

“THE BEST WORD I’VE HEARD!”

Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:24-37

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What is the thing you most wanted in your entire life? Let’s get the silly things out of the way first: the shiny new bicycle you wanted for Christmas — whether you got it or not, it’s the long wait you remember. That sports team you hoped would finally have a winning season (the Cleveland Browns, maybe?).

More seriously now — what is the thing you most wanted in your entire life? Is it the relative or loved one you wanted healed? Did it involve waiting? There’s a reason they call those places in hospitals “waiting rooms.” We wait for our loved ones to come out of surgery — for an eternity, or so it seems. We wait eons between the Friday biopsy and the Monday test results. I know couples who have tried everything that modern medicine has to offer and still they are unable to have a child by conception. I know people who are waiting for a decision that will affect the rest of their lives: high school seniors waiting to hear into what colleges they will be accepted; bankers and auto workers waiting to find out if they’ll be laid off and wondering how they’ll support their families if they are. People wait for kidney transplants and donors who hope to match. They give blood, take tests, say a few prayers and wait. We have parishioners battling cancer, and every six months they go back to the hospital to have their “numbers” checked. They wait to see if the cancer is coming back. They wait for words about life and death.

We have trouble waiting, don’t we? Most of us don’t wait very well. Whether it be in traffic, or a supermarket line, or waiting for test results — we don’t like to wait. In a helpful piece on the subject of waiting, *Plain Dealer* columnist Terry Pluto wrote recently, “*I’ve told people whose lives seem stuck on hold: ‘There are times when God puts a stop sign in our lives because we are moving too fast, doing too much. We can’t hear God’s voice.’*”

“*Sounds good,*” Pluto continues, “*Only I want God to give me green lights in my life. I’m like a little kid in the back seat of life screaming, ‘Are we there yet? Why aren’t we there yet?’*”(1)

Waiting is especially difficult in anxious and tumultuous times. Have you ever waited with someone for an ambulance to arrive? It seems like forever. When I think of waiting, my mind always takes me to pictures of the victims of Hurricane Katrina waiting for help — waiting for hours, days, weeks, even months for the assistance they needed to get back on their feet. I remember seeing the devastation firsthand with the mission work crew I was part of a year ago in January, months after the storm. I saw weariness and frustration on the faces of those who had been waiting and waiting and waiting for the supplies and the manpower they need to rebuild.

The early Christians lived in days of high anxiety — times much like our situation today

— where there was instability and uncertainty about the future. The passage from Mark which is our Lectionary reading for today talks about “stars falling from heaven.” Many of us feel as if the sky is falling, as we see the stock market plummet, banks get sold, and the auto industry falter.

The early Christians were waiting expectantly, however, for they were waiting for the return of Christ. They believed that it was only a matter of time until Christ would come again and set things right. Christ would come again and bring the justice and the healing that was so desperately needed in their world. They echoed the sentiment of the prophet Isaiah, who, hundreds of years before the birth of Christ, expressed his desire in a colorful way, “*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence – as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil — to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might quake at your presence!*” (Is. 64:1-2) Does Isaiah sound a bit impatient? I think he does! Does Isaiah want God to hurry up? Most definitely! He’s tired of waiting! The early Christians were tired of waiting, too. To be truthful, so are we!

Why doesn’t God do something? That is perhaps the most frequent question people ask Christian teachers and leaders. Tragedies happen. Horrific accidents devastate lives and families. Tyrants and bullies force their own plans on people and crush the opposition, and they seem to get away with it. People ask, why is God apparently silent? Why doesn’t God step in and put a stop to it?

While none of us knows the answer to that question, we do know that God’s sovereign rule over the world is not quite as straightforward as people sometimes imagine. New Testament scholar and commentator N.T. Wright asks, “*Would people really like it if God were to rule the world directly and immediately, so that our every thought and action were weighed and instantly judged and if necessary, punished, in the scales of his absolute holiness? If we ask on special occasions, do we really suppose that he could do that simply when we want him to, and then back off again for the rest of the time?*”(2)

In the meantime, we are called to that difficult job, which is our word for the day: to **wait**. Although waiting is difficult for us, **we wait in hope**, for we believe that the promises of God will eventually be fulfilled. We believe that Christ will eventually come again to bring the justice and the peace that Isaiah envisioned, the peace and justice that the early Christians believed would soon come to pass.

What we have yet to learn, most of us, is that God’s timetable is not our timetable, and that while we get impatient and weary of waiting, especially on these dreary December days leading up to Christmas, there are lessons to be learned from waiting.

Again, to quote Terry Pluto, “*I Corinthians 13:4 reads, ‘Love is patient.’ I want those who love me to be patient. I’m just not very patient with them.*” He continues, “*Yes, I know that the book of James tells us that waiting and suffering can ‘develop perseverance...and perseverance must finish its work so that you may be complete, not lacking in anything.’ I know that I have learned a lot from waiting, and that good things come from it. I just find it hard to remember that when forced to wait.*”(3)

During the Vietnam War, Horace Champney mounted his own one-person candlelight vigil in front of the White House. The press heard about it, and a reporter interviewed him. The reporter asked, “Mr Champney, do you really think that one person with a candle can change the

country?” He replied quietly, “I am not doing this to change the country; I do this so that the country will not change me.”(4) Again, I remind you that we are called not to be distracted by our waiting, or to become weary and prone to despair, but to wait in hope, knowing that the promised day of the Lord will indeed arrive for us and for all humankind.

This past year has been an exciting one for Church of the Saviour. We began the year by moving into the new building, with state-of-the-art facilities for our children, the new library and all the opportunities that are afforded by the magnificence of the Great Hall. We raised the money and broke ground for a Habitat House which is under roof and hopefully will be ready for occupancy in the late spring. We took 65 youth and adults to South Carolina on the largest mission work trip ever for this congregation. We have other things to celebrate, too, too, but none more significant for the future of this congregation than the 28 babies that have been born since January 1, 2008. In every case, there was a period of waiting. Yes, there was the nine months of waiting during pregnancy. But in some cases, the waiting was longer than that. Some families had been hoping and dreaming for years. Some had adoption procedures going back two or three years and even further.

This waiting on the part of our young families was expectant waiting. **They waited in hope** — to get the results of a pregnancy test, to hear baby’s heart beat, to get a word from the adoption agency. **They waited in hope** as they remodeled the nursery, bought diapers, and opened shower gifts. **They waited in hope** as the labor pains started. **They waited in hope** as one of God’s greatest miracles unfolded before their very eyes.

We, too, are called to **wait in hope** this Advent season. “Advent” means coming. Christmas is coming, but Advent means a lot more than that. Advent is about a God who “*Breaks open the heavens and comes down,*” not stopping halfway. God in Christ comes all the way down to meet us in our sinfulness, down into a manger bed, down to the cross, down to the grave. Advent means that the Christ who came to Bethlehem’s manger will eventually come again to bring the justice and the peace and the love and the joy to this world that we are all waiting to experience.

Recently I read an article that will not leave my mind. The author said, “*We spend too much time trying to work out the details of when and how Jesus will come again. In the process, we fail to grasp the truth that Christ has come not once, not twice, but hundreds of times as God-with us, our Savior.*”(5) I couldn’t agree more. I truly believe that Jesus comes again every time we repent, turn from our sins and seek God’s forgiveness. We don’t need to wait to receive God’s forgiveness and love. God is ready to come into our hearts this very day.

My friends, it’s Advent. That means **Jesus is coming!** That’s the best word I’ve heard in a long time. That’s the best word we’ll ever hear. **Jesus is coming!** Open your heart and life to him!

Prayer: Dear God, How hard it is to wait! We confess that we are an impatient people. Help us to wait expectantly for your coming, filled with hope. In the meantime, help us to realize that we don’t have to wait for your love and forgiveness, that you are ready and willing to come into our lives today. May each of us open our hearts to you this day! We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Notes:

1. Pluto, Terry. “*Waiting to Learn How To Be More Patient About Waiting.*” *Cleveland Plain*

- Dealer*. November 22, 2008, p. E3.
2. Wright, N.T. , *Matthew for Everyone — Part One*, Chapters 1-15. Louisville Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press., pp. 168-169.
 3. *Ibid*.
 4. *Awaken: The Art of Imaginative Preaching*. Advent 2008-2009, Year B., p. 6.
 5. Benneman, James E. “*Reflections on the Lectionary*.” *The Christian Century*. Vol. No. p. 21.