

# “Waiting”

**A sermon in the Advent/Christmas series  
“Christmas (Re)Actions—Responding to God’s Invitation”  
by the Rev. Jon M. Fancher  
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio  
November 28, 2021—First Sunday of Advent**

**Psalm 62:5-8 (NRSV)** <sup>5</sup>For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him.

<sup>6</sup>He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken.

<sup>7</sup>On God rests my deliverance and my honor; my mighty rock, my refuge is in God.

<sup>8</sup>Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us.

**Luke 2:22, 25-38 (NRSV)**

<sup>22</sup>When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord.... <sup>25</sup>Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. <sup>26</sup>It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. <sup>27</sup>Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, <sup>28</sup>Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

<sup>29</sup>“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word;

<sup>30</sup>for my eyes have seen your salvation, <sup>31</sup>which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

<sup>32</sup>a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”

<sup>33</sup>And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. <sup>34</sup>Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed <sup>35</sup>so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

<sup>36</sup>There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, <sup>37</sup>then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. <sup>38</sup>At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child<sup>[b]</sup> to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

In most churches around the world, this day is regarded as the beginning of a season, an observance, which the church calls Advent. Most of us say, “Sure, of course it’s Advent. We’re four Sundays before Christmas.” But it’s good for us to remember that there are always some for whom this is the first time they’ve ever experienced Advent. Maybe someone is new to the Christian faith and is just discovering some of our observances and celebrations like Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, Lent. Maybe someone was raised in a branch of Christianity that celebrated Christmas but not the season of spiritual preparation that precedes it. Maybe a child is just noticing that there’s something different about the four Sundays before Santa comes to their house.

We know that the “advent” of something means that something’s coming, something’s making an appearance for the first time. The church season of Advent is a way of remembering that our familiar and beloved celebration of Christmas celebrates that God appeared to humankind. In the Nativity of Jesus Christ God took on human

flesh and, as the Bible says, “dwelt among us” in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, born to Mary and Joseph while they were visiting Joseph’s hometown of Bethlehem.

The Christian church created the season of Advent; it’s not described in the Bible. Long ago church leaders decided to set aside Advent as a season of spiritual reflection leading up to Christmas. Advent begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas, so this is the First of Four Sundays of Advent. A common symbol of the season is an “Advent wreath.” It features a candle for each of the four Sundays, along with a central candle, a “Christ candle.” The first Sunday of Advent we light one candle, the second Sunday we light two, and so on. The Christ candle is lighted on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day.

In my experience, the wreath symbolizes one of the most difficult aspects of Advent, which is the waiting for Christmas. Many of us just want to “get to Christmas,” don’t we? But no, this week only one candle is lighted. Next week, we still are lighting only two of the candles... and subconsciously we ask ourselves, “*How long do we have to wait?!?*” The slow, methodical progress around the wreath symbolizes the waiting that is characteristic of Advent.

As we grow in our awareness of God, we grow in our appreciation of the value of waiting.

The Israelite prophets perceived a message from God – that at the “right time” God would send one who would save the people from the consequence of their misdeeds, their omissions, their sins. When would that “right time” be? Only God knew. So they waited. They waited in expectant hope. And in the meantime, while they waited for God’s Messiah, God’s savior, they tried as best they could to shape up their lives, to prepare the way for God’s chosen one.

You see, waiting doesn’t mean “doing nothing.” We can grow, learn, develop as time passes.

Picture this: when a child shows up for her first day of kindergarten, there’s a reason they don’t hand her a high school diploma, pat her on the head, wish her good luck and send her on her way. Yes, eventually she’ll learn that a diploma is the goal she’ll be working toward. But that little girl doesn’t simply bide her time until then.

Through the years her mind is developed. She’s guided in developing the ability to reason, to wonder, to hypothesize, to investigate, to discover, to reason, to draw conclusions, to determine appropriate next steps. She’s shaped by her family, her school, her church, her community.

And not just her mind. Her heart is developed through her school years. Her capacity for empathy. Her ability to display compassion for others. Her respect for her own self.

And not just her heart. Her spirit is developed through those years as well. Her recognition that there is a power greater than her parents, a power wiser than her

teachers, a power more powerful than a snowplow blasting through snowdrifts on the street in front of her house, a power even more ubiquitous than pharmacies and coffee shops and fast-food joints in her hometown.

For that little girl, the passage of time is not a time of idleness; it's fruitful.

The waiting of Advent reminds us of the waiting by generations and generations for God to send the Savior. Waiting invites trust. Waiting provides a foundation for hope. That's a message we can take from the stories of two biblical figures we heard from the Gospel of Luke on this first Sunday of Advent.

The stories of Simeon and Anna are very much a part of the "nativity narrative," the story of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. But to be honest, these two parts of the story tend to get overlooked. They don't seem to contain much "action" related to remarkable aspects of Jesus' birth:

- the angelic announcement of an unparalleled pregnancy;
- the third-trimester trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem;
- birth in the most rustic of delivery rooms;
- angels prompting shepherds to pay a visit themselves;
- and eventually the unexpected visit by aristocratic foreign visitors.

The stories of Simeon and the brief mention of Anna didn't really have anything to do with those aspects of the advent of Jesus.

So what was distinctive about Simeon and Anna?

They waited. They waited patiently. They waited expectantly.

Apparently Simeon waited a long time. We don't know the details, but God's Holy Spirit had assured Simeon that he wouldn't die before he had beheld God's promised Messiah. Imagine that promise: "*Sometime in your lifetime, Simeon.*" We presume that he had waited a long time.

And Anna? We know that Anna waited decades. Rough calculations would suggest that she had lived as a widow for maybe sixty years. And all that time she waited. Waited to witness the Messiah, the promised savior. She waited faithfully, with hope, with trust.

Anna and Simeon waited, but they weren't idle, twiddling their thumbs. Their waiting was a time of thoughtful action, of faithful engagement, of hopeful trust in God. We know that beloved song of the season that urges, "Let every heart prepare him room." They used the time of waiting – the days and months and years of waiting – they used that time to prepare room in their hearts to welcome and follow God's promised savior.

When your timeframe is uncertain, it can be especially hard to wait patiently, expectantly. As writer Ann Weems expressed in the closing lines of her poem "The Coming of God,"

When God is ready  
 God will come  
 even to a godforsaken place  
 like a stable in Bethlehem.

Watch...  
 for you do not know when  
 God comes.

Watch, that you might be found  
 whenever,  
 wherever  
 God comes.<sup>1</sup>

Advent is a time of waiting: hopeful, expectant, active waiting, not idle waiting while doing nothing. Of course, we'll have chores and tasks that we tackle to prepare for celebrating Christmas with loved ones and friends. But we can welcome this time of waiting as a time of blessing for our minds, our hearts, our actions, for blessing what we think, how we choose to feel, what we opt to do. How can waiting bless us?

I imagine that each of us has experienced having to wait longer for a salesperson in a busy store or a server in a short-handed restaurant. The next time that happens to you, you can use that moment of waiting to give thanks for those whose work serves us in various ways in our daily lives.

When some delay causes you to have some unexpected waiting time on your hands, instead of checking your phone for messages or playing a game, you could use that moment of waiting to reflect on how your display of patience can be a blessing to others.

When you face the unsettling reality of having to wait for a medical procedure to get scheduled or waiting to learn the results of tests, the anxiety, the impatience, the discomfort you experience can serve as a signal, a reminder to show understanding and empathy and kindness to others who are stressed by whatever difficulty they're going through in their life.

Times of waiting do not have to be excuses for us to vent frustration at being personally inconvenienced. In a culture awash in expectations of instant gratification, a season of waiting can be a blessing to our spirits, and in turn, we can be a blessing to others. That is one of the gifts of the season of Advent. As we await the slow, steady approach of Christmas, we can learn from the examples of Simeon and Anna how to wait... how to live with patience and with hope.

[sermons; se20211128; © 2021 JMF]

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<sup>1</sup> "The Coming of God," by Ann Weems, [Kneeling in Bethlehem](#). Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987