

December 3, 2017
The First Sunday of Advent

“While You Wait”
by Mary Anne Biggs

Isaiah 64:1-9 ~ Mark 13:24-37

I had a friend in college whose father was a B-52 pilot with the Strategic Air Command during the Cold War. She remembered weeks where her dad was in town ... but unavailable to their family because he was sitting on a runway with engines idling, ready to be airborne in seconds ... just in case. “Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty,” as they say. While he was waiting, my friend was growing up ... waiting herself ... for a more stable and rooted life. She went to thirteen different schools across the country by the time she graduated. We forget sometimes the price our military families pay ... waiting to feel at home.

Waiting is the substance of Advent ... a season that’s not just about remembering how the world felt before the Messiah was born ... but watching for ways he is born into our lives *now* ... and looking to his ultimate arrival with God’s merciful justice. We are called to hold three tenses of Christ’s coming in mind all the time. The testimony of the church for thousands of years has been, “Christ *has* come, Christ *is* come, Christ *will* come again.”

There are two Latin words for the future. *Futurus* is constructed of the past and present ... continuing forward. Futurologists analyze trends to extrapolate, postulate, and prognosticate. If you are powerful and wealthy, this is the kind of future you prefer, that is, more of the same. *Adventus* is the word for the arrival of something completely different, something completely new. To use Fred Craddock’s language, the message of Advent is “*it won’t always be this way*” ... which is good news for those longing for change ... and bad news for those who like things the way they are.

During Advent we listen again to the prophets ... not to match prediction to fulfillment in Jesus ... but to hear again their vision ... and to feel their longing ... for a world that God gives us the imagination to see ... but which only God can finally create. Today for instance, we read the words of Isaiah who writes to Jews who have returned to Jerusalem after the exile. It’s a poem. It’s a prayer, and he celebrates: “*From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him.*” But the waiting is hard. In the ruins of their homeland, they cry out to God, “*O that you tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence... to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!*”

In our comfortable lives, we speak of the quiet and gentle ways Christ comes to those who wait and keep watch ... and we think already of the manger that the *un*watchful world missed so long ago. In this busy season, we say, “stop and smell the roses.” We join it to Thanksgiving and make the message of Advent “Count your many blessings.” Pause now and then to see the signs

of God's hidden presence. But for much of the world ... and for the sensitive conscience ... the world is crying for relief right now ... for God's intervention in tender mercy and powerful justice.

Ask the people in West Africa or Syria or the West Bank or the gang-ravaged neighborhoods of Los Angeles and Chicago ... and feel the longing for the world as-it-is ... to become the world that God wants. We all know how the greed for power and wealth has led governments and businesses and cartels and militias to create the conditions that prolong human misery. God promises a better world than the one we have created ... and calls us to begin the changes that will prepare the way. But we've been waiting so long now ... and the world seems to be getting worse. We get weary with waiting ... and many give up hope and just try to carve out their own comfort.

Waiting is a universal human experience, of course. We spend a good portion of our lives waiting on one thing or another.

We wait in line to shop ... or eat ... or take our turn through the light. We wait at the doctor's office ... or the hair salon ... or the grocery store. We wait for the call ... or the grade ... or the offer ... or the proposal ... or the answer. We wait for the news ... or the treatment plan ... or the results.

We wait for birth.

And we wait for death.

Numerous studies in the physiology and psychology of waiting have shown the negative health results ... stress ... anxiety ... confusion ... uncertainty ... anger ... depression ... and all the accompanying symptoms. The old saying, "*It's the waiting that kills you*" is literally true.

All of these studies suggest that how we wait has everything to do with how the waiting will affect us ... as well as our eventual experience of what we are waiting for. Turns out, waiting is a spiritual exercise ... a discipline if you will. That's why the season of Advent has a value that surpasses simply getting ready for Christmas. During Advent we renew our expectation in the promises of God ... and we learn how to wait well for those promises to be fulfilled.

The first task of Christian waiting is to remember the content of our hope ... to repeat the promises of God. We expect a world where peace will abide ... where everyone will have enough ... where no one will be left out of the justice enjoyed by all. God has promised a time of righteousness and justice, universal wholeness, shalom. We hope for a world where the love of God reigns ... and every life can flourish.

Remembering our hope renews our trust in God, but also makes us restless for change ... impatient with injustice ... and unwilling to be co-opted by the numbing comfort that the Powers offer us to keep the world as it is. It makes us subversive to the chapter and verse of the sedated.

The second task of Christian waiting is to be busy with building God's dominion *now*. Christian waiting is not the passive paralysis of those who have no hope ... but the active waiting of those who are not satisfied with a world where hunger and disease and poverty and violence create such misery. We do not presume we can reach the goal without God's help ... or even that we will accomplish it in our lifetime ... but we do what we can ... with what we have ... as we pray "thy kingdom come ... thy will be done ... on earth ... as it is in heaven."

Prayer is the third task of Christian waiting. We pray for the victims of injustice. We pray for the people of West Africa and Syria and the West Bank and Los Angeles and Chicago. We pray ... and our prayers make a difference ... not least of all in keeping our conscience alive and leading us back to the actions that might lead to justice. Prayer is not about getting all our desires. It's about putting ourselves in God's presence ... waiting with God until we want what God wants.

Eugene Peterson reflects in his poem *Prayer Time*:

*I've never had an answered prayer
... Or unanswered.*

There's a clearing away

*... or a darkening over,
A quickened pulse ...
or Slowed step,*

*Not Getting ... but
Getting in on
God.*

Being there.

One other thing all these studies on waiting discovered: waiting is easier and healthier if we do not wait alone ... but wait with other people. And so, I invite you to wait with us ... to wait together during this season of Advent. Renew your hope ... take meaningful action ... pray with us ... not as a here and there ... now and then ... time out ... during a busy schedule of parties and travel and shopping ... but as your primary way of being. I know it's a broken world with too much misery for too many people right now. We are all waiting to feel at home. But remember beloved ... it won't always be this way. God calls us not to give up... but to remain on alert ... engines idling ... ready to meet the inbreaking presence of God. Do you know what God is getting ready to do? Wait for it, wait for it....

May we pray?

Eternal God, we wait on you. We long for your intervention. Risen Christ, we wait on you. We watch for the signs of your coming. Comforting Spirit, we wait on you. Be with us as we wait. Be with those whose pain is so deep, whose sorrow is so overwhelming. Let their anguish

not be so overwhelming as to eclipse their hope, but help us find ways to let them know that they do not suffer alone ... they do not wait alone. Be God with us ... and in us ... and among us ... now as we wait for the hope of your coming. Amen.