing for God to tear open the heavens and come down. The Apostle Paul encourages the Corinthian church in our other passage to wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. Waiting can be a place to explore what is important and what is less so. Waiting, purposeful waiting can be a spiritual, counter-cultural place, if we are clear about the who's and the whys related to our waiting.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor, who had been imprisoned by the Nazis, wrote a letter before Christmas in 1943, in which he said, "Life in a prison cell reminds me a great deal of Advent. One waits and hopes and putters around but in the end what we do is of little consequence. The door is shut, and it can only be opened from the outside."²

Let us not only wait for the days to go by. Let us be intentional about waiting for God. That doesn't mean we can't do anything during our time of waiting, but it does mean we can't do everything immediately. Perhaps the waiting could actually have a positive effect upon us.

That is what it did for Nelson Mandela who spent 27 years - 10,000 days - as a political prisoner in South Africa. During the time of his waiting, a revolution of discontent with the apartheid policies was brewing within and beyond his country. Twenty-seven years of waiting and wondering, 10,000 nights of loneliness and separation. But in that waiting place, at least for Mandela, strength and focus, vision and determination were forged, so that when the apartheid system fell, he had been prepared to preside over a free nation. He wrote, "It was during those long and hungry years that my hunger for the freedom of my own people became a hunger for the freedom of all people, white and black. I knew as well as I knew anything that the oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed. When

I walked out of prison, I knew my mission to liberate the oppressor and the oppressed.”³

Advent is not 27 years long, although to some young and old, it may feel like it is. This year, from today, the beginning of Advent to Christmas is 27 days long. To be in a place of waiting is generally not a comfortable place to be. Yet, with the God for whom we are waiting, we can be filled with hope instead of with dread. We can be filled with love instead of with indifference. We can be filled with purpose instead of anxiety.

During 2020, we have been in a long season of waiting seemingly with little rhyme or reason, but Advent is a time for us to grow in clarity about what we are waiting for. We may feel like we are just on the spin cycle, not going anywhere, but if we instead recognize through Isaiah’s imagery that we are on a potter’s wheel with God’s hands shaping us into useful vessels, then we will begin to relish this season of waiting. We can learn about what we can control and what we cannot. When the days are short and the nights are long, we can begin to focus on the Source of true light. We can lift up our hearts and voices to the One who hears us and knows us better than anyone else. We can figure out that our hope is best placed in the One who can ultimately deliver us from that which holds us captive. Welcome to the season of Advent, let us prepare our hearts to truly welcome the revelation of the Lord.

¹Dr. Seuss, Oh, The Places You’ll Go, Random House, 1990.

²Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, Fortress, 2010.

³Nelson Mandela, Long Walk to Freedom, New York: Little Brown & Company, 1994, p. 64.