

“Moving Right Along” / I Thessalonians 3:9-13 / 2 December 2012

Happy Advent season to you. Today is the first Sunday in Advent, and so it's the New Year's Day of the church calendar. Advent is one of my favorite times of year to be a pastor because it's a season of waiting, and I find that no matter who you are in life, no matter your age, or race, or occupation, you know what it is to wait. Nothing makes us feel powerless quite like waiting. And in our waiting, we experience hope, and boredom, and impatience, and maybe even the occasional dream or vision of the new thing that might be coming our way. And so, happy Advent to you! Whatever you're waiting for, in this life of years, God grant that you might wait with hope.

They say, “Who you are when you're alone is who you truly are.” Another truth is this: “Who you are when you're waiting is who you truly are.” All up and down Washington Pike these days there are whole convoys of slow-moving backhoes, those lumbering, yellow machines that move dirt. There are dozens of them running between the construction sites out in South Fayette and their headquarters in Bridgeville. They've got huge tires and big appendages to reach out and scoop the soil out of the earth. When we were children, my brothers and I used to pretend they were dinosaurs. And these particular dinosaurs like to travel right at rush hour, too, and did I mention that they're slow? You never see them on weekends, and you never see them at any time of day except from 7 to 9am and from 4 to 6pm. In fact, on my way to work this past Friday, I came up behind just one such backhoe, and he was moving at a very good clip. He was going about thirty, which isn't bad for a machine like that. I said to myself, “As soon as that guy sees me behind him, he's going to slow down to a crawl.” And he did! As soon as I got up behind the guy, he started doing twenty. You really find out what you're made of when the world forces you to slow down and wait. It doesn't even matter where you're going or what you would prefer to be doing; when you're forced to wait, suddenly you're in a great hurry. Suddenly, you've got urgent business to attend to, places to go, people to see, deadlines to meet. When life makes you wait, it reminds you that there really are enormous forces beyond your control. I can't say that I liked the person I was as I inched toward Bridgeville behind that dinosaur. What does waiting do to you?

Let's think about it another way. If the world really did end with the Mayan calendar, later this month, how would you wait for December 21? You've surely heard that, centuries ago, the ancient Mayans finally stopped counting the future at December 21, 2012 CE. Some have gone so far as to say that the Mayans actively predicted the end of the world on that date. (The real Mayans down in the Yucatan and Guatemala are just rolling their eyes and keeping silent about the whole thing.) I imagine some ancient priest-astronomer in his temple down in Chichen Itza, engraving far-flung future dates into a stone. His hand is getting tired, and he knows he's never going to live to see these hypothetical years anyway. I mean 1998! 1999! 2000! 2012? C'mon, many of us didn't expect to live long enough to see that one. “But just let me finish out this lunar cycle, then I'll be done. We'll have thousands of years to update it.” He presses on with a cramped hand until he arrives at the end of his 5,200-year rotation, and says, “Ah, done! Now, let some future guy take up where I left off.” But you know how it is when you retire, or go off a committee, and you leave all your hard work in the hands of strangers. And alas for the Mayans, the Spanish arrived, their culture fell into decline, and nobody got around to updating their calendar. And so, let me emphasize: I do not believe that the world is going to end on December 21, but some people out there do.

Let's imagine that we're among those folks. How would you wait for December 21 to arrive? How would you live from now until that day? With fewer than twenty days left of Planet Earth as we know it, and the world scheduled to end right before Christmas! How would you spend these next nineteen days? Would you faint for fear of what is coming upon the earth—as Jesus says in Luke? Would you quit your job, pull your kids out of school, and live in reckless abandon? Would you drink...a lot? Would you get mad and try to return all the Christmas presents you bought on Black Friday? Or would you smile, hope for the best, and celebrate Christmas a few days early? I love Advent because it's a season of waiting, and no matter who you are in life, you are waiting for something. You in your pew, you with your hopes, what are you waiting for?

Our faith ancestors, the early Christians, were waiting for Jesus to come back in a cloud of glory to set up his kingdom and make the people who crucified him squirm just a little. They were waiting for the apocalypse. The Advent season always kicks off with these apocalyptic readings, like the one we just heard from the Gospel of Luke. Jesus waxes lyrical about the end of the world. "Signs in the heavens, distress among the nations, people fainting for fear of what's coming upon the earth." Now I admit that I would prefer some Christmassy words about angels and Mother Mary, but this is potent stuff. With the signs, and the distress among nations, and the fear, he might have been talking about the times in which we live. The reading reminds us that people have been expecting the apocalypse for a very, very long time.

Our second reading, too, makes appeal the "the coming of our Lord Jesus." In fact, First Thessalonians is the oldest book in the New Testament. It's the Apostle Paul's personal letter to faraway friends. He penned this wistful missive long before anyone ever thought to write an account of Jesus' life in the form of Mark or Matthew. And did you hear the impatience, the longing in the Apostle's words to his distant friends? There is a note of real joy with an undercurrent of sorrow. Paul misses them profoundly. He says, "I can't thank God enough for the joy that I feel when I think of you. Night and day, I pray that I might see your faces again. And now, may God direct my way to you, and give you strength of heart until the coming of our Lord Jesus."

Paul, too, is waiting. He's waiting for a day when the Big World will roll back around to the place where he can be together with the people he loves. He's waiting for a day when he can see their faces again. He's waiting. Waiting is always hard, but it's especially hard when you're waiting to be reunited to someone you miss and love.

But here we all are today, sitting in our pews, waiting. I don't care if you're bored, and tired, and finished with all your life's goals. I don't care if the only thing you're waiting for is 10:30, so that you can make for the exit. All of us are waiting for something. What are you waiting for in your life? Are you waiting to be reunited to someone you love? Waiting for a phone call, waiting for the lab results, waiting for someone to get back to you. At some point, a bus or a plane will be the object of your waiting. Are you waiting for a certain feeling to go away? Are you waiting to gain some perspective on a longstanding problem? I'll tell you what I'm waiting for. I'm waiting to see if this tattered old preacher's robe is going to last until May. I'm waiting to see if I'll be able to replace it with a nice, new robe...the kind with three bands on each shoulder. Last Thursday, I mailed my doctoral dissertation to my committee, and on December 10, I travel to Rochester to defend it. Now, I have no illusions. I am fully aware that my dissertation committee will read my work; then—if it's approved—it will get shelved in a

divinity school library where it will remain untouched, waiting—like the Apostle Paul and the Mayans—for the end of days. But until December 10, I'm waiting to see if my work will be deemed good enough, waiting to see if my thoughts will be received by the academy, waiting to see what these past four years of reading, and writing, and lectures was about. We're all waiting.

What are you waiting for? What's anybody waiting for? People wait to be loved, people wait to find happiness, they wait for a better world for their children. People wait for their hurts to heal; they wait in hopes that their relationships will improve. Some people are waiting to die. I once knew a woman, 101 years of age, who called her best friend every single night—also a centenarian—and she bid her friend goodnight with the same sentence each time she called. “Good night, Clara, I hope you die tonight.” Of course, she finally did. Some folks have lived for decades, but they're waiting for a time when they'll finally be free to be the person and do the things that they never got to be and do because of decisions they made when they were young. People wait for holidays, like the one we're waiting for now, because it's a time to put aside our work or our tedium, a time to reconnect with all-too-rare loved ones. We wait for vacations, and days off. Most of the hopes that keep us going are not especially big; we wait for the snow to fall on the slopes so we can go skiing. But we wait for these unspectacular things, and just the knowledge that they're coming keeps us sane. Everyone's waiting for purpose and meaning to step up and light the way to a happier life.

I don't know if you're aware of this, but waiting is sacred time. Waiting is holy time. Look at all the waiting that's done in the Scriptures. Waiting to be freed from slavery, waiting to get to the Promised Land, waiting for a Messiah, waiting for the Day of Pentecost or the Second Coming. Waiting—with its uncertainty and powerlessness—is one of our least favorite activities, but God draws near to those who wait. And so, next time you find yourself waiting for something small, remind yourself that in reality we are all waiting for something very big. We're waiting for that promised day when justice shall roll down like waters. We're waiting for that day—and we've been waiting long—when they will beat their swords into plowshares. We're waiting for nothing less than a new world, and it might even have to rise out of the ashes of the old. We're waiting for an outrageous dream to come true, for an ancient promise to be kept. We're waiting for a new world, and we're working for it. And so, Happy Advent, the season of waiting. Now make yourself at home, and together, let us wait...with hope. Amen.