

Date: December 12, 2004

SUNDAY: Advent 3

SERMON: Hurry Up and Wait!

Text(s): James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:1-10

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Most Americans are not particularly good at waiting. Very little in our culture prepares us for it. We like our gratification to be instantaneous. When we want something, we want it yesterday. Our dangerous mountain of credit card debt testifies to our unwillingness to delay our gratification until we can afford something. In our image-driven society, a picture is not only worth a thousand words; it's worth a thousand minutes of the time it would take us to study or analyze. "Sound-bites" become substitutes for critical thought. I read an article about the decrease in the number of people who are learning to play musical instruments. It takes too long to learn. Who wants to spend the years of practice necessary to make a violin produce a sound of heavenly sweetness rather than the hellish squawks it produces in the hands of a beginner?

I learned the art of patient waiting from some good teachers, particularly the head clerk at the Parcel Office in Kuching, the city where we lived in Malaysia. In that particular school of experience, I learned that the simple act of collecting a package at the Parcel Office, particularly a package coming from outside the country, was the work of almost an entire afternoon. I also learned that if I showed the slightest sign of impatience, I could count on the process taking twice as long as usual. So I learned patience. I learned to take a book along when I had a parcel to pick up at the parcel office, and, after presenting the notification slip to the officer in charge, I'd find a seat in the corner somewhere and get some reading done while I waited for my parcel slip to make the rounds of many civil servants' desks, getting the proper measure of serious contemplation and stamp of approval from each one.

Given our impatience with waiting, we

can probably empathize with John the Baptist in our gospel lesson this morning, for we find John in a situation we all dislike— he's waiting; he's on hold. John was a prophet who came out of the desert and proclaimed to the people of Judea, "Repent, for the Kingdom of God has come near." He called people to pay attention to the moment in which they were living and to get ready for the One God would send to baptize them in the fire of the Holy Spirit. But all that happened was that John was arrested for telling King Herod some unpleasant truths about himself, and the sun rose and set as always, day after day, while he languished in Herod's dungeon.

Oh, to be sure, snippets of news reached him, as people visited him and passed on what was going on in the world outside his cell. He heard the news that his distant cousin Jesus of Nazareth, whom he had baptized, had taken up where he had left off in some respects. He too was traveling about, preaching and teaching about the Kingdom of God. John might even have been convinced that Jesus was the Messiah whose coming he had proclaimed. At least his question implies as much, "*Are you the one we expected to come, or should we look for someone else?*"

It's a fair and natural question. John's life has been put on hold, with no end in sight. He's cooling his heels in a dark cell and eating food that's probably not fit for pigs. If the Kingdom is really coming, if Jesus is really the one through whom God will establish his sovereign rule over his people, then why isn't it happening? Why such a promising beginning, and then . . . nothing?

What do we hear in John's question? Confusion? Probably. Frustration? Very likely. Fear? Almost certainly. All the emotions that we experience when our own lives are put on hold and we find ourselves in some interminable waiting game. If we only knew what was coming, we could deal more rationally and creatively with it. But to be on hold, not knowing what's ahead, not getting any clear messages

about the meaning of what we're going through. That's tough. That's frustrating and confusing and fearful. And patience wears very thin in those situations, doesn't it?

Why? Why do we become impatient when we have to wait? Why did John become impatient there in his prison cell? It's really very simple— when we're waiting, we don't feel in control, and that's what's so scary and so frustrating about it. We want to be in control. We want to be in charge of our own lives. We want to be able to face life and make it bend to our will. When we're "on hold" we're under the control of someone else's will, or under the control of circumstances which we are powerless to change. And what is the desire for control if not a desire to be our own god? Isn't that desire the primal human sin, "original sin" if we can put it in traditional theological language? Isn't that what the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden is all about? We want to be in control.

And yet, if we stop to really think about it, we would realize that we are hardly ever in control. Most of our lives are spent waiting, in fact. We wait nine months for our children to be born, and then we wait for the next 18-25 years for them to leave home and start their own lives. (Remember the punchline of the old joke about when life begins? Life begins when the kids leave home and the dog dies.) We wait for the right person to fall in love with; we wait for the right job to come along; we wait for a promotion at work; we wait in lines to mail our packages at the post office; we wait for approval of our mortgages; we wait for problems in our marriages to work out; we wait for the chance to retire and enjoy ourselves; we wait for healing and recovery from illness; we wait, usually impatiently for our aging bodies to function, hindered as we are by our infirmities; we wait, ultimately, for death. And in almost none of these situations do we have anywhere near the control we desire to have, or think we have. Always, what happens to us, to a lesser or greater

extent, happens as the result of decisions and actions of other people or of causes outside our control. Any illusions that we are in control are just that—illusions. Part of the very mystery of human life is that we are shaped and molded by so many things and people beyond our control. Our life is a passion play. As Henri Nouwen, one of the great spiritual guides of our time, reminds us, the meaning of passion, is that we are the recipients of other people's initiatives.

Advent is the season that speaks to this fundamental human experience of waiting. Just as Mary and Joseph waited for the birth of their baby, so we wait for the new advent of Christ. Our celebration of Christmas, the first advent, is meaningful because we are waiting the for second. It is what we anticipate in the future that makes the celebration of the past full of promise and hope. So the question is not how can we avoid waiting, but how can we wait so that the waiting itself is meaningful.

Henri Nouwen suggests that a biblical or Christian understanding of waiting has three aspects to it.¹ First, it is waiting with a sense of promise. It is never a movement from nothing to something, but from something to something more. Wherever we find ourselves when life suddenly puts us on hold, that is where we must look to find the seeds which hold the promise of flowering into something. What we are, what we are doing, here and now, holds the promise of what is to come. But we have to recognize that fact before that promise is revealed to us.

Secondly, he says, waiting is active rather than passive. Active waiting means being fully present to the moment, in the faith that something real and important is happening in the waiting itself. "A waiting person," says Nouwen, "is someone who is present to the moment, who believes that this moment is *the* moment." That's the sort of waiting, St. James has in mind, when he says in today's lesson, "*Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the*

earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient." The farmer knows that while to all outward appearances, the seed which has been planted in the ground is just lying there, in reality, all sorts of things are happening. The hard outer covering of the seed is softening under the influence of sun and rain and soil. The embryonic plant at its center is beginning to expand and germinate. Even before anything appears to the eye, roots are pushing out of the seed down into the soil, and shoots are pushing up toward the sunlight. The farmer waits patiently, not because nothing is happening, but precisely because something really important is happening, even though it is invisible at the moment. Active waiting is this attentiveness to the invisible. Active waiting is waiting that pays attention, is fully present to what is really going on, even when to all outward appearances, nothing is going on.

Finally, Nouwen says, Advent waiting is open-ended. It is not merely waiting for the fulfillment of our wishes. Wishes are often expressions of our desire to control the future. Disappointed wishes often lead us to frustration or despair. But Advent waiting is full of hope, and hope is open-ended. Waiting that is open-ended, waiting that is full of hope, is a radical approach to life. Giving up control over our own future, surrendering that primal human drive to be God, that's radical; that goes against the grain; that's the beginning point of real spiritual development and growth.

We see all three of these aspects of waiting, grounded in promise, actively present to the moment as *the moment*, and full of the open-ended trust called hope in Jesus' reply to John the Baptist's impatient question. *"Go and tell John what you see and hear,"* he tells the messengers, *"the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news brought to them."* And all of this while John himself is

on hold, in a prison cell. All of this Kingdom of God stuff is happening, and it is happening while John is waiting.

It's happening while we're waiting too, if we have the eyes of faith to see it. Right in the middle of our bored or frustrating or painful life-on-hold something is happening, something is germinating, something is coming to birth. To have faith, genuine faith, is to look deeply into the very fabric of our frustrations and fears and discover the hidden presence and work of God. The kingdom begins to come for us, when we look for its signs in the ordinary stuff of our lives.

Wendy Wright, a mother of three children who is on the theology faculty at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska, sees a parallel between this kind of Advent waiting and the experience of a pregnant woman as she awaits the birth of her child. Her insight perfectly captures the posture that all of us need to adopt if our experiences of being on hold are to become meaningful and spiritually enriching rather than merely frustrating. Pregnancy, she says, is *"a waiting that is also a 'listening,' a leaning inward toward the new life that is budding in the darkest center of one's being. . . We do not simply assent to God's presence, we incarnate it. It comes through the longing of our hearts and the labors of our bodies. . . The waiting can be hard. We can be spent in the process. It may feel as though the marrow of our bones is being sucked out, that we must die before God can be born through us. But the mystery we live is that our suffering is also a new birth. . . Pregnancy is at the core of the Christian message. We are pregnant. We are the place of waiting, the place of the question of the advent. We are the womb through whose pulsing life, God is born."*²

1. Nouwen, Henri, "A Spirituality of Waiting," *Weavings*, 1:3 (January 1987), 9-12.

2. Wright, Wendy, "Wreathed in Flesh and Warm," *Weavings*, 1:3 (January 1987), 18-27.

