

The Long Wait

Isaiah 35:1-10; Psalm 25; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Luke 1:57-80

Prayer for Illumination

Grant us, O Lord God, the knowledge of your divine words, and fill us with the understanding of your holy Gospel and the riches of your divine gifts and the indwelling of your Holy Spirit. Enable us with joy to keep your holy commandments and accomplish them and fulfill your will, and to be accounted worthy of the blessings and the mercies that are from you now and at all times. *Syrian Jacobite Liturgy*

Waiting

Are you tired of Advent already? Maybe a better question might be, are you ready for Christmas? I know the children are. Children start getting ready for Christmas early, and it cannot come too soon. The Christmas wish of many mothers, however, is another week to do all the work of preparing for the holiday. Waiting is so hard! I broke my phone, which is a problem because I do so much of my work on the phone. I ordered another one on Monday, and it was supposed to come sometime between Wednesday and Saturday. Why does the Post Office take so long? It arrived on Friday. Hooray! But it also is broken, so I have to return it. Aaaaah! More waiting! And why do we have to have Advent anyway? What evil person invented this season?

Waiting is a big theme in the Bible – a *big* theme. Everyone has to wait, and no one likes it. That is because our sovereign God is constructing an unbelievable kingdom, where everyone will live in peace and happiness in a gorgeous city – but it is taking thousands of years. God uses all of His people to play a role in this project, and He weaves together the stories of Zechariah, and Elizabeth, and Mary – and you! – to build this city. What might seem like waiting to you, might be a time of intense activity elsewhere. But we see only our own place. We cannot see what God is doing across the world, or even across the city. Even here in this church, God is at work in each of you in ways that the rest of us cannot see. So sometimes it appears to us that nothing is happening, when a lot is happening.

Waiting for God

Advent is a time for us to remember and reflect on God's work in the past, and anticipate His work in the future. Think what it was like for the Jews in the rubble and ruin of Jerusalem to read Isaiah where he says,

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.

What a marvelous vision! There was hope! They would not sit in the dirt forever. God would visit them and make their city beautiful again. But years passed, and it did not happen. There were some improvements, but nothing like this prophecy. And conditions got worse when a new ruler took over in 175 B.C. and did not improve much under the Romans. But Isaiah continued:

Be strong; fear not!
Behold, your God will come with vengeance,
with the recompense of God.
He will come and save you.

Ha! God will show those Romans! And with vengeance, too! But still the years rolled on. Babies were born and grew up, young people fell in love and married, crops were sown and harvested – life went on, but where were the glorious promises of God? And as if to end by teasing the Jews, Isaiah prophesied that,

the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain gladness and joy
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

This is great poetry, but for hundreds of years it was a distant dream. Yet the Jews waited. Through all of life's sorrows and turmoil, they waited. How do we know? Because we have this record of Zechariah and Elizabeth and Mary. Luke tells us that Zechariah and Elizabeth "were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord." And we can see from Elizabeth's speech and the songs of Zechariah and Mary, that even after hundreds of years, they still clung to the old prophecies. They were not fulfilled in their parents' lifetimes, they were not fulfilled in their grandparents' lifetimes, they had not been fulfilled in their own lifetimes, yet still these faithful Jews and thousands with them looked for that glorious day when God would come and save them. Psalm 25 ends with this plea:

Redeem Israel, O God,
out of all his troubles.

And they were convinced that God would do just that.

In due time God *did* redeem Israel, and He did it more gloriously than even the prophets could imagine. God came in person, but what is more, He came as a man! He redeemed Israel and opened the kingdom of heaven to the gentiles and gave us the Holy Spirit – yet still all is not right. We still have sickness and death, shame and disappointment, tyranny and poverty. This week, as you look back over it, you find that your life is not as you wish it to be. And globally, people are dying left and right in war in Yemen, Christians are being persecuted in China, while U.S. politicians exert themselves mightily to stay in office. Jesus, before He ascended to the Father, promised to return and finish the glorious home for us – a new heavens and earth in which all – not just some, but all – the prophecies will come true.

The Struggle to Wait

So now we also wait. Like the Jews before Christmas, we wait for God to come and save us. It is hard. If it is hard to wait to open Christmas presents, or for my new phone to arrive, it is unbearably harder to wait through the intense suffering of disease, death, and destruction. Jesus promised to return – when? When did Jesus make this promise? How long has it been? Is this a real thing?

The early Christians struggled to understand Jesus' second coming, so Paul addressed this in his letters to the church in Thessalonica. Life was harder for them. They did not have modern comforts. They did not have modern medicine. They sure did not have cell phones! But their biggest problem was persecution from the Jews and the Romans. The authorities would periodically round up the local Christians and feed them to the lions or use them for other entertainment. Emperor Nero set fire to Christians and used them as torches for his garden parties. Life was dangerous and harrowing for the first Christians, and one thing that kept them going was the hope that Jesus would come back to rescue them. Years went by. Decades passed. Friends and leaders died horrible deaths. And these first Christians wondered, where is Jesus? Why are we suffering and dying? Is He coming in time to save us? Is He coming at all? Have we been scammed by some monstrously cruel hoax?

In this situation you want the Apostle Paul to appear with some new insight or new information, perhaps an update on Jesus' timing or an adjustment to His plan. But no, you see in verse one that Paul has no intention of saying anything new. He says right at the outset that he is only going to reinforce what the Thessalonian Christians already know. **First** Paul reminds them that "the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night." In other words, Jesus' second coming will be a complete surprise to everyone. This implies several things. One, those people who claim to know when Jesus will return are wrong and deceptive. Stay far away from teachers and preachers who claim much learning and deep insight about the return of Jesus. Even Jesus said He did not know when the Father would send Him back. If Jesus and Paul do not know when Jesus will return, you can be sure no one else does either. Two, this means that it is a foolish waste of time to speculate on Jesus' return. Paul reminds us later how we *should* spend our time.

Children of the Light

Second, Paul reminds us who we are. This is critical. We are people of the light. We are not in darkness. Therefore we will not be surprised when Jesus comes again. This is not because we will figure out in advance when it is, but because we will welcome Jesus, *whenever* He comes. Jesus came as the light into a dark world. Jesus exposed wickedness and brought cheer to those who followed Him. And those who follow Jesus discover that they become lights, too. Christians do not live in fear of exposure, in terror of punishment, hiding in darkness to escape the just reward for their evil deeds. Christians are not perfect, but they know they are forgiven, and they become – over time – more and more like Jesus. We expose evil around us. We bring joy to each other and to those seeking to escape the death of this world. Jesus calmly, patiently, meekly loved and served people all the way to the cross. That is who we are, people. We are those who remain calm, who love, who serve others even while the world comes crashing down around us.

Notice that Paul does not command us to be lights. This is not a command. That is good, because there is no way we could obey such a command. No – Paul says we *are* lights in the world. This is our true nature and our inevitable effect. Look at the ceiling. Those light bulbs do not do anything to become light bulbs. They just are. And they shine, not because they think to do so. They shine just because that is what they do. So it is with you. You may not be aware that you are a light in this dark world, which is why Paul reminds us of these things. Now, sometimes we shine brighter than at other times. But the Holy Spirit who is always within you makes you a light to those around you all the time. Not all lights are the same. Flood lights illuminate large spaces, candelabra lights decorate the dining room, fluorescent lights illuminate the workbench, etc. But although these are noticeably different from each other, they are all lights, and they all illuminate their space. Christians are different from each other, but we all are lights, and we all illuminate this dark world.

How important is it that we be aware of our identity, you say? It is vitally important. It might not be an exaggeration to say that knowing our identity is foundational to anything else in the Christian life. Think of it this way. Suppose Paul Hadfield rolled over in bed one morning and said to his wife, “I really wish I could fly airplanes. I would love to be a pilot.” Sara would think this is extraordinarily odd, and she might reply, “But Paul, you *are* a pilot. You fly airplanes every week.” Paul replies, “That is what I love about you, Sara – you are so supportive and loving. But I really do wish I could be a pilot.” So what is Paul going to do that day? When he goes into the office at Arctic Barnabas Ministries his boss will say, “Paul, the Joneses are ready for you to fly them into the bush today.” What will Paul do? Convinced he is not a pilot, will he climb into the cockpit and fly into the bush? No, he will not. It would be suicidal for an untrained person to attempt to fly an airplane, especially into the bush, and Paul is not that reckless. He will refuse to fly. If Paul is confused about his identity, nothing else is going to make sense in his life.

This story about Paul is a little silly, but it well illustrates how many Christians go through life. Scripture clearly teaches that we are united with Jesus, that we have the powerful Holy Spirit in us, that we are lights in a dark world. But many Christians do not believe it. Consequently they act frightened, powerless, confused. If we are confused about our identity, nothing else makes sense. Could *you* be a light in this dark world? You think that is possible? A lot of Christians are scared of the world and try to avoid it as much as possible. Jesus plunged into the world, and was found among lepers and tax collectors and other unsavory people of His day. Jesus knew that He was the light of the world, and He was confident that He would brighten everyone He met. Paul says, “you are all children of light.” Do you believe this? Is this how you think of yourself? If not, you are as sad and foolish as Paul Hadfield would be if he doubted he was a pilot. Friends, it is time to stop listening to the lies of Satan, your sinful self, and the world. The glorious truth is that you all are children of the light, and God is using you to change the world. It might not always be evident, but it is true even when we cannot see it.

This means that when you go to Kaladi Brothers for coffee, you bring the light of Christ into that shop. When you go to work, you brighten everyone there with a spiritual light. When you go to school, you light up the classroom simply by walking in. But we are usually unaware of this, aren't we? Others are *not* unaware of it. Listen to a student from China who began coming to our campus ministry:

I will go back to China soon. This should have been the last time for me to attend the Dinner Discussion in this semester. Studying alone in the United States is a very hard and lonely activity, but I meet you in the United States is one of the happiest things to me!¹

This student was not happy because the campus minister told good jokes. He was happy because he saw light for the first time in his life. Here is another story:

I want you to know that your work with your friends is really valuable. I never learned about the Bible before I came to the United States. The three months of communication with you changed my mind... You are telling us the truth of life.²

My father-in-law was a professor of classics at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, PA, and all of his children studied there. Douglas Feaver was only a professor – a very good one – and every day he went to the university and taught. When his daughter, Ruth, was walking across the campus one day, the chairman of the classics department stopped to tell her how embarrassing it was that a Christian was employed at Lehigh University. What had Ruth's father done to cause this remark? Nothing. Nothing except go to work. Ruth's father was not a secret Christian, but he did not advertise his faith. He was just minding his own business as a professor, but the light of Christ touched everyone around, and this non-Christian was not happy about it. Sometimes non-Christians are more spiritually tuned-in than Christians! This non-Christian could tell that Douglas Feaver had a spiritual nature like Christ, even if my father-in-law was unaware of his effect on those around him.

Acting as Children of the Light

Since we *are* children of the light, Paul points out, **third**, that it makes sense for us to *act* as children of the light. You sleep at night and wake in the day. So we ought to be alert and thoughtful. Paul is not talking here about intelligence or athletics. Some of us think better than others, and some are more athletic, but all Christians, whatever our gifts and skills, should act according to our true nature – which is to be alert and thoughtful. At least this means Christians should avoid drunkenness and drug addiction. But more broadly, it means that we should avoid anything that drains our energy and distracts our attention. Like alcohol, we should consume sports, television, social media, etc. in moderation. It means that we should pursue constructive activities. Some of us will be pastors and missionaries, but we need all sorts of people, and God uses all sorts of employments to build His kingdom. As children of the light it makes sense for us to get up and get going in some constructive endeavor. What does *not* make sense is to waste our time doing nothing or in foolish speculations. That is what children of darkness do. Although we have no reason to fear the children of darkness, neither should we join them in their sinful pursuits.

Another way of saying these things is that we have put on faith, love, and hope. Notice the past tense in verse eight – that we got these gifts in the past. You do not have to put on faith, love, and hope. You already wear them. So is there nothing for us to do? Not so fast. We have no need of *getting* faith, love, and hope, but we do need to *use* them. What do you think when faced with a big challenge? Do you think, “I wish I had the faith to believe that God could help me?” What do you think when confronted with a difficult person? Do you think, “I know I ought to love her, but I don't have it in me?” Folks, this is exactly the problem. You *do* have the faith to trust God with your challenges, and you *do* have the love to care for a

¹ Shared by Matthew DeLong, RUF-I Campus Minister at George Mason University.

² Shared by Rick Gray, RUF-I Campus Minister at the University of Delaware.

difficult person. God has given it to you. Well, if this is so, why doesn't it seem so? It is because you are the victim of a lie. Satan, the sin within you, and the world around you are telling you that you need extraordinary faith – more than you have – to trust Jesus with difficult problems. It is a lie that you do not have the love to care for difficult people. Your problem – and the problem of so many Christians – is that we do not know we are being lied to, and we end up believing the lie instead of believing God.

But we have strayed from the original question. What is there for us to do? It is to *use* the faith, love, and hope that we have. It is this way with all human activity. All babies are born with the ability to walk and run, but this ability is undeveloped until the baby practices walking and running. And the more he walks and runs the better he becomes at it. All babies are born with the ability to talk. They do not need surgery or equipment or special foods. (Well, most don't.) But their speaking ability remains poor unless they practice. And the more they practice, the better they become, and they learn to use nouns and verbs effectively. Then they advance to learning past, present, and future tenses. Some might even learn to use voice and mood to communicate subtle nuances. But they use the same lips, tongue, and vocal cords that all of us have.

When you are faced with a difficult problem – sickness, a school assignment, an issue at work – and you are thinking about how to avoid it, you can ask God to help you. You might feel like it is hopeless. You might feel like you do not have enough faith for this situation. But you will discover that as you use the faith that you have, your faith grows stronger. When your neighbor needs help and you do not want to help her, you can help her anyway. You might feel like you cannot do it. You might feel foolish and helpless and angry and hypocritical all the way to her house. But you will discover that God has put love in you – love you were not aware you had – and the more you help her, the stronger your love grows.

The Long Wait

Now Paul says all this in answer to a question about the return of Christ. The first century Christians were waiting for Jesus – waiting and wondering. The Apostle Paul could not tell them when Jesus would come for them, but He could tell them how to wait. You might think that waiting is inactivity – like standing in line at Wal-mart. That is not Christian waiting. Christian waiting is living like Christians until Jesus returns – waiting for Jesus to come for us. Jesus might come tomorrow, or next year, or in a hundred years. It has been 2,000 years since Christ ascended to the Father and it could be another 2,000 years until He comes again – or longer. It could be a long wait. It was a long wait until the first coming of Jesus. No one knows when Jesus will return, and it does not matter. What we *do* know is *how* to wait – to use the faith, love, and hope that Jesus has given us, shining like Christ as we wander through this dark world.

Paul ends this paragraph by telling us how to hang on in tough times. He says we should “encourage one another and build one another up.” When the first century Christians were facing the lions, and when you are facing the hardships that come into your life, God sends fellow Christians to encourage us and help us. I see this happening in Redeemer church, and I join with Paul in saying to continue “just as you are doing.” But if the companionship of friends is a blessing, how much more is the presence of Jesus. We are waiting for Jesus to return in His body, but He has never left us in Spirit. All day, every day, in joy and in sorrow, Jesus is with us to comfort, instruct, guide and encourage. And especially on His own special Day – the Lord's Day – Jesus comes to us in word and sacrament. Someday you will grasp the hand of Jesus physically. Today you touch Jesus when you grasp this bread. Although we cannot see Him, Jesus is here. He offers Himself to you and He is yours. Take this bread and wine, and know that Jesus is with you forever.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, you are so patient with us, but we are so impatient with you. We hate to wait for you to act. We want everything quickly and on our own terms. You declare Yourself to be our loving, sovereign Father, yet we persist in thinking that we know better than You what is good for us. Forgive us, O Lord! Make us patient as we learn to trust you more. Help us to use the faith, love, and hope that you have given us. Help us to use these gifts in service to each other and those in our communities. Help us to remember and believe that we are children of the light. Help us to wait for you, though the time may be long and the troubles grievous. This we ask in the name of Jesus, our Savior and Lord, who ascended to heaven and will return again. Amen.

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