

Learning to Wait

First Sunday of Advent, Year A December 2, 2007

Lectionary Texts:

Isaiah 2:1-5

Psalm 122

Romans 13:11-14

Matthew 24:36-44

Today is the start of the Advent season, a season set aside especially to prepare for Christ's coming. We are waiting for Christ to come as baby Jesus, to come again as the Son of Man at the end of days, and to come daily into our lives through the Holy Spirit. Christian Hope is a continual looking forward to the eternal world. Our Faith is that, in the Kingdom, we will see Christ face to face. Today we live in time, but we look forward to Eternity. We have Faith that through the grace of our Lord Jesus, freely given by God to us as an unmerited gift, we will be forgiven and redeemed. Because it is God's gift to us, we have no control over how, or when, or where this gift of salvation will be received. It is entirely up to God. So we must wait. How we wait is up to us.

I have never been good at waiting. Instead, I am good at keeping busy. From an early age, I have kept a book, correct that, several books with me at all times. If I ever have to wait, out comes a book. Reading is a great distraction from the unpleasant experience of waiting, it makes the time go by quickly, and it gives the satisfaction of being educated and entertained. If the book is a Bible, so much the better! I am not alone in this habit. Besides reading, there is needlepoint, knitting, and all the other easily portable and compact crafts. The younger generation has its own tools for waiting—cell phones, portable music players, DVD players, and video games.

This approach may be fine for ordinary waiting in lines, in waiting rooms, and—when it is safe—when stuck in traffic. However, even for worldly waiting, this distraction approach has a major problem. It takes our awareness away from the reality of the present situation. This can sometimes be dangerous. When I lived in the neighborhood around the University of Chicago, I used to get a charge at seeing all the students who kept their noses in a book even while walking down the street. They were upholding the reputation of their very scholarly institution. However, they were also putting themselves in danger of falling down a manhole or being mugged—this was a high crime neighborhood.

The distraction approach just does not work when it come to waiting for Jesus! Remember today's Gospel, "For the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour." If I have my nose buried in a book, I just might miss his coming. Christian waiting is watchful. It is using all the senses and the heart to catch those subtle signs that Eternity is breaking into our lives. It is a well-know paradox that the one way we can experience Eternity is by being very present in the here-and-now. Eternity is not the same as the future. As Jesus said, "Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself." To experience the Holy Spirit we need to be as mindful and present as we can be. That means being willing to put aside the distractions—the books, the cell phone, the i-pod, even the Bible—and wait quietly for God to make his presence known in your life.

This Advent season is a good time to practice Christian waiting. I remember that at a certain age there was nothing I wanted more than to get an electric train set for Christmas. I must have seen a picture of a train set in the Sears Catalog. I am sure that I put that train set at the top of my Christmas list. I may have even asked the department

store Santa for it. I may have even promised Santa, or my parents, or Jesus that I would be a very good boy, if only I got that train set. The train set gradually took over my Christmas. I began to be obsessed with doubts. I didn't always get exactly what was on my Christmas list—what if the train set did not come, or if it was the wrong train set? This waiting was really getting on my nerves. Why couldn't I just have the train set right now!

There were many Christmases where my desire for a special toy threatened to take over the Advent season and turn it into a painful time of waiting. Fortunately, I was blessed with a family with many Christmas traditions, which helped to remind me that there was more to Advent than nervously waiting for that special toy. There was picking a Christmas tree and putting it up in the living room. There was the excitement of bringing down all the boxes of Christmas decorations from the attic and putting them on the tree and around the house. Putting out what we called the “manger set” was always my favorite. There were Christmas craft projects, special services and Sunday school classes at church, and exciting plans to visit relatives.

And, most of all, there was the Advent calendar. My sister and I each got wonderful Advent calendars. The best Advent calendars had a picture of the stable, and behind each door was another element of the Christmas scene—a shepherd, a cow, a donkey, leading up to the three kings, Joseph, Mary, and finally on the last day, baby Jesus in the manger. This was much more than a “Christmas countdown.” It was a way of reminding me that every Advent day was important in its own way; with its own mystery and its own gift behind the door. This Advent, use every day as an opportunity to prayerfully reflect on how Christ is coming into your life in the here-and-now, through

your traditions, through your family, and through the presence of the Holy Spirit. Be watchful and mindful of all the signs of the Kingdom that you are blessed with each day. Wake up! Christ is coming! “Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.” For all we know, the hour is “now” and “today” is the day. Amen.

*Bible quotations are from Today's New International Version (TNIV)
© Copyright 2001, 2005 by International Bible Society, accessed via
www.biblegateway.com*