

In the Meantime...

Mark 1:1-8; 2nd Peter 3:8-15a

CWZepp, BWCOB, December 10, 2017

Two weeks ago, a certain Elf stood up here and declared that we are not really an Advent people, because and I quote, “we don’t like waiting.”¹ I have been thinking about that statement ever since, with my initial inclination being to issue my rebuttal of that statement in today’s sermon. After all, this is a church that has an Advent Celebration...something I have not seen elsewhere. We have rich traditions around lighting the candles of the Advent wreath, which have only grown deeper in recent years as we have been hearing personal Advent stories from some of our members each year. Our kids have grown up on Advent calendars...and not even the kind that have chocolate candies inside the windows. True, we don’t enjoy singing the Advent hymns in our hymnal as much as we do the Christmas hymns, but that is mainly because the Advent section in our hymnal is terrible, not because we don’t want to sing Advent songs. It’s not like we get complaints when we sing “O Come, O Come, Immanuel” instead of “Hark the Herald Angels Sing.” So surely there is some resonance with Advent among us. Surely some of us know how to wait in this season.

But then I sat down to work on worship planning. I put my computer in its docking station and pressed the power button. And then I waited. For what felt like forever. In actuality it was something like a minute. Then I entered my password. Waited another 55 seconds for the operating system to load. Yes, I timed that one. And then another minute or so until the background programs finally finished loading and my machine was fully operational. There went 3 minutes of my life that I will never get back.

OK, so we don’t like waiting.

But we do an awful lot of it. We wait at traffic lights and in traffic jams, at restaurants and airports and movie theaters; we wait in line at the post office, the bank, and the grocery store, at the doctor’s office and the hospital where waiting is so institutionalized that they have rooms on every floor devoted solely to that purpose. We wait on the phone when calling customer service, when a recorded voice is very likely to inform us how valuable our call is and to thank us for waiting. And then if you happen to want to speak to an actual bona fide human being – even one on the other side of the globe – you have to wait some more. If you are lucky, that recorded voice might come back on the line to tell you how long your wait is expected to be.

Estimates vary widely, but it is clear that all that time waiting adds up and amounts to a significant portion of our days. One source claimed that the average person will spend a total of approximately 5 years of their 80-year lifespan just waiting in lines!² If that is anywhere near true, and if our late great American prophet Tom Petty was correct in saying that “the waiting is the hardest part,”³ we just might all be in for a world of hurt.

¹ Jeff Carr, “Is It Christmas Yet?” BWCOB, November 26, 2017.

² Luke Ward. “How Much Time People Spend Doing Stuff In Their Lifetime.” *The Fact Site*. Online: <https://www.thefactsite.com/2010/03/how-much-time-people-spend-doing-stuff.html>

³ “The Waiting” Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers (1981)

A few years ago, *The New York Times* ran a piece entitled “Why Waiting in Line is Torture.”⁴ Citing a statistic that Americans spend roughly 37 billion hours each year waiting in line, it detailed some of the psychology and science of waiting and line management. It led with a case study that I think is worth sharing:

Some years ago, executives at a Houston airport faced a troubling customer-relations issue. Passengers were lodging an inordinate number of complaints about the long waits at baggage claim. In response, the executives increased the number of baggage handlers working that shift. The plan worked: the average wait fell to eight minutes, well within industry benchmarks. But the complaints persisted.

Puzzled, the airport executives undertook a more careful, on-site analysis. They found that it took passengers a minute to walk from their arrival gates to baggage claim and seven more minutes to get their bags. Roughly 88 percent of their time, in other words, was spent standing around waiting for their bags.

So the airport decided on a new approach: instead of reducing wait times, it moved the arrival gates away from the main terminal and routed bags to the outermost carousel. Passengers now had to walk six times longer to get their bags. Complaints dropped to near zero.

This story hints at a general principle: the experience of waiting, whether for luggage or groceries, is defined only partly by the objective length of the wait. “Often the psychology of queuing is more important than the statistics of the wait itself,” notes the M.I.T. operations researcher Richard Larson, widely considered to be the world’s foremost expert on lines. Occupied time (walking to baggage claim) feels shorter than unoccupied time (standing at the carousel).

“We’ll never eliminate lines altogether,” says author Alex Stone, “but a better understanding of the psychology of waiting can help make those inevitable delays that inject themselves into our daily lives a touch more bearable.”

One gets the feeling that the first-century author of 2nd Peter might have similarly been trying to help his readers and hearers understand the psychology of waiting. In today’s passage, assigned by our lectionary for this second Sunday of Advent, we are given insight into what was going on in the minds of early Christians as they awaited the promised second coming of Jesus. Already at this early moment in the Christian movement, believers were struggling with the wait. Even then, it seemed clear to them, as it surely does to us today, that the initial understanding of this promise – that Christ would return very soon, even before the generation of his original followers died out – was not fulfilled nor looked as if it would be fulfilled, at least not in the way that most of them expected it.

In response to this dilemma, the author of 2nd Peter seeks to help readers make sense of this wait while still holding on to the promise. One of the things noted in *Times* article was how much our expectations affect how we feel about lines. It noted how uncertainty magnifies the stress of waiting, and how feedback in the form of naming expected wait times and offering explanations for delays improves the tenor of the experience.⁵ And so we have several

⁴ Alex Stone, “Why waiting in line is torture.” *The New York Times*. August 18, 2012.

⁵ Ibid.

explanations for the apparent delay of Christ's coming named in our passage today. First, says the author in verse 8, remember that God's time is very different from our time. By alluding to Psalm 90:4, "a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past," the writer invites us to embrace the mystery of trying to understand or perceive from God's point of view.

Now, had it been available to first century persons, I can imagine our author referring readers at this point to the famous pitch-drop experiment at the University of Queensland in Australia for a case-in-point illustration.⁶ If you haven't heard of it, the pitch drop experiment is listed in the Guinness Book of World Records as the world's longest-running laboratory experiment. It was begun in 1927 by Professor Thomas Parnell, who wanted to demonstrate to his students that some substances that appear to be solid are actually liquid. So he got some pitch — a petroleum-based derivative of tar once used for waterproofing boats, which at room temperature feels solid - even brittle - and can easily be shattered with a blow from a hammer, but is actually liquid! In 1927, he heated the pitch and poured it into a glass funnel with a sealed stem. Three years were allowed for the pitch to settle, and in 1930 the sealed stem was cut. From that date on the pitch has slowly dripped out of the funnel, with nine drops falling between 1930 and 2014. The experiment is ongoing, and if you are curious, a quick internet search will provide you with a live look at the funnel⁷ or a time-lapse video of the 9th drop⁸.

The point, of course, is that appearances can be deceiving, and that what at first appears to be an illustration of nothing happening is actually just a snapshot of a very, very slow process. Such is what the author of 2nd Peter appears to be saying in our scripture today. But this is of course, only the first explanation for the apparent delay that our author notes. A second reason, our scripture goes on to say in verse 9, is that God does not want anyone to perish. And so it is that the apparent delay in Christ's return is actually an example of God's mercy – God patiently allowing time for everyone to come to repentance.⁹

So in these two verses, we have two explanations that might help believers understand and cope with the delay in Christ's coming that they are now enduring. However, there is still no relief in tempering the expectations for how long they will be waiting. While many over the years have given in to the temptation to try to predict and name the date or the season for Jesus to come again, the author of 2nd Peter is having none of that, being squarely in the "no one knows the day or hour"¹⁰ camp.

Instead, what we are given is some suggestions for what to do in the meantime. Like Richard Larson noted about waiting in lines, the objective seems to be a shift from "unoccupied waiting" to "occupied waiting." A new heavens and a new earth is on the way, but while one is waiting for that day to come, what ought one to be doing? Preparing to live in that world "where righteousness is at home."¹¹ As verse 14 advises, "While you are waiting for these things, strive to be at peace, without spot or blemish." In other words, live Godly, Christ-like lives and work for peace. If that isn't what you're up to these days, you might want to reboot. Or to use a more "churchy" word, "repent."

⁶ "The Pitch Drop Experiment." School of Mathematics and Physics. University of Queensland, Australia. Online: <http://smp.uq.edu.au/content/pitch-drop-experiment>

⁷ <http://www.thetenthwatch.com/>

⁸ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UZKZF7FNh_0

⁹ 2nd Peter 3:9.

¹⁰ See Matthew 24:36 among others.

¹¹ 2nd Peter 3:13

Now, to bring this back to Advent, I don't know about you, but all this talk of Jesus' second coming in 2nd Peter doesn't really speak to my Advent practice or experience. When I light my candles and mark the days off of our Advent calendar, I am not actively awaiting the second coming of Jesus. After two millennia, I am not terribly concerned about the delay of the second coming.

But I am waiting for something. It isn't simply Christmas Day or all the nostalgia that comes with it for good or ill. It isn't just the holiday break, or the time set-apart for and spent with family, though I do eagerly anticipate those. It isn't the gift giving or receiving, the singing, the lights, or any of the cultural trappings of the season. And it isn't the ritual retelling of the sacred story of the incarnation, as dramatic and enriching as that may be.

No, I'm not waiting for a retelling of an old story. Nor for the promised ending of the story. I am waiting for the rebirth of that story – the reincarnation of Christ in me, in us. I am waiting for Christ to come again – to bring hope to the hopeless, peace to the troubled, joy to the despairing, and love to the forgotten. I am waiting for the Light that shines in the darkness, the kingdom to come to earth as it is in heaven, the already but not yet realized dream of God to find a foothold in my own waking hours.

We spend a lot of time waiting for this. And in truth, we don't like it. We wish it was already so. But it isn't. All we have is the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, which at this time of the year, we remember as the voice of John cries out into our wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord!"

Perhaps it is simply a diversion – like an airline moving its gates farther away from the baggage claim just so that we have something to do while we are waiting. But even if it is, that does not negate the reality of that for which we wait. And so in the meantime – while we are waiting – we prepare the way, opening up the spaces in our lives and in our hearts for Christ to be born anew in us and among us. In the meantime, we ready ourselves for whatever God may have in store for us or for our world – living lives of holiness and godliness. And in the meantime, we dream of a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness is at home and all are found at peace.

Christ is coming. In the meantime, we wait. So let us prepare the way of the Lord!