

“Waiting but for What?”

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December 15, 2019

James 5:7-10

⁷ Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. ⁸ You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. ⁹ Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! ¹⁰ As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

Longing. Mystery. Expectation. Waiting. These words sometimes feel strange, awkward, in our hurried world. With Siri standing by to answer every question and Amazon ready to deliver almost anything to our doorstep overnight, we are no longer used to waiting.

Patience used to be considered a virtue, but now we get annoyed if four people are waiting to check-out and Trig's doesn't open another line. Anymore, we think of waiting as a problem to be solved. And yet God knows that practicing patience is good for us.

Delaying gratification is good for us.

When we don't get everything we want when we want it, or when things don't come as easily or as quickly as we expect, we have a chance to grow to be better people.

Our sermon series is “Awe and Wonder.” Advent is a time of waiting, longing and expectation. But when we have lost our sense of wonder and forgotten what awe feels like, it's hard to recall what we're supposed to be waiting for.

Last week, we talked about living mindfully, being present in each moment so that we can perceive how precious life is. We acknowledged that while we may wish it was otherwise, the nature of life has always been achingly beautiful yet also so painful. We also entertained the possibility that we can have a perfect Christmas, but only if we accept that “completely good” is an illusion. In order to have a perfect Christmas, or a perfect any day, we need to rewrite perfection's definition to include both bad and good.

I've been rereading some Thich nhat Hanh this month. The writings of this Buddhist monk remind me that even I can work on mindfulness. I like his mental image of washing the dishes to wash the dishes. How often do we wash dishes, or do anything else, simply to get it done and move onto something else? How often do you let your mind wander through the ordinary things of your day? Driving, shoveling snow, coming to church.

And yet, being present as we fold laundry or listen for the sixth time to someone's story is also a gift. Multitasking, fretting, and being anxious wear us out. Mindfulness refreshes us, renews us. And – a truth hidden from those who dismiss it – mindfulness helps with the waiting.

When I'm focused on this moment, when I'm fully immersed in our time of worship together, I'm not thinking about Christmas Eve or Jared's graduation or how tired or excited or worried I might be. It's a win-win. Christmas Eve will still come, and I get to really enjoy the here and now. Isn't that neat?

I was reading Chris Hogan's blog last week. He teaches about using money well but in this entry "6 Must-Dos for an Intentional Christmas" he says, "I spend my time like I spend my money: on purpose.... My priority," he continues, "is being with the people [who matter most to me]. Who is most important to you? And how can you fully enjoy your time together this Christmas?"

Imagine this is God. The God of the Cosmos is too large for us to comprehend. We may try but if ever we think we understand God, we're really putting our image of God in a box. This is the backbone of the conflicts between churches, denominations and individuals. We think we know something when we really only have a glimmer of understanding.

Yet, God puts up with us, with all our illusions of grandeur, our missteps and blatant sin. God forgives, challenges, and encourages us – in the process drawing more from us than we'd have believed possible. In gratitude for God's lovingkindness and ever-presentness, we want to be our best selves. We long to have God smile at us and to be ever closer to God.

An interesting thing happens when we let God draw us closer though. These represent us. We each begin our spiritual walk somewhere on that outside circle. But as we grow closer to God, do you notice what else happens? We grow closer to the others around us.

God is mystery – not only so much bigger than anything we can comprehend, God is other, unlike and so very much different from everything we know. We can feel frustrated at not understanding this mystery, yet when we accept it, we can marvel. We experience awe.

Part of having faith is accepting that we don't know, and will never know, God fully. And that's okay. Through all of our days, we continue to discover God's way for us. Our relationship with God broadens and deepens. We learn not to shy from our growing edges but to trust when God as Spirit leads us into and then through them. We grow comfortable accepting and even celebrating this mystery that is God.

One aspect of this mystery is that as we let ourselves grow closer to the holy, we also grow closer to all of creation. It seems to be in our nature to erect borders and boundaries for whom we invite in – to our lives, our country... But when we look at Jesus' example, we find that he is always in community. As an introvert he needs to go off by himself to pray and to recharge, but then he is right back with his friends, disciples and followers. His ministry is always connectional. His life is defined by his relationships.

Sometimes we can miss things that are right in front of us, either because we don't understand or we don't want to accept it. Jesus comes to us, fully human and fully divine, so that we might learn to embrace our humanity. We can get so caught up in spiritual things that we forget that God made us as bodily creatures, to enjoy this world, to work and play, eat and drink, laugh and cry *together* – just as Jesus did. Part of the mystery of faith is that faith cannot exist in a vacuum. It needs to be lived out *with others*.

Not that it's always easy. We have all faced the unexpected. We've all suffered. A Facebook friend shares part of her story: "The Christmas when my dad left our family was a very sad Christmas. I was about 6 years old. My aunts and extended family went out of their way to see that we still had presents and a Christmas tree. While grateful for the gifts, it was not the presents or the tree that stuck in my mind, but the lesson I learned... that God can and will help you get through the dark times in life."

It's easy to believe that God is with us when life is fine. Yet it is when the worst happens that we have a chance to discover that, even then, God is with us. God shows up in times of sickness, death, unemployment. Christmas is one of our reminders that amid life's uncertainty, God comes – bringing peace, joy, hope and love, yes, and also purpose, salvation and wholeness.

Life is messy. Walking in the way of Christ is messy. Let's say you do everything you can to be faithful to God and true to your family. Then at Thanksgiving you're told you're going to be laid off in January. Or your spouse wants to end your marriage. Or your grandchild receives a grim diagnosis.

Though it continues to surprise us, it is in the middle of life's messes that miracles happen. Friends, neighbors, even strangers come to be the face, hands and feet of Christ for us when we most need it. In devastating circumstances that we suspect will finish us, we discover that God is right here with us. So much so that when we look back, we often find that not only did we survive but that we grew through our walk through the "valley of the shadow of death."

A first step in any faith journey is accepting that God is with us. Gradually, we may add the words, "no matter what." God wants relationship with us.

Jesus says, “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I’ll come in.”

God wants relationship with every one of us and with every person. God comes whether we are being naughty or nice. Because God loves us. Loves every person, and indeed all of creation.

So to recap: Following Christ is not meant to be neat or predictable. It’s a messy business. Life is messy. But in the midst of all of it – the unexpected, the messy, and the devastating – we can fully trust God shows up—no matter what.

This is what Advent is about. This is why – with anticipation – we wait. For our God that shows up.