
Waiting

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
The Second Sunday of Advent
Isaiah 40.1-11
Mark 1.1-8

"While you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace."
2 Peter 3.14

Waiting.

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It's the hardest thing we do in life. We wait for the end of classes. We wait to see if we have got the job, or got the raise, or got the recognition.

We wait for the operation to be over. We wait for the doctor's report.

We wait for the one we love to say, "Yes." We wait for the baby to be born, nine long months of imagination. Will the baby be right, or will something go wrong? Our imaginations take over. We dream of the worst; we dream of the best. Which dream will it be tonight?

We wait for Christmas to come. We wait for our birthdays to come. We wait for the end of the war.

We wait.

Someone once said that 98 percent of our life is spent waiting. At check-out counters, at airports, waiting for someone to arrive - and then waiting for the same person to leave!

What is there to say while we wait?

We rarely have a truly full moment in our days, a moment when we are not thinking of something else, a moment when we can say, "I'd rather be right here, right now, than anywhere else." "There's no place else I'd rather be."

Our telephones now have "call waiting." We eagerly think that our next call will be more thrilling than our present one!

We are told that we are on the waiting list. For dinner reservations. For admission to our favorite school. In all those occasions, the waiting indicates that we should really be somewhere else, or talking to someone else.

Waiting has a bad image, doesn't it! As if it is something we should never do. But I believe it is really the *impatience* of waiting that creates its negative image.

Impatient waiting lies to us, claiming that there is something more important than where we are now. That kind of waiting creates despair.

And it is the despair of waiting that creates such despondent plays as *Waiting for Godot*, (Don't get me wrong; this is a great play! And don't forget its modern day parody: *Waiting for Guffman!*) It is the despair and impatience for something else that robs our present moment of its value.

Like any priest, I spend a lot of time with people who are waiting. I have been with folks, for instance, in the somber waiting rooms of hospitals. But I have discovered that waiting rooms in hospitals and magnificent studies of spirituality. I believe it was Simone Weil who said: "Waiting patiently in expectation is the foundation of the spiritual life."

In fact, hospital waiting rooms can be great laboratories of spirituality. Some folks experience those waiting rooms as boring, the most boring places in the world. We are waiting for the birth. Waiting for operation to be over. Waiting for death itself.

I have discovered that what people do in waiting rooms is actually very close to the way they actually spend every other part of their lives!

Some of us take that waiting occasion to be bored. Some of us use that time to be impatient and angry Why doesn't this happen? Why doesn't so and so get out of our way! Some choose despondency and despair. Some of us give up there and just remain silent.

But, you know, others of us find something quite helpful to say in waiting rooms. Some of the folks in the waiting room can pass the time enormously fruitfully. They are speaking wise words. They are asking non-anxious questions.

And some of them are not asking questions at all. They are simply speaking, and not asking anything of those around them at all. Have you ever noticed how much energy questions demand of those around you? Sometimes, simple statements are the most comfortable words for those around you in anxiety.

Believe it or not, some of the most joyful times I have ever experienced have also been in waiting rooms, in recovery rooms, even in rooms where people are dying. It is the authenticity of human reality and divine grace that make them joyful.

Some people choose to be real and open in waiting rooms. And you know what? That authenticity and openness cancel out waiting for anything else.

So, it is not waiting that is boring or hopeless. It is forgetting the power of the present that makes us bored and hopeless!

The word "wait" can actually be an active word. To wait comes from the word "to watch." Waiting, then, is not meant to be a passive affair. It is meant to be alert and watchful.

The writer Henri Nouwen noticed that "Words like [waiting] seem to push us into passivity,. But there is none of that passivity in scripture,.Those who are waiting are waiting very actively...Active waiting means to be present fully to the moment in the conviction that something is happening where you are and that you want to be present to it. A waiting person is someone who is present to the moment, who believes that this moment is the moment." (*Watch for the Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas*, page 31)

This season, this Advent, is said to be a season of waiting. But it can also be a painful and anxious season for those who think that the next best thing is just around the corner. It can be lonely, indeed, for those who think that only the future holds satisfaction, a future that usually never comes.

The best way to wait, is to act like the future is already here!

Last night, I glanced at a few minutes of the movie, "Bruce Almighty." I have never seen the entire movie, and I have heard

it makes some excellent theological points. One line of the movie remains with me: "If you want a miracle in your life, be a miracle."

If you want a miracle, be a miracle.

That principle applies to this anxious season of Advent. If you are waiting for a miracle in your life, be a miracle. If you are waiting for love in your life, be love. If you are waiting for joy, be joyful!

The way people wait in waiting rooms is very much the way they live every other day of their lives. The way we wait in check-out lines, in Atlanta traffic, for dinner reservations, is indicative of the spiritual life of our souls. "Waiting patiently in expectation is the foundation of the spiritual life." (Simone Weil again).

We have always heard that the word "Advent" means coming. But that definition can defeat the purpose of Advent. The purpose of Advent is to notice all the ways that God is actually here, with us, now! I say it is time to re-define the word "Advent." Why not turn Advent into "Adventure?"

Why not turn the season of Advent into the season of Adventure?

"Comfort, comfort ye my people" said the prophet, Isaiah, years ago, when his people were in exile, when they were suffering, when they were waiting for their return to a homeland. Isaiah spoke words of comfort during that waiting, he spoke words of comfort - and then that comfort became a reality!

"Prepare the way of the Lord," sang our John the Baptist years later. Repent and be baptized. Then, as John was the preparing the way, the way came. We might say that because John was preparing the way, the Word came and dwelt among us.

The way we prepare for life, is the way we will experience life.

The way we wait is actually the way we live every day.

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

(Here is an additional treat, for those reading this sermon on paper or online!)

On His Blindness

WHEN I consider how my light is spent
E're half my days, in this dark world and wide,
And that one Talent which is death to hide,
Lodg'd with me useless, though my Soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, least he returning chide,
Doth God exact day-labour, light deny'd,
I fondly ask; But patience to prevent
That murmur, soon replies, God doth not need
Either man's work or his own gifts, who best
Bear his milde yoaik, they serve him best, his State
Is Kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed

And post o're Land and Ocean without rest:
They also serve who only stand and waite.

---John Milton (1608-1674)

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