

Advent, a season of active waiting

Isaiah 9:6-7

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“According to a new survey, all of the luxuries of modern life have made most people incredibly impatient. Respondents reported becoming frustrated after just 16 seconds of waiting for a web page to load, and after 25 seconds of waiting for a traffic light to change. It only takes 22 seconds for people to start cursing their computers or TVs if a show or movie doesn’t immediately start streaming correctly. Those surveyed also reported losing their cool after just 18 seconds of searching for a pen. Even a cup of tea incited anger among respondents if the kettle took more than 28 seconds to boil.

Waiting in line seemed to especially annoy respondents, with 45% admitting they had lost their temper after waiting an “excessive” amount of time. But, what exactly is excessive? Respondents said just 30 seconds of waiting in a line would be enough to try their patience, and half said they are likely to switch to a different line if the one they are in isn’t moving fast enough. Surprisingly, 95% of respondents still admitted that they believe patience is a virtue.”¹

Some are better at waiting than others. In the life of a Christian, what are the benefits of waiting? It depends on the situation. At times waiting calls us to patience and contentment. At other times waiting moves us towards trust and surrender, reminding us that we are not ultimately in control. At times waiting grants us time to prepare for what is to come as we wait on the Lord. Even when we are waiting for answered prayers, provision, healing or direction, we must remember that God’s timing is perfect, orderly and wise.

When we talk of time we think of minutes, hours, days and years. Scripture talks of time differently. Time is expressed in relation to God’s purposes in our lives and in the world. **“In the fullness of time”** God sent His son. When the time was right, God came to Moses to deliver His people from slavery in Egypt. At the appointed time, God sent the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

As we read in Ecclesiastes 3, **“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to break down, and a time to build up . . . a time to weep, and a time to laugh . . . a time to mourn, and a time to dance . . . a time to keep, and a time to cast away . . . a time to keep silence, and a time to speak . . . a time to be born, and a time to die.”**

¹ <https://www.studyfinds.org/hurry-up-modern-patience-thresholds-lower-than-ever-before-survey-finds/>,

As the Psalmist wrote in Psalm 31:5, ***“My times are in your hand.”*** As we wait on the Lord, He alone is our confidence. He alone will accomplish all that He wills on our behalf. Nothing can hinder or stop His purposes, but we must wait on Him. As we read in Isaiah 46:9-11:

“I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me,¹⁰ declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose’ . . . I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and I will do it.”

The Christmas Advent season is about waiting. It is the four weeks before Christmas. The origin of Advent is not in the Bible, but comes from church history, as early as the fourth century. It is a time of preparing our hearts for the celebration of Jesus’ coming at Christmas. That is where the word Advent came from. In Latin it means “coming or arrival”. Advent is not just a time of waiting, it would be best described as a time of “active waiting”.

It is a time to intentionally draw back from the rush, the noise, the stress of our lives and wait . . . once again allowing God the time and the space to turn our hearts back towards Himself. A time to refocus our lives on the Christ child in the manger. A time to evaluate our priorities and the direction of our lives and make the needed changes, so that we can once again draw near to God.

The Jews were very familiar with this idea of preparing for the Messiah’s coming. We read in the Old Testament, in Isaiah 9:6-7, almost 800 years before Christ was born, that God had spoken through the prophets promising a day when a Messiah, a Savior would come to deliver His people.

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore.

So, the Jews took these words and they waited. Century after century, generation after generation, but yet there was no sign of their Messiah. The Jews responded to this delayed coming of the Messiah in different ways. Some quit waiting and began to live for the world, putting away all hope that the Messiah would ever come. Others took it into their own hands, as we see in scripture, claiming to be the Savior themselves (Acts 5:36-37). Others, by faith, continued to wait on the Lord, living in a way that testified to their belief that the promised Messiah was coming.

In the church, do we not do the same? Some claim Christ with their mouths, but practically speaking live for the things of this present world. Others are tired of waiting on the Lord and take their situations into their own hands, seeking to be the savior of their own lives. A third group lives faithfully, waiting for Christ’s return, and living with their eyes fixed on eternity.

Have you ever been in a situation where you have been forced to trust and wait on God’s timing? It is a difficult process of trust, patience and obedience. The Israelites’ continued to wait for 400 years, between the Old Testament and the New Testament. They heard nothing from God, until finally, the silence was broken.

In Mark 1, a man named John, the son of Zachariah, is spoken of. *"I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way, a voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"*

This "John" would come to be known as John the Baptist, and he was to prepare the way for Jesus' coming.

John had been prophesized about centuries earlier in Isaiah 40:3-5. *"A voice of one calling: 'In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.'"*

In Isaiah's time in history the roads were much worse than they are today. When a king wanted to travel from one city to another, he would send out hundreds or even thousands of workers. They would clear the road of stones and fallen trees. They would level out the tough terrain. They would do whatever was necessary to "prepare the way for their king".

Spiritually speaking, John played a similar role in preparing the hearts of the people for the coming of Jesus Christ, the King of kings. John was the forerunner, the herald of Jesus Christ. He came and called people to repentance. He called people away from empty religious rituals and back to an intimate relationship with God. He prepared the way for Christ's coming. We, also, are to prepare our hearts for the coming of the King during this season of Advent.

Advent looks forward to the coming of Christ. This is a coming that manifests itself in 3 ways: The coming of the Christ child, the coming of Christ into our lives at conversion, and the coming of Christ at the end of the age. The first, we look back to celebrate at Christmas. The second, we experience in the present on an ongoing basis. The third is still in the future as we await His return.

All 3 call for preparation. The birth was preceded by the prophecies and their fulfillment in God's bringing together everything in the fullness of time. It was also preceded by John the Baptist, who prepared the way of the Lord. Our conversion was prepared for by God himself as He drew us to himself, gifted us with faith, and granted us the revelation of who Christ was and is. The third is being prepared for as the church is made holy, as the nations hear the gospel, and as scripture's "second coming" prophecies are fulfilled. It is as we live faithfully in the present that we prepare for his final coming.

Like Joseph in the book of Genesis, even after he had been sold into slavery by his brothers and later was falsely accused and thrown into prison, as he lived faithfully in the present, one day at a time, God prepared him for the future and the mighty ways that God would eventually use in Joseph's life.

We see the people of Israel doing the same during their time of traveling through the wilderness. God led them by a pillar of clouds by day and a pillar of fire by night. They did not know the way or the time to arrive in the promised land. Their only responsibility was to wait on the Lord. As long as the pillar of cloud and pillar of fire remained unmoved, above the tabernacle, they were to stay in place. Maybe for weeks, months or even years at a time. But once the pillars began to move, they all packed up their tents and belongings and followed God. As they were obedient in the present day, they could be confident that God would lead them into the future that He had planned for them.

This too should be our method of preparing for the future. Recent years have reminded us that the future is so unknown, so unpredictable. Preparation for the future, especially for Christ's second coming is done through honoring God one day at a time. As we obey God in the present, God will make sure that we are prepared for the future that awaits us.

So the question is, "in the midst of our busy and cluttered lives, how do we prepare our hearts for the coming of the Lord?" Our goal is to be sensitive to the Spirit every moment of every day. We see, in Galatians 5, we are to walk in the Spirit, be led by the Spirit, bear fruit of the Spirit, and live in the Spirit. This is to be the norm, but many times being sensitive to God seems to be the exception.

How do we live a **God-sensitive life** as we wait on the Lord? It must be intentional, that is why it is called **Active Waiting**. In the midst of our busy schedules and godless world, how do we live so that we can still be sensitive to what God is doing in and around us?

Followers of Christ from the early church until today have sought to follow the teachings of scripture and live a life that is sensitive to God.

You see it in Jesus' life. There were various spiritual disciplines that he practiced regularly. It was His custom to be in the synagogue on the Sabbath (Luke 4:16). We see that Jesus prayed often. His priorities were correct. He was never hurried. He was sacrificial. He lived in community with other followers of God. He fasted. He knew the scriptures. He had a heart of gratitude. He was forgiving. He surrendered His rights for the sake of furthering God's kingdom. He was a servant. He was humble. As a result, He was aware of what God the Father gave Him to do and He accomplished it all (John 17:4). We also read that Jesus, "Only did what He saw the Father doing" (John 5:19). Because of Jesus' "God-sensitive life", God worked through His life mightily. One can see a similar pattern in the earliest days of the church.

We see examples in the book of Acts. In Acts 2:42, we see the disciplines of fellowship, communion and prayer. In Acts 3, the discipline of compassion is seen. In Acts 4, we see the disciplines of generosity, sacrifice, corporate worship and witness. In Acts 7, one finds the discipline of service. In Acts 14, the people experience the discipline of fasting, and in Acts 15 we see the discipline of discernment. In all of these occasions God's people lived in ways that brought them nearer to God and more in line with what God wanted to do in and through their lives.

Some of these spiritual disciplines are done alone. Some we do together. Some call us to action, while others help us to abstain. Through the centuries they have been shaped by the needs of Christians in response to the culture and context in which they have lived. While at certain times some spiritual disciplines have been needed more than others, they have always shared the simple focus of making less of the world and making more of God in the lives of those who had chosen to follow Jesus Christ.

As the centuries passed, times changed and so did the needs of the Christians of those days. While the timeless spiritual disciplines of Scripture remained unchanged, new expressions of them formed in response to challenges which the followers of Christ faced. As we read in Adele Ahlberg Calhoun's *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*:

As the gospel spread throughout the Roman Empire, the church continued to respond to people's desires to keep company with Jesus. In the fourth and fifth centuries, as the church was relieved of

its persecution, the desert fathers found that the politicized and nominal nature of Christianity sabotaged their first love. Longing to recover the passionate love for God that characterized the early church, they moved into the desert, where they could more intentionally partner with Jesus for transformation. Their longing to be conformed to the image of Christ gave rise to spiritual disciplines of silence, solitude, contemplation, detachment . . . Believers who shared a desire to go deep with God made space in their lives for God. These Monastic communities forged their lives around disciplines of memorization, devotional reading, hospitality, meditation, and service.²

In the sixteenth century, the Bible began to be translated from Latin into the native languages of the people. Coupled with the invention of the printing press and sailing ships that could travel the world, the Word of God could now be taken to the nations. Because of this, the spiritual disciplines of witness, Bible study, prayer, discernment and stewardship became the property and the personal calling of the normal people.

Today, as the modern world has become more industrialized, urban and individualistic, it once again has called for certain ways of living. Many have begun to re-sensitize their lives to Jesus Christ through simplicity, accountability, small groups, giving to the poor, and mentoring. The hurried pace and technology, that now even reaches into our private moments, has drawn many towards planning alone time, “unplugging”, and intentional times for Sabbath or rest.

This disconnecting from the world or slowing down can be found in various places in scripture. ***“Be still and know that I am God”*** (Psalm 46:10). Psalm 62:5-7 even says this:

“For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence, for my hope is from him. ⁶He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken. ⁷On God rests my salvation and my glory; my mighty rock, my refuge is God.”

As we talk about re-ordering our lives to be more sensitive to God, we need to be careful with how we understand this idea. It is not saying that if we re-order our lives that we then can fix ourselves. No one can change and transform their own heart. That is the work of God.

This re-ordering of our lives can be described as Spiritually Preparing the Soil. A farmer understands the Laws of Nature that God put into place. With those laws in mind, the farmer works to create the best environment for the seeds to grow and bear fruit. He breaks the soil. He pulls the weeds. He fertilizes the soil. He irrigates. He might even spray insecticides, but once this is done he must sit and wait. The farmer plays an important role, but he gets no credit for actually growing the plant which bears fruit. He is only creating a fertile environment.

Living our lives in a manner that is sensitive to God is similar. We rely on God’s help as we seek to organize our lives in a way that will be sensitive to Him, but it is Christ who comes in and changes our hearts. We must first look to scripture to see what a “God-Sensitive Life” looks like. Then we must trust His ways and obey in faith to re-reorder our lives. As we are submitted to His ways and His will, only then are we ready to be changed by His grace.

Living a God-sensitive Lifestyle comes in many different forms. It depends on your season of life, your work situation, your family responsibilities, your time in history, and much more.

² Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 17-18.

As we prepare our hearts for the celebration of the coming of the Christ child at Christmas, here are some things we should consider... Are there any unconfessed sins that are keeping you from walking near to Christ? Are there any areas of rebellion or disobedience that are keeping you from feeling at peace in Christ's presence? Is there anyone who you need to apologize to or forgive? Is there any attitude of yours that is not becoming of a child of God? Is there anyone to whom you need to express thanks? Is there anything that you need to make right financially? Is there anything in your life that is drawing you away from God from which you need to distance yourself? How can you make unhurried time with God's Word and prayer this Christmas season? What people do you need to make time for this Christmas season? How can you be generous with your finances or material possessions this Christmas season? How can you use any vacation days to put you in a better place to be sensitive to what God is doing in and around you? How can you turn your family's attention more toward Christ this Christmas season (*Belén* tour, etc.)? How can you spend quality time with your family this Christmas season? Is there anyone with whom you need to sit down and strengthen your relationship or share Christ? Is there anyone that you can invite to the church's Christmas Eve service? Should you host a Christmas gathering at your home or in your zone to build relationship with neighbors, coworkers or friends? Can you use Christmas to bring up spiritual conversations that you need to have with others?

Advent is a time to prepare our hearts for the coming of the babe in the manger, the coming of Christ into our lives, and the second coming of Christ. May we use these days to draw back from the rush, the noise, the stress of our lives, and once again allow God to turn our hearts back towards Himself. A time to evaluate our priorities and the direction of our lives and make the needed changes so that we can once again draw near to God.

I would like to close by leaving this image in your mind. It is the story of the Prodigal Son, found in Luke 15. Jesus told a story of a younger son who asked his father for his part of the inheritance. This would have been an incredibly disrespectful request to the father, but nonetheless the father grants the money. The son then runs off to a foreign country and wastes the money on wild living. Once the money is gone, a famine comes to the land and the young son is left with nothing. It gets so bad that the young man has to take a job feeding pigs. For a young Jewish man this would have been the worst of humiliations. Finally, he "comes to his senses" and reasons that he will ask his father to take him back, not as a son but as a servant.

The young man starts the long journey, likely rehearsing the speech that he is going to give his father. *"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. ²¹ And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²² But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. ²³ And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. ²⁴ For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate"* (Luke 15:20-24).

Regardless where you find yourself today: Prepare the way for the Lord. Actively wait for His coming. Humble your heart and turn towards home. Draw near to Christ this Christmas season. The Father is gladly waiting with open arms to receive you.

Discussion questions:

1. What in this sermon did you find most interesting?
2. Why do you think people find it so difficult to be patient?
3. When Christians need to wait, how might they benefit from the process?
4. At Advent we are preparing a way for the Lord in our lives. What changes might we need to make so that our lives can be more sensitive to God?
5. What do you need to remember from this sermon?
6. What do you need to do in response to this sermon?