

Wake Up and Wait

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Romans 13:11-12 — You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.

A few weeks ago, I saw a sign on the New York City subway that caught my attention. It was an advertisement for a restaurant reservation app, for smart phones, and it said, “Wait for a table? You won’t even wait for a walk sign.” The ad was based on our general dislike of waiting — you know, most of us get annoyed or a little frustrated when we have to wait for something. But what caught my attention about this ad was that it expressed more than just annoyance; there seemed to be something like scornful condescension in it as well. The ad speaks to us as if we are not merely bothered by waiting, but as if we have come to think that waiting is beneath us. “Wait for a table? *Me?*” We have moved beyond simply rolling our eyes in a line, and we have become increasingly indignant when we are asked or forced to wait. In today’s world, it seems that our disdain for waiting is stronger than ever.

Now, this isn’t the main point of my sermon this morning, but I think it’s worth mentioning a few of the factors that fuel this disdain. First, I think that it has something to do with our reliance on modern technologies. More and more of us are used to having the world at our fingertips, literally, and when a sliver of the world is beyond our instantaneous reach, we get upset. And before older generations get too haughty in their thoughts towards the young’uns and their iPhones, remember that technology was fueling our disdain for waiting long ago — inventions like the microwave and the television nurtured it and propelled it forward. Every generation alive has played its part.

Another factor in this disdain, I think, is what one of my mentors calls “the time famine” — this feeling, which more and more people have nowadays, that there just isn’t enough time for whatever it is that we’re after. Waiting, by its very nature, takes time, and time is the very last thing that we want taken from us. So, we hold onto it with tightly-clenched fists, fighting to be in control of every hour, minute, and second. Waiting seems to threaten and loosen our grip, and it scares us.

One last factor I’ll mention in our culture’s disdain for waiting is our ever-increasing mobility. More than ever before, we are people on the move — new jobs, new houses, new goals, new challenges, new projects, new paths, on which we charge ahead. Nobody likes to be told to sit still, especially when there are so many places to get to. Just as waiting takes our time, then, it also takes our motion — it stops us. In a world that is constantly screaming “Go go go!” and “Not enough time!”, it’s no wonder that waiting is so widely despised.

And yet, we Christians have a whole season of the liturgical year dedicated to it. Strange as it is, we are a people who wait — or at least we try to, once a year, in the month leading up to Christmas. In fact, this season of Advent begins the church's annual calendar. As of today, it's a new year for us. Every year, then, the very first thing we as Christians do is wait. Why is that? What's all the fuss about waiting? And what exactly are we waiting for?

Whenever we are forced to wait (say, in a long line), it means that we are not in charge. We don't have the power to make things happen whenever we want them to happen, and our waiting testifies to the limitations on our power. What does it mean, then, when we *choose* to wait, rather than being forced to? When we choose to wait, to adopt an inner posture of waiting, we are recognizing and accepting our lack of control. When we choose to wait, we are waiting *on* someone, waiting *for* something, outside of ourselves, and an inner posture of waiting leads us to say, "That's okay. I accept that someone else is in charge here. I accept that someone else is in control." When we choose to wait *on God*, then, we are acknowledging and embracing the reality that God, and not us, is in control here, including in control of our precious time.

And what are we waiting on God to *do*? Well, in short, to show up. Because, whether 2,000 years ago in Bethlehem or here in our own lives today, God always shows up first. We didn't make a way to God; God made a way to us. Before we ever came to God, God came to us.

The standard theological term for this is incarnation: God, who is not a physical being, enters into our physical world; God, who is eternal, steps into space and time; God, who is Spirit, takes on flesh. For me, it's the most bizarre, the most outrageous, and the most beautiful thing about our faith. Now, usually, when Christians use the word "incarnation," they are referring specifically to one person: Jesus of Nazareth, a Palestinian Jewish man, whose flesh God took on 2,000 years ago. In the historical event of Jesus' birth, God became uniquely incarnate, and on Christmas Day, we celebrate this incarnation. In the lead-up to that celebration, during this season of Advent, we remember that God's people were waiting for, well, thousands of years before us, waiting for God to show up in a unique and uniquely powerful way. So, today, and during this season, we practice waiting ourselves — looking forward, but also looking back, at when God showed up like never before, in Jesus Christ.

But of course, God comes to us in powerful ways still. God did not come to us in Jesus of Nazareth and then stop coming to us afterwards. Although our tradition does not teach that God took on human flesh more than once, we can teach that incarnation is an ongoing phenomenon: an ancient *as well as* a current grace. For example, Jesus says that whatever we do for the least of these, we do for him. In today's poor and marginalized communities, then, Jesus is distinctly present, and we encounter a distinct kind of incarnation whenever we practice loving the poor and the marginalized as God has loved us. And beyond that, I honestly believe that God is showing up in our midst every day, in ever-new, ever-surprising ways. One of my favorite quotes about the spiritual life comes from poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who wrote, "Earth is crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God, but only those who see it take off

their shoes.” Who knows what form, what flesh, our God will take on next? Who knows how God will come to us today?

These questions take me back to this morning’s passage from Romans 13: “It is now the moment for you to wake from sleep.” The theme of waiting is at the heart of Advent, but so is this theme of waking up. It might seem a little strange to put these two themes side-by-side. We often think of waking up to go and *do* something. Why would it be so important to wake up if we’re just waking up to wait? Well, it seems to me that waiting *well* requires quite a lot of energy from us. It is not easy to let go of our desire for control. It is not easy to maintain a posture of attentiveness towards the Divine. Waiting well is not for the weary.

Our task, friends, during this season of Advent, is not simply to twiddle our thumbs as we passively, absent-mindedly wait for a holiday; rather, our task is to be on the look-out; to keep our eyes and ears and hearts open for God’s movement in our midst; to create space in our hearts, in our relationships, and in our communities in which God can become incarnate once more. It’s up to us to discover ways to wake up and wait. Who knows where and when God will show up next? Amen.