

“How Do We Wait?”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Advent I – December 2, 2018

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

When are times in life that we wait? Plenty of times, if you think about it.

We go to a restaurant with friends or family to have a meal, and waiting is infused throughout that experience. We wait to be seated. We wait for our server to come and take our order. We wait for our food to arrive. We wait to receive our check in order to pay. And what do we call those who take our orders at restaurants? Waiters or waitresses.

We get in the car in the morning to go to work, and we will wait at stoplights. We wait when traffic gets congested. We wait if we encounter an accident that delays us further. We wait to enter our parking garage and to finally park. We tend to measure our morning stress level by how much or how little we have had to wait to get to work.

We go to certain appointments and we must wait. If the person who cuts our hair is delayed, we will wait in the beauty or barber shop. If we have to go to the BMV – and with all apologies to Rob Wistendahl who works for the BMV – we will often wait for some time to get our license or registration renewed. If we have a doctor’s appointment, it always seems like we are waiting to be seen by the nurse, and then waiting in the examination room for that knock on the door signaling that the doctor is entering.

In most of these instances, waiting can be a nuisance. We have a predetermined idea of how much time it should take to get something done, and when we have to wait longer than our expectation, we become frustrated, annoyed, or perturbed. But in reality, it’s not life-altering to wait in these circumstances, even though in the moment we feel it is.

However, waiting in other situations feels weightier and more intense, and can cause anxiety, fear, and strong emotion. You might be a high school senior who has submitted all of your college applications, and you are waiting: waiting to see if you’re accepted into your top choice; waiting to see what the financial aid package will be; waiting to see if those scholarships you applied for come through. It’s a life-changing moment to wait for, and it can be hard to wait.

Or, when you go to the doctor, you can be waiting on tests and procedures to be scheduled, and for test results to come back. And that waiting can be excruciating, as you know that waiting can mean so many things, so many outcomes.

Our family has been living with that the last several weeks. In October, Debbie had a mammogram which showed a change in a spot that they had been following for two years. It was recommended that she have a needle biopsy done, and thankfully, that came back benign. But it was also recommended that she see a breast surgeon, because the mass, if left in place, can lead to higher occurrences of cancer. And with a family history of breast cancer, the surgeon recommended that it be removed so that a full pathology can be done. So, this Wednesday, Debbie will have outpatient surgery to remove that mass, and we will be waiting for those test results. Much like many of you have lived through or walked with family and friends who have waited.

Advent is a season of waiting. It is a time of preparing for God's love coming into the world in human form. In our calendar, it is four Sundays of listening, looking, praying, and waiting for God's coming to a stable in Bethlehem. But it's also a time to examine how we wait - how we listen, how we look, how we prepare. For waiting is not just a passive, helpless activity. It is a faith-filled, hope-driven practice which helps us be ready when God speaks and acts in our lives of discipleship.

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).

The other occasion which causes us to wait is when we experience the end of something. When something comes to an end, we are left waiting for what happens next. And as we talked about at our church’s governing board meeting on Monday, our church has experienced a number of endings this year.

We saw the end of Tom Markey’s service with us as youth director in September, as he left to take a full-time job at Second Presbyterian Church. And in the wake of that ending, we have been waiting for someone new to take that role. Through job postings, email communications, and interviews, we have actively waited to discern God’s guidance for who is called to this position with our incredible youth. But that person has not yet become apparent to us, and so we continue to wait.

Last week was the last Sunday that Iglesia Nueva Creacion worshipped here at John Knox, after ten years of being in our space. They are now worshipping at Westview Christian Church, with the Hispanic congregation, Iglesia Hermandad Cristiana. They will be back here on January 6 for a celebration service, a service on Epiphany to which all of us are encouraged to attend. But in essence, on Sundays, we will no longer see consistently our sisters and brothers in faith who have shared our space for worship, education, and fellowship. But we will wait expectantly for what is next, engaging in conversations with this new combined congregation on what mission and outreach opportunities they wish to engage in out of our space during the week and on special, joint occasions with us.

We have said goodbye to many people in our church this year – either through moves or through death. And this morning, we will say goodbye to two longtime members who will be moving out-of-state this week. These endings are a part of life – change happens, whether we wish for it to or not. And we are left waiting for what’s next – how we will respond in our discipleship and in our stewardship to these endings; what new faces we will encounter in the wake of these goodbyes. We must not wait passively or indifferently, just assuming new people will walk through our doors. We must be active, expectant waiters – intentionally welcoming and inviting those next disciples into our Open. Caring. Community.

In this Season of Advent, we are reminded once again of what it feels like to wait. It can be hard. It can be difficult. But it also can be full of newness and hope. For the one we wait for embodies God’s promise of new life, a promise which will never fade through our waiting.

But how shall we wait? Will we wait fearfully, anxiously, and passively? Will we wait expectantly, hopefully, and actively? 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.