

WAITING IS THE HARDEST PART

Meditations for
the Season of Advent



*A collaboration of multimedia devotionals written & compiled
by Grace Mills River*

WAITING IS THE HARDEST PART

An Introduction by Pastor Patrick Lafferty

No culture like ours in history has ever perfected the art of the instant. Neither Edison nor Einstein could ever have fathomed our ability to communicate, share, purchase, and exert influence over vast distances almost immediately. So much we want (or have been trained to want) we can get not just quickly, but now.

But with every advance there is a corresponding trade-off. While we may benefit from the rapidity our technologies afford, can anyone deny a diminished capacity in us to wait? Now that we rarely need to wait, we become frustrated and petulant when we have to wait.

There is no life of faith that does not ask us to wait upon God—to exercise hope, patience, trust, and faithfulness while what we most desire is still not at hand.

Advent recalls the arrival of God made flesh in Jesus—One, as the hymn goes, “long expected,” now finally here. But while Advent looks back, it does so only to train us to wait upon His return.

This waiting is no merely passive act. It invites us to set our hope on certain things and use our time in certain ways. Mostly it asks us to both to rest and act on the basis of a certain peace. For that we will always need help, both from the Spirit of God and from a few fellow travelers also learning to wait.

Several of those fellow travelers have assembled here. Friends and fellow members of Grace have prepared for you daily reflections on what it means to wait upon the Lord—not as experts but as fellow strugglers.

On Monday-Thursday for all four weeks of Advent, we invite you to slow your pace, take a seat, and consider the varied creations of these who love you. Then on Fridays, you will find an image paired with a Scripture text. On those days you’re invited to act as you might in an art gallery. Stare quietly, patiently, curiously. See what’s there. See until you see—until you pray. Even in the act of attention we learn something about waiting.

We pray this series might help you observe Advent as it was always intended: to learn a little more how to wait with patience until we see him face to face, until we know fully, as we have been fully known.

Please Note:

This is an interactive publication.

Links to video and audio are active when viewed from a digital device.

November 28

Waiting While Learning

By Rebecca Cochrane

Luke 10: 38-42

Surely we all have memories of school days, learning under another's teaching. Whether we attended traditional classrooms or were taught at home, there was always a distinction between teacher and student. Most of us have needed to learn even beyond the classroom. On-the-job training, interning, or apprenticeship are some of the seasons of transition, which all newbies endure as knowledge and wisdom mature.

The word "disciple" means "learner." Even without a capital D, we're all disciples, learners, at some stage of what it means to know Christ, to pursue fellowship with him, to become more like him, to experience the fullness of the unity he says we have with him.

Mary of Bethany opens our season of waiting by reminding us that learners wait. The nature of learning is that it takes time, attention, even repetition, before knowledge in practice becomes wisdom.

And so she sits at his feet, the proper place for a disciple to be. In his great wisdom, mercy, honesty, and purpose, he welcomes her there, a woman—a symbol perhaps of the fullness of his Bride to come. Unlike Martha, Mary isn't compelled at this point to busy herself in ministry. It is her time instead to receive. The blessing of learning from him precedes the obedience of service, and like a sponge, she—as we all are invited to do—chooses one thing: To soak in all that he is pouring out. Knowledge, wisdom, love, presence, purpose.

Psalm 16:5 says, "The Lord is my portion and my cup."

At his feet, Mary accepts her need of him as her portion. Jesus calls this "the good portion." Laying aside the urgency to do, she opens herself to him to merely receive.

Have you yet done the same? In this season of gifts, this season of waiting and anticipation, be nourished by him. Set aside the busyness of doing—and receive. Open a hand as well as an ear. Quiet your soul, and choose the good portion.

November 29

Waiting while Grieving

By Rebecca Cochrane

John 11: 17-35

Martha now, it seems, has moved into the early stage of learner, as she approaches Jesus with a distant understanding of future things: He is “coming into the world,” and at the “last day,” her brother will rise with those who followed this Christ. She refers to Jesus as “the Teacher” to her sister now, as if acceptance of her sister’s earlier choice has set it.

Mary, however, has grown in her waiting to be able now to share in the sorrows of God himself. Still, she knows her place, and it is again at his feet. But this time, it’s in a posture of soul-scraping grief and need for the hope of hopes. To whom else would she go?

This time, Jesus doesn’t pour out more knowledge on Mary. By contrast to his interaction with Martha just moments before, he doesn’t teach. Instead, he grieves with her. He pours out his tears, adding his to hers. Both grieve.

Rest in this a moment. Let those tears fall on you, beloved: He knows our sorrows. He is acquainted with grief.

Or is it now the other way around as well: The learner who has soaked up his presence, chosen him as her portion, understands how God’s own heart breaks over sin that leads to death? Is this not the fullness of union that can occur only because of the supernatural reality of the God-made-man who dwelt among us? Does a woman after God’s own heart know now on the heart level what this severing of soul from body really does to the image of God? And where the only hope of restoration lies?

Mary doesn’t need a theology lesson like Martha does, so Jesus doesn’t teach her here. She has been taught. But even so, her grief in the moment of facing death is real as is HIS grief. Part of waiting in the grieving is knowing that He shares in our sorrow, at this very moment. His Spirit is our Paraclete—one who comes alongside. The Father looks from heaven and He sees.

When we fall at his feet in grief, we become seeds planted in soils of despair and watered by the very tears of God himself, from which we will burst upward in new life—in the resurrection to come, but also in reconciled life to share now with others our testimony of His power and provision.

For many, both in and outside the family of God, the holiday prompts emptiness as hollow as a tomb. It can’t be numbed by distraction, no matter how shiny the packages and decorations. In our waiting, might we embrace opportunity to share in honest grief rather than contrived frivolity with those who suffer in our sphere, if such opportunity is given us?

Waiting While Serving in Worship

By Rebecca Cochrane

John 12: 1-3

In the week before Passover, before Jesus stoops to wash the disciples' feet in an upper room, Mary is again at his feet. This time, while Martha serves food as is her custom, Mary too takes on a servant's position. But her service is the pouring out of her devotion for Christ.

She has learned from him. She has grieved with him. She has been bound up by him mentally (sharing knowledge), emotionally (sharing grief), spiritually (witnessing restored life). Over time, he has taught her, wooed her, prepared her, provided for her, walked with her—as John Donne would say, he has ravished her. (Holy Sonnet XIV) And her response while waiting for the fullness of all things, for all to be placed under his feet, is complete and utter worship poured out on him in material (the ointment), in service (wiping his feet, as a servant would), and in vulnerability (letting down her hair to do so).

Some scholars suggest that the jar of precious ointment might have been her dowry: all the hope a woman of that day had for a physical life of provision, progeny, social acceptance, prosperity. If this is the case, then Mary is very literally pouring out all her hope onto Jesus in the presence of witnesses. She is the embodiment of the Bride of Christ, dependent, united to him, and so given over to him that this expression of love and dependency is communicated in a state of rapt ecstasy. She has learned that the very place she was created to live/dwell/embody is at his feet. As she lets down her hair before him, she is casting her “crown,” looking ahead to the culmination that waits for all of us who will take the same posture in the day to come, exulting, “Holy! Holy! Holy!”

It is his death that allows for the consummation of our union with him. Mary does this for him simultaneously in preparation for his death and in response to the consummation he is securing, knowing he is on his way to seal her forever as his own.

Like Mary, we wait for his return, for this consummation. We are waiting for a wedding—our wedding! With the anticipation of a bride, we wait for that glorious union. As his Bride, he frees us to love him by loving others, by pouring out the gifts he's provided for his worship and glory.

While [our] king was on his couch,

[our] nard gave forth its fragrance. (Song of Solomon 1:12)

Already and almost, we are in his banqueting house, and his banner over us is love!

Timing is Everything

By Paddy Lynch

John 11:1-44

The Resurrection of Lazarus



**Click the image above to watch the clip if viewing on a digital device.*

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pKP4cfU28vM>

In 1959, Pete Seeger wrote a song he called, “Turn! Turn! Turn!”, which was based on the text of Ecclesiastes 3. He wrote it as a protest song, a lyrical challenge to society that the status quo was about to change. America was embroiled in a period of tremendous unrest- the Viet Nam war, the civil rights movement, school integration and the sexual revolution, among others. The stability of the 1950’s was making way for the unpredictability of the 1960’s, and as a result, “Turn, Turn, Turn” became the number one song in the US in 1965.

The first verse of Ecclesiastes 3 reads, “There is a time for everything and a season for every activity under the heavens,” but in the Western world we think of time in chronological terms rather than seasons. Time is like currency, a resource not to be squandered, and so we fall prey to the notion that time spent waiting is wasted time. When our 3 daughters were teenagers, getting ready to leave the house on time was an exercise in futility; I despaired of ever arriving anywhere promptly. “Hold-On,” “Wait-a-Minute,” and “I’m-Coming,” were the refrains I heard over and over again. The longer I waited the more impatient I became, and my frustration often resulted in a lecture about respect for other people’s time- particularly mine.

II Peter 3:8 is a reminder that, “With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.” God’s eternal time is more “when the time is right” than hours and minutes on a clock. But I am a planner. I make lists. I am impatient. I want things to happen in a timely manner, and when they don’t, I want God to do something, to intervene, to make things happen the way I imagine they should.

So when I read the account of Lazarus’s death, I hear my own frustration in Martha’s voice as she greets Jesus: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” (John 11: 21) This sounds like a rebuke, a combination of her grief and frustration at Jesus’ delay, and the subsequent the death of her brother. She would not have asked Him to come if the situation had not been dire, and having sent for Him suggests that she knew how long it would take for Him to arrive in Bethany. But He was too late. Lazarus was already dead. She had hoped that He would come quickly and intervene, but instead He had lingered. Why?

Martha's interaction with Jesus on the road suggests that she was hurt and confused by His delay. He was a close family friend. She willingly acknowledged that He was "the Messiah, the Son of God who is come into the world," (v. 27), and professed that "even now God will give you whatever you ask." (v.22). But her remarks sound like student responses in a catechism class. Martha seemed to hold her faith in a tightly clenched fist, longing for a more profound understanding of Christ and His purposes. Henri Nouwen writes that "Our spiritual life is a life in which we wait actively present to the moment, expecting that new things will happen to us, the new things that are far beyond our imagination or prediction," but Martha's waiting is laced with grief and confusion, rather than anticipation. And although Jesus reminded her that her brother would be resurrected on the last day, that He Himself was the resurrection and the life, ".....it is clear that she derived very little consolation from the fact of a distant and general resurrection: she needed resurrection and life to come nearer home, and to become more a present fact to her." (Spurgeon).

Prior to coming to Bethany, Jesus had informed His disciples that "This sickness will not end in death.....No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it," (v. 4), and "For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe." (v. 15). Jesus' delay was intended to demonstrate the glory of God and His own authority and power over death for the sake of His followers. He was not simply a "good teacher," a tool in the hands of the Almighty, He was "the radiance of God's glory, and the exact representation of His being, sustaining all things by His powerful word." (Hebrews 1:3). With the raising of Lazarus, Jesus demonstrated that He worked "beyond the range of human experience; that He existed "apart from and not subject to the limitations of the material world." (Google English Dictionary/Oxford Languages). His timing was perfect.

Jesus had raised the dead before, but Lazarus' resurrection was different. The widow of Nain's son was made alive even as his body was being carried away (Luke 7:11-15), and Jairus' daughter had just died before He arrived to restore her (Luke 8: 40-42, 49-56). Among the Jews, it was believed that the soul of the deceased would linger over the body for 3 days, hoping to return to it. But having laid in the tomb for 4 days, there was no question that Lazarus was dead, and his body had begun to decompose, as Martha reminded the Lord in verse 39, "...but Lord... by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days." Having waited until there was absolutely no chance that Lazarus could revive, Christ gave was a compelling and persuasive demonstration of His power and authority over death. Jesus showed that the worst possible thing- death- had happened, and yet, as Buechner writes, "Resurrection means that the worst thing is never the last thing." (Buechner, *The Final Beast*, 1965).

Pete Seeger may have intended "Turn, Turn, Turn" as a protest song, but the refrain, "And a time to every purpose unto heaven" is a sweet reminder to me that nothing occurs beyond the purview of Almighty God. When He asks me to wait, as He did Martha, there is hope in that waiting because we hope in "the One who is utterly good, completely for us, whose Word is sure, and whose ways are perfect." (Hope for Waiting Hearts, Courtney Doctor, TGC, 1/26/2018)

Fine Art Reflection

Job 9:2-12



The Starry Night, Vincent van Gogh. 1889. Oil on canvas

Image Source: <https://www.moma.org>

Painted from his time recovering in an asylum, “The Starry Night” was one of several nocturne paintings expressing his inner turmoil that though the world be dark (note the lights off in the church, but not the village) hope may be “in the stars.” We hear a similar turmoil in Job as he contemplates his lot, his God, and the stars (Job 9:2-12)

But how can a man be in the right before God?

If one wished to contend with him,
one could not answer him once in a thousand times.
He is wise in heart and mighty in strength
—who has hardened himself against him, and succeeded?—
he who removes mountains, and they know it not,
when he overturns them in his anger,
who shakes the earth out of its place,
and its pillars tremble;
who commands the sun, and it does not rise;
who seals up the stars;
who alone stretched out the heavens
and trampled the waves of the sea;
who made the Bear and Orion,
the Pleiades and the chambers of the south;
who does great things beyond searching out,
and marvelous things beyond number.
Behold, he passes by me, and I see him not;
he moves on, but I do not perceive him.
Behold, he snatches away; who can turn him back?
Who will say to him, ‘What are you doing?’

“[I have a] tremendous need for, shall I say the word—for religion—so I go outside at night to paint the stars.”

- Vincent van Gogh

Waiting and Hastening

By Anne Kerhoulas

Matthew 25:1-13

Karl Barth uses the language of waiting and hastening to describe advent; in this time between advents, we are caught in this tension of waiting patiently for the day that our God will return, and hastening, actively preparing for the day to come. Waiting and hastening. One of many seeming paradoxes of faith. They feel like opposites—waiting is quiet and sedate. But hastening is waiting in action, eager preparation when there is much to do, much to be done before that for which we wait arrives.

Jesus tells the parable of the ten virgins just before his death, in a series of parables about the final judgment. The parable is about the time that we live in today between comings, a time for both waiting for the return of Christ and hastening it, preparing for the day he returns to make all things new. The virgins in the parable, who symbolize the Church, the Bride of Christ, are waiting for their groom to arrive. Though they are all waiting, only five of them have been hastening: preparing, planning, and readying themselves for whatever may come.

The groom is delayed, at least, he hasn't arrived when they expected him. The virgins grow tired and fall asleep, but are awoken by the cry that the Bridegroom has come! The wise virgins trim their wicks and go to meet him, the foolish ones have run out of oil and must go find more. When they return it is too late. This parable teaches us that simply being in the right location and waiting with the right people isn't enough, we must be hasteners. We must be people who are preparing, readying ourselves, and waiting with action day by day.

But what does it look like to have your oil ready? Second Peter is a book mostly about the return of Christ and in it Peter says that in light of Christ's imminent return we must live lives of holiness and godliness, waiting and hastening for the coming of the day of God (3:11-12). To hasten, then, is to be actively pursuing the things of God, growing in love for Christ, walking by his Spirit, and bearing its fruit. Hastening means growing day by day in our devotion to Jesus, that is how we prepare, that is how we wait.

But the obvious problem is that waiting is hard, especially when our world seems to deteriorate more and more into sin and brokenness. This is the advent question—how do we do this? How do we wait in brokenness and darkness and suffering? Why doesn't the Lord simply make all things right? This is the advent question, and the only answer is the advent promise; as sure as Christ came into the world once, he will come again. In the meantime, we wait, we prepare for his return, and we find comfort in the words he has given to us.

Psalm 130

*Out of the depths I have cried to You,
O Lord;
Lord, hear my voice!
Let Your ears be attentive
To the voice of my supplications.
If You, Lord, should mark iniquities,
O Lord, who could stand?
But there is forgiveness with You,
That You may be feared.
I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,
And in His word I do hope.
My soul waits for the Lord*

*More than those who watch for the
morning—
Yes, more than those who watch for
the morning.
O Israel, hope in the Lord;
For with the Lord there is mercy,
And with Him is abundant
redemption.
And He shall redeem Israel
From all his iniquities.
Amen.*

Waiting, in Sharp Contrast

By Patrick Lafferty

Habakkuk 3:16-19

Years ago a renowned Jewish rabbi and author tried his hand at answering the thorniest theological question: how does one entertain faith in God while at the same time try to reconcile that belief with the tragedy of evil and suffering. The book was entitled *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?* When it came to the subject of death, the author argued that God is as pained by death as we are but is powerless to overturn it.

Another Jew—he, too, a scholar and writer, but also a Holocaust survivor, could not help but respond to this noble but, to him, inadequate explanation. To the claim that God had no power over death, Elie Wiesel answered, not disrespectfully but clearly, “If that’s who God is, he should resign and let someone competent take over.”

We know next to nothing about the prophet Habakkuk, except for the tumultuous moment into which he wrote. He laments Judah’s entrenched culture of injustice and idolatry. But when the Lord promises to discipline His people through the marauding hand of the Babylonians, Habakkuk doesn’t question the competence of the Lord so much as His methods.

Babylon wrought havoc and showed no mercy wherever it flexed its imperialistic muscles. So, to Habbakuk, the Lord appeared to have employed a club upon Israel when a scalpel would do.

Before we hear any reassurance from God, we learn from Habakkuk something about waiting upon Him. **Complaint to God and trust in Him are not contradictory postures.** It’s the belief in God’s holiness, wisdom, and power that leads the prophet to speak his bewilderment at the unfolding of these events. His lamentation has its roots in the promise of God and the goodness of what He means for the world He has made. So the complaint is its own expression of faith, even if it represents the collision of hope with the hardness of this world. We ought not fear expressing to God our bewilderment, our grief, our anguish when we inevitably experience that collision.

But there’s more here about waiting on God than honesty with Him.

“Write this vision,” the Lord tells Habakkuk, “If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay.”

And what is that vision?

Days of woe befalling the tool of God that would become tyrannical in its time. And the destruction of its forces, with a fierceness that recalls the exodus, by one... anointed of God (3:13).

Just the thought of the vision leaves Habakkuk trembling. But because the arrival of that day remains undisclosed, what is the prophet to do? He utters what is a second contrast that explains a feature of waiting on God.

*Yet I will quietly wait for the day of trouble
to come upon people who invade us.
Though the fig tree should not blossom,
nor fruit be on the vines,
the produce of the olive fail
and the fields yield no food,*

Prayer:

You to whom we bring our complaint and beg your aid. We survey the landscape of the world, and then of our own heart, and find too much to bear. We wonder if anything will change and our hearts fail us. Prompt in us that righteous complaint of what is, but from our sense of your goodness and might. May our longing for the day of righteous trouble be filled by nothing less than longing for You the Righteous One.

*the flock be cut off from the fold
and there be no herd in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the LORD;
I will take joy in the God of my salvation.
GOD, the Lord, is my strength;
he makes my feet like the deer's;
he makes me tread on my high places. (3:16-19)*

Just as complaint to God and trust in Him are not mutually-canceling postures, so, too, lament for all that is not yet and love for the God who is. One may properly and poignantly catalog the lack all around, while still be confident in One who sees and is attentive to the void. But the capacity to hold these contrasting expressions together comes not from some inner fortitude, but is no less a work of God than what need we are asking Him to fill.

What renewal for you seems to stand far off? For what are you longing the arrival of which tempts you to give up? Habakkuk heard the vision of an anointed one who would address the chaos within and without, a pattern we find more clearly seen in the anointed one born of God. In his power over death and promise of life both before and beyond it, we have not just a picture of waiting, but a strength to do so.



"Habakkuk's Complaint," Marc Chagall, 1960
Image source: <https://fineart.market>

Waiting for Christmas

By Craig Lotz

Romans 8:18-30



**Click the image above to watch the clip if viewing on a digital device.*

Source: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1w5N-ByRYTjM8fWZnAc4-9_njCJHkUuyvv/view?usp=sharing



**Click the image above to watch the clip if viewing on a digital device.*

Source: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/17Y89opvPij9100HrRITpPaDrV5zysECc/view?usp=sharing>

Every year, the season rolls in with joy and song. Festivities with family and friends. Exchanging of gifts. Hoping once again, that peace on earth is possible. With others and within. So we pause to be merry. Offer good tidings to one another. Strive to be on the “nice” list and receive a fruitful new year in return if we simply sing and believe like a child. We can be different. Transformed. For one day at least.

But every year, shortly after making more resolutions, we’re right back on the naughty list. Beastly with one another. Adding once again to the brokenness throughout humanity. Furthering the groan through all creation. We live like orphans. Fight for our own needs. Lie to ourselves and others. Shake our fists at the suffering. Act as if we’re stuck in an endless groundhog day, but somehow look to the unseen. Hoping for liberation. Redemption. Deep down we know something’s wrong.

We wake each day with a sense of “ought to.” We ought to be different. Ought to love others. Ought to give back. Ought to stop thinking so much about ourselves. We make lists. Set goals. Pray. Step. Believing we can end the cycle. But quite often, ending up in a mess again. Feeling alone.

Our spirits long for renewal. Groan with expectation. Sons and daughters in a greater kingdom. Trusting we’ve been rescued. Our being rescued. From the brokenness. From ourselves. A deeper Voice reminds us that we are not alone. The Son has come to set things right. Died and rose to tame our beasts. Ongoing and ultimate renewal through a gift we didn’t earn or deserve. A gift that can melt our angry and fearful hearts each new day.

He, himself, is the gift our hearts long for. His sacrifice and daily presence leading us out of our wintry mix and into a new dance forward. His Spirit reminding us daily, where we have been and where we are headed. Transforming into a Greater beauty. His likeness. Eternal peace and good will towards all. Not just annually, but eventually... forever. Eternal Christmas.

On this Eve we wait. Like kids we hope.

Sanctification While Waiting

By Molly Angel

Thessalonians 5:16-18



**Click the image above to watch the clip if viewing on a digital device.
Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FFO_87VBwNc*

As my children have grown up and matured it has been an interesting experience to begin to leave them on their own for short periods of time. We have a home phone and that has made us feel better about leaving them because they can connect with us if needed while we're gone. It's always fascinating when my cell rings when I've left them home alone to see what they deem worthy of a phone call. Sometimes the initial question or request seems silly but then the real heart of the reason for the call comes out in, "how soon will you be home?"

In this season of Advent we are waiting. Waiting for Christmas and the incarnation. But in a larger sense Advent reminds me of how we are waiting for the second coming. We are in this complicated time of in-between where we've already received the Lord's salvation and his gift of the Holy Spirit, but he has not yet come back for us and everything has not yet been made new. We are living in the tension between the already and the not yet. Here is where the sanctification happens as we wait. This is nothing new as there have been many generations living in this space.

Navigating our broken world in this waiting space can be a difficult road to walk with all that life brings. Praise the Lord that we do not wander around with no direction or without a Helper. I am so thankful for the Living Word that speaks to us and guides us. This verse from first Thessalonians has long challenged and comforted me. Recently it has come up again. "Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." (Thessalonians 5:16-18) What a challenge to be told to pray continually and to give thanks in all circumstances! Praying continually throughout the day can be such a comfort even when practiced so imperfectly that it seems more intermittent than continual. Ellie Holcomb calls this "pouring your heart out in God's direction" in her devotional book, *Fighting Words*. Just like my children need that connection over the phone when they are left on their own waiting for their parents return, we can have a constant connection to the Lord through prayer during our separation time of waiting for his return. We don't even need a phone. We have the holy Spirit with us and God hears us no matter where we are.

Prayer:

*Jesus as we prepare to
celebrate your birth, we
also long for your return.
Thank you that you are with
us and your Holy Spirit is
sanctifying us while we wait.
Teach us to rejoice always,
pray continually, and give
thanks in all circumstances.
Thank you that who you are
never changes. Amen.*

Ann Voscamp combines the idea of continual prayer and cultivating thankfulness by asking the Lord for eyes open to all the little graces that God gives us in daily life and seeing with new eyes of gratitude in her book, *One Thousand Gifts*. Voscamp says, "Gratitude is not only a response to God in good times - it's ultimately the very will of God in hard times. Gratitude isn't only a celebration when good things happen. It's a declaration that God is good no matter what happens." This reminds me of something that a friend said to me recently; that one of the most important reasons for the command to give thanks is to get our eyes off our own circumstances and focus on God and what is true, right, and holy.

There are many circumstances I am not thankful for. Life can be so full of misery. There have been many tears. But God... He is in control. When asked to give thanks in the face of the painful realities of life I must cling to his sovereignty. And to his love.

Here are some of my clinging verses in hopes they might help a fellow clinger who needs to be reminded that we can always pray and give thanks while we wait:

Isaiah 43:1-3 God will be with us
Psalm 91:1-4 shelter under his wings
Jeremiah 29:11 hope and future
Zephaniah 3:17 rejoice over us
Romans 8:28 working for our good
Romans 8:31 God is for us
Philippians 1:6 He will complete what he has begun in us
Philippians 4:4-8 Peace

Listen to this song praising God for his faithfulness and love. He is sovereign over us. (*Sovereign Over Us* by Shane & Shane) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FFO_87VBwNc

Art Reflection

Luke 15:20-32



“The Return of the Prodigal Son”, by Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, c. 1669
Image Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org>

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. 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.’ 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. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive

again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate. “Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but

he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’ And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’”

While Our Master Is Away

By Andrew Kerhoulas

Matthew 25:14-30

You might ask why I wanted our church family to meditate on this fateful passage during “the most wonderful time of the year.” The reason is because advent is a season that has historically been aimed at the second coming of Jesus. In advent, we are meant to remember that we, like the servants in the parable, inhabit the “long time” awaiting our Master’s return. And Jesus didn’t leave us wondering what he expects his servants to do as we wait. Let’s set our sights on Jesus’ expectations for his servants before we take some time to reflect and pray.

In his parable, three servants are entrusted with a share of the master’s property in the form of talents. A talent in those days was an incredible sum of money, something like 20 years wages. Each servant was given talents in accordance with his abilities, and the master expected each one to invest to make gains while he was away on his journey. Then the master returned after a long journey and settled accounts with each of them. The Greek word for “settled accounts” is the same word found in Romans 14:12 where Paul tells us we will all give an account to God in the end.

What is Jesus teaching his apprentices? Jesus has gifted every single one of us with unique gifts. He has entrusted us to make something of his investment in us while he’s away. And he has given gifts “each according to [our] ability” (v.15).

We recently adopted five chickens and we let our four-year olds name them all: Elsa, Anna, Pertelote (aka Perdie Birdie), Phoebe, and Posie. We let them open the coop and take our eggs inside because they can handle those small tasks. But we don’t let them cook our eggs for breakfast because they don’t have that ability quite yet.

Some of you have the talent to be a CEO of a large company. Others have a knack for visual art. Still others have been graced to manage portfolios, defend other’s rights, teach small children, repair a burst pipe, or clear a clogged artery. The question Jesus is prompting all of us to ask ourselves is, are we using our talents for Jesus where we live, work, and play? And how do we know whether we’re using our talents for him or not? To hear the words that the master tells the faithful servants, “well done good and faithful servants,” Jesus teaches us that we need theology that leads us to faithful action.

It is easy to miss in the parable but look closely at what the faithful servants said to their master when he returned: “Master, you delivered to me five talents; here, I have made five talents more.” The first thing the faithful servants did was acknowledge he had a master who had given him something and that he was not the master himself. Theology at its core acknowledges who God is and who we are according to his self-revelation in Scripture. Do we let his word inform and guide the ways we create, or build, or parent? Do we send emails and make things as if we are the master of our fate or as if Jesus is? Again, how do we know? That leads us to the second thing. Theology should lead to faithful action.

Notice why the slothful servant buried his talent rather than investing his master’s wealth like the others. He said, “Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, gathering where you scattered no seed, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground” (vv 24-25). This unfaithful servant presumed that his master was a hard man, also translated as a “harsh man,” who reaped what he didn’t sow and gathered where he didn’t scatter, which kept him

Closing Prayer:

During your long-awaited return, it's tempting to be swayed by the world to think your gifts are just for me and mine. By your Spirit, lead me to find creative ways to invest my unique gifts as unto you, my Master and Savior. Free me from bad theology that causes me to be afraid to be faithful with all you've given me and to work for you. Thank you for the good news that in Jesus I cannot be condemned. And because of that gospel, I make it my aim to please you in all things. Even though I will fail at times, I know that you will be faithful to complete the work you have begun in me. Thank you for loving me this much. I pray these things in your name and no other, amen.

from investing his talent. So he buried it instead.

This is why theology matters so much. While theology won't save you—Jesus does the saving—this parable shows us that bad theology kills. Armed with a misunderstanding of his master the servant was slothful and unfaithful; his unfaithful actions betrayed his deficient theology. The master then stripped the wicked servant of the gift he had been given, gave it to a faithful servant, and then cast him into outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. This phrase is often used to describe hell itself (see Matthew 8:11-12).

Jesus is calling us into faithful obedience—taking the gifts God has given us and actively using them for his glory to advance the Kingdom of God. The faithful servants knew who their master was and lived faithfully by developing and investing the gifts they were given. The wicked servant misunderstood his master and he lived unfaithfully, allowing the gift of God to go undeveloped and uninvested.

This parable can conjure fear in us that debilitated the unfaithful servant. But I want to remind you that our Master is also our Savior. As John tells us, it's Christ's "perfect love that casts out fear, because fear has to do with punishment" (1 John 4:18). And with his perfect love in tow, we can say with the psalmist, "But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared" (Psalm 130:4). We revere our Master for who he is and what he's done for us, but we aren't afraid of him. We remember the lengths our Master went to save his servants from condemnation: on the cross, he was cast into outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Before he rose, Jesus was buried in the ground like the talent of the unfaithful servant. He took on flesh to become the most faithful servant of God knowing full well he would be treated like a wicked and unfaithful servant. He did this to save us from condemnation for our unfaithfulness and to give us all we need to hear his commendation when he returns. Jesus loves us so much that he made the way for us to participate in his work of gracing his world and enter into his joy forever with him. And while our Master is away, he's given us his Spirit and his church to spur us on to love and good deeds. Now that's good news!

Meditation:

A. W. Tozer famously said, "What comes to mind when you think about God is the most important thing about you." Take a moment to prayerfully consider what comes into your mind when you think about Jesus. Who is he, really? Is he harsh or is he gentle and lowly of heart (see Matthew 11:25-30)? Ask for his Spirit to guide you into all truth about Jesus through his word so that you are motivated by his love to invest his gifts where you live, work, and play. Confess where deficient theology has led to deficiencies in your walk with him and receive his grace anew.

Practically speaking, how might this parable change your motivation at work? Ask Jesus to reveal at least one way you can faithfully invest his gifts where and with whom he has placed you today.

December 13

Magnificat

By Katie Winkler

Luke 1:46-55



The young are sometimes
Braver than we think
Waiting, to them, means
More than we know
Or remember

And her
Waiting for Him
Those nine long months
So long a time within her
Small, short life
Waiting--while her world
Watched hers expanding
Waiting—while they judged her

A peasant,
Barely a woman,
Without a man
Waiting for a king—the King
Waiting for the salvation
Of all Mankind

A woman—a girl
Waiting for a long time
Without knowing

But trusting

Barely a woman
Showing us the way

As she Rejoices in
The Waiting

Longing for a Fulfilled Promise

By Christen Stewart

Luke 2:25-35

Closing Prayer:

God,
Thank you for being the promise-fulfiller. Thank you for always showing up and being a Father that sees us in the waiting. I pray that while we wait, we remember the promises you made and fulfilled in Your Word, and use those as a reminder that you are still good. That you are still working on our behalf. I pray for rest where it's needed, peace where we seek it, and trust in the hardest days.
Amen

We are all waiting for something. Waiting for good news, waiting for that promotion, waiting for healing, waiting for the next phase in life, waiting for a breakthrough, waiting, waiting for Heaven. Waiting.. Waiting.. Waiting..

If we truly think about it, our life here on earth is just a series of waiting and anticipating. But how do we react to waiting? Who do we trust during it? Do we believe that promises will be fulfilled?

When I was growing up, I played sports year round. When one season would end, another would begin, and so on. My favorite part of playing volleyball and basketball was seeing my mom and dad in the stands cheering for me. There was something comforting about knowing there was always someone there supporting me who knew me better than anyone else. My dad is a pastor so his schedule was busy through the week between church services and other shepherding responsibilities. Even though he was busy, my dad always promised that he would be at my games. Sure enough, for thirteen years, between the church events, Sunday/Wednesday services, and caring for others, my dad never missed a game. Not a single one. Looking back, I'm not sure how he did it, but he did. He kept his promise. As a result, I always knew I could count on my dad. No matter how inconvenient or out-of-the-way it seems, I know that my dad will always be there for me. I don't have to wait to see if he's going to come through, I just trust that he will. Because my father is a promise keeper.

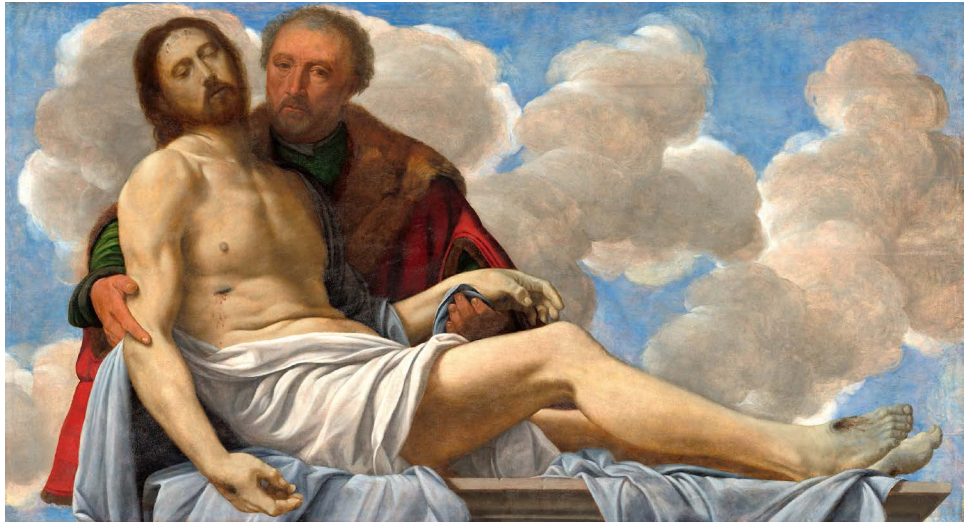
We read in Luke 2 about a man named Simeon. We don't actually know how old he was, the Bible doesn't say specifically, but some assume that he was older in age. The Bible says, "And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ." A promise was made to him that he would see the Messiah before he saw death. So he waited. His entire life he waited for this promise to be fulfilled. Then one day, a baby boy named Jesus is born. Mary and Joseph take baby Jesus to the temple in Luke 2. That same day, the Spirit leads Simeon into the temple as well. And then it happens - he sees Jesus. Simeon holds baby Jesus in his arms and knows the promise made to God's people has been fulfilled. Everything that Simeon had waited for his entire life was redeemed in a moment by holding a newborn baby in his arms. Jesus was not just a promise fulfilled to Simeon, though. He was a promise fulfilled to Abraham, to Moses, to the nation of Israel, to all of His people, to you and me.

You see, our Father is a promise keeper. He's never broken a promise. And by sending Jesus to earth as a baby who would grow into a man that would be crucified on the cross for our sins, every promise He ever made was fulfilled. I don't know where you're at right now or what you're waiting for, but I do know who you can trust in the waiting. His name is Jesus. He will always be there for you. He will always show up. He will always keep His promise. We may not all be like Simeon and see what we're waiting for fulfilled here on earth. But we do have the promise of heaven where all things will be healed and made whole, and that's worth waiting for. One day when we see Jesus face to face, like Simeon, we will rejoice and say, "for my eyes have seen your salvation."

What Does Waiting for the Kingdom of God Look Like?

By Scott Rayl

Mark 15:42-47



Christ with Joseph of Arimathea, c. 1525.

Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo (Italian, c. 1480–after.1548).

Oil on wood; framed: 134.6 x 221 x 12.7 cm (53 x 87 x 5 in.); unframed: 105 x 191.8 cm (41 5/16 x 75 1/2 in.). The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of the Hanna Fund 1952.512 Image source: <https://www.clevelandart.org/art/1952.512>

Joseph of Arimathea was a man who had the kingdom of God on his mind. In various translations we are told that Joseph was “looking” for God’s kingdom, while in others we are told that Joseph was “waiting” for it. Which is it? One form of this Greek word, *prosdéxomai*, means to “‘wait actively, expectantly’. . . [and] expresses expectant waiting where a person is ready and willing to receive all that is hoped for. . . This is active ‘looking-for-and-waiting!’” ([source](#)). Perhaps, then, looking for more of God can tell us something about what it means to wait while seeking the fulfillment of His plan in our lives and in the lives of others. More on that in a moment.

And yet, this is not a story about Jesus’ birth. There is no Simon or Anna here; long ago both had passed from the story after seeing the appearance of their infant Messiah. They expected the Messiah to triumphantly usher in God’s Kingdom and deliver Israel from its suffering, and each was overjoyed by the thought.

But now Joseph is seeing those hopes crushed some thirty-three years later, by the violent death of that same Messiah. The one who came to “baptize... with the Holy Spirit and fire” had indeed come, but instead had been extinguished like a candle.

I can’t help but think that Joseph was deeply struggling with this development, possibly in the form of doubt, confusion, anger, or simply deep grief. Regardless, he was waiting for God’s kingdom, which meant that he was actively looking for it, trying to see what God was up to. And even if that kingdom seemed to have been violently thrown down in defeat, Joseph was ready to step in and do whatever God was leading him to do at that moment, for the sake of God’s eternal kingdom.

One other thing that Joseph was struggling with was fear. Mark tells us that Joseph “took courage and went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus” (43; emphasis mine). John tells us that Joseph, “secretly for fear of the Jews, asked

Pilate” for the body of Jesus. Joseph even brought his Pharisaic friend Nicodemus (John 19:39) to help him—the same Nicodemus who was too afraid earlier to seek Jesus in broad daylight because of his own fear of his fellow Pharisees. But these two cowards, when all seemed lost, surprised everyone (and maybe even themselves) by summoning up their courage and risking everything for the sake of Jesus. They had seen God’s kingdom unfolding in the ministry of Jesus, and they wouldn’t allow his body to be further desecrated by His enemies. Perhaps like Abraham with his son Isaac, they reasoned that perhaps God might bring His own Son back from the dead.

So in this advent season of waiting, are you actively looking for God’s presence in your life and in the world around you? What is He showing you? What might God be asking you to do in response? Is it to seek more of His reign over your life? What else? How could you respond to that?

Or perhaps like Joseph, maybe you have just rolled a stone in front of the tomb of your most cherished dream. Will God roll that stone away, or will He fulfill your dream with something far greater when His kingdom comes on earth and His full, abundant plan is accomplished in your life forever? Perhaps now is the time to begin looking for signs of His answer, while you wait for His comfort and consolation. Maybe even now your waiting is about to end, and God is calling you to move deeper into the mystery of His presence and plan for your life. Either way, may you experience more of His presence and comfort in this advent season.

Fine Art Reflection

Luke 1:26-38



"The Annunciation" by Henry Ossawa Tanner, 1898.
Image Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org>

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

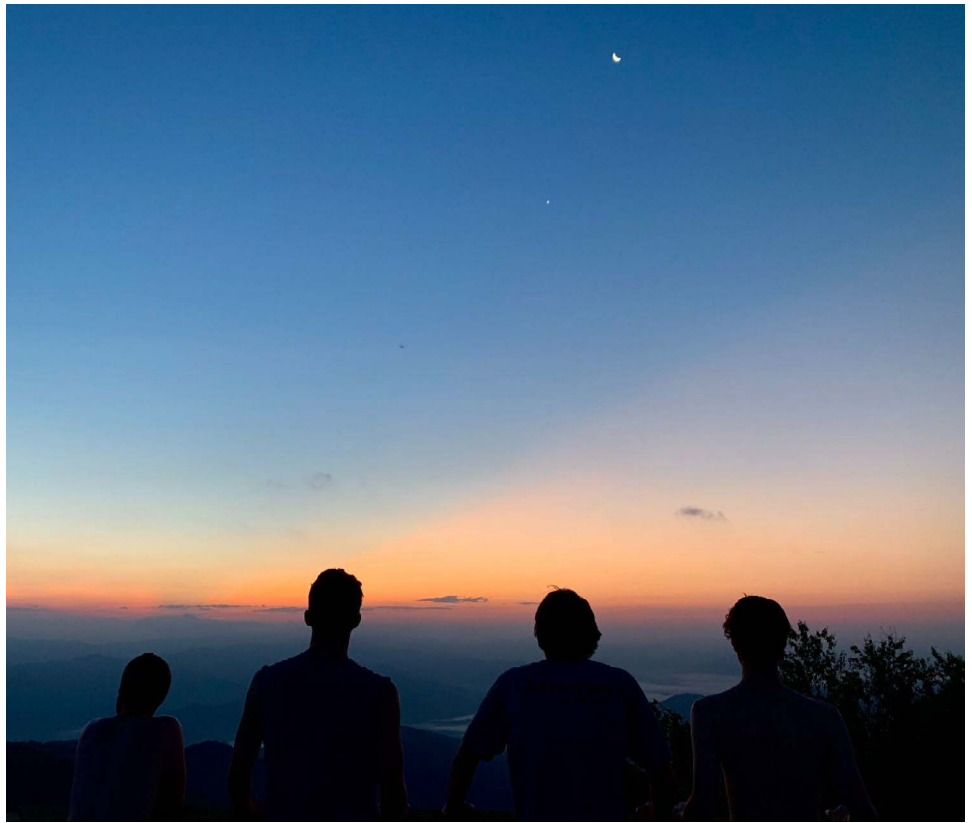
And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

(Luke 1:26-38)

Exhaustion, Weariness... Renewal

By Nick Dotti

Isaiah 40



Chasing down the perfect gift, the impending doom of last-minute shopping, enduring relatives who try your patience, planning food for friends and family, scheduling the ideal time to leave for church on Christmas Eve.... What contributes to your fatigue? Maybe it's work deadlines in the midst of all of the above. There is a wise and philosophically vexing question that challenges even the brightest scholars: "Would you rather fight one horse-sized duck or 100 duck-sized horses?" Hmmm, ah yes, commence gray beard stroking now. It is typically not one major event that weighs me down but the whole of all the little things. Whatever your choice, we all have tangible and intangible, real and imagined obstacles that cause us to fatigue, grow weary, and faint.

After more than a century of captivity with no end in sight, God's people must have been growing weary. Within this context, we find the words of Isaiah 40. In this passage, we are asked and reminded of who God is; the creator God, a faithful, covenantal God. We are reminded of his nature. Our God, in the midst of countless calls, wants, and demands from his people never grows weary. He does not lose power by giving power to his people. He created from nothing and he can increase from nothing. This is another reflection of his nature. We are not just weak without him, we are powerless. We bring nothing, he provides it all. It reminds me of the hymn Rock of Ages, "*Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to thy cross I cling.*"

Everyone has a point at which they stumble and fall – present planning, perturbed parents, plentiful ponies. The message in Isaiah 40 is not what to do IF we stumble it is what we should do WHEN we stumble.

The correct posture is to WAIT. However, if the season we are in now, Advent, is a time of waiting, why do we lack renewed strength? Why, in this identified

period of waiting, are we so fatigued? It is because I/ we look to our own idea of waiting and to ourselves for renewed strength. When I feel fatigued I often look to check off the next task on my list as a source of strength. It is the spiritual equivalent of turning into the skid!

The waiting Isaiah 40 directs us to is not passive, it is active waiting. This type of waiting takes practice. This type of waiting is a spiritual discipline. So, whether these days have you soaring, running, or walking, your renewed strength will come from waiting on the Lord. It is his nature to restore his people. My challenge for you today is to take a minute to slow down, be still, wait for the Lord and HE will give strength, even where there is none.

If I was going into exile, how would I hear this?

28. Have you not known? Have you not heard?

The LORD is the everlasting God, → Isaiah reminding us of God's Nature - YAHWEH the Creator of the ends of the earth. and as Creator yet separate ↗ Covenantal God!

He does not faint or grow weary; See below... He "does not" even among countless his understanding is unsearchable. Wants of His people.

29 He gives power to the faint, Neither of these have anything that can be added to "No" might... Yet He increases NOTHING! ... Nothing in my Hands and to him who has no might he increases strength? I Bring, simply to the cross I cling.

30 Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; → Everyone has a breaking point. Thank God I do! and then know source of True strength.

31 but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; → HOPE, PRAY... Waiting is a spiritual Discipline!

they shall mount up! with wings like eagles;

they shall run and not be weary; Mount up ↘ Run ↘ walk } in all... Wait, Pray, Hope

they shall walk and not faint.

Our Restoration based on His Nature ↗

He will renew strength ... contingent on Waiting

In desert... Wait In captivity... Wait

In already... Wait In not yet... Wait

Nick Dotti '22

Waiting on God, Not People

By Lee Hunt

Lamentations 3:26

*"What keeps the wild hope
of Christmas alive year after
year in a world notorious
for dashing all hopes is the
haunting dream that the child
who was born that day may
yet be born again even in us."
- Frederick Buechner*

Closing Prayer:

Lord, we wait in your hope, and
your joy as we entrust the lives
of our loved ones to you this
Christmas. All in your mighty,
gentle hands. Amen.



During the Advent 2020, my wife Amanda acted in a video skit for the online service (this, due to COVID-19 when church was meeting outside in the parking lot or online. Can you believe that was two years ago?). She portrayed a woman preparing Christmas dinner for her extended family. As she sets the table, she wonders who will come, who will not, trying to stay positive all the while when the audience can ominously tell not everyone in the family is coming and not everyone in the family gets along.

Like the character in the skit, around Advent I am reminded that I am waiting on people too – not necessarily presents, or decorations, or Christmas cookies. The Holidays are like a giant lighthouse beckoning all the distant ships in the family to reunite at some harbor. And many of us are waiting on shore for people to come around in some way.

We are waiting for an apology, waiting to forgive someone for what happened long ago, or waiting to be forgiven. We are waiting for someone to understand, and to be understood. We are waiting impatiently for someone to know how much they are loved by the family and by God and would they just “get it” already and come around.

Waiting to see if those empty seats may yet be filled.

Maybe, like me, you’ve said in your mind about a family member who once sat at that Christmas table, “You don’t have permission to hurt us anymore. You are not going to steal our joy. We as a family are going to enjoy this holiday with or without you, no matter what you choose to do.” I know I’m not the cause of their problems and that I can’t control or cure those problems. I pray God will restore these very real people on both sides of my family with His gentle, yet mighty, hand. If I’m truly honest I wait paradoxically, simultaneously with and without hope for them, that their shipwreck of a life may still reach God’s harbor somehow.

For Advent, I’m learning to wait on God, not people. They’re in His hands, not mine. So if you can relate to any of the above, maybe we can convert that impatient, frustrated, oft disappointed love into waiting on God instead of waiting on people, to enjoy the Christmas holidays at all. I’ll take that joy and some Christmas cookies now – thank you very much.

My daughter finds the joy best, in a way. She doesn’t wait for frosty December to start watching Hallmark Christmas movies on Netflix. She starts early, sometimes in the heat of August.

December 21

Waiting at the Gate

A Dramatic Sketch

By Brad Owen



(Scene opens at airport gate with desk and ATTENDANT in tableau speaking with TRAVELER. WOMAN in seating area, knitting with bags and a signboard)

ATTENDANT
No need to panic.

TRAVELER
I was sure I missed the flight.

ATTENDANT
If it wasn't for the delayed flight out of Denver, you would have. No worries.

TRAVELER
How long is the wait?

ATTENDANT
Everyone should be off the plane. It's being cleaned. The crew is staying aboard, so it shouldn't be long.

TRAVELER
Ok great, thanks!
(Grabs carry-on handle, and makes way to seating area, sitting one seat away from WOMAN with seat between. Sits and leans head back, relieved)
Thank God!

WOMAN
(Peers over reading glasses)
Amen.

TRAVELER
Huh? Oh, yeah. Sorry.

WOMAN

You look like you've seen a ghost.

TRAVELER

I would have been one, if I'd miss this flight.

WOMAN

(Returns to her knitting)

Marriage can't be all that bad.

TRAVELER

Oh no, no. My boss would have killed me - not my spouse. I'm headed to Denver on business.

WOMAN

(Looks TRAVELER up and down)

I bet you're... don't tell me. You're maybe an accountant or actuary.

TRAVELER

Actually, I'm both. How did you know!?

WOMAN

Navy blue jacket, sharp brief case.

TRAVELER

Yeah, but lots of people...

WOMAN

And you have an "AAA" sticker on your carry-on.

TRAVELER

(Laughs)

Well, I'll be...most people think I'm with Triple A.

WOMAN

My husband's the Georgia chairman of the American Academy of Actuaries.

TRAVELER

No kidding! What's his...

WOMAN

I can't wait to tell him I met another actuary. You all are rare birds.

TRAVELER

We sure are.

WOMAN

(Looks toward gate)

He should be off the plane in a few minutes. I'll even introduce you to my son.

TRAVELER
Off this plane?

WOMAN
It was late coming out of Denver.

TRAVELER
Yes, but the attendant just said...

WOMAN
(Excited, grabs sign and turns it around. It says, 'You're both still a great catch, with cartoon drawing of two fish smiling with hooks in mouth')
Okay, okay, what do you think?

TRAVELER
Wow, this is nice. But...

WOMAN
I know, it's too much and it's going to embarrass them, but they've been gone a while, and I can't wait to see them!

TRAVELER
Are you flying out to Denver?

WOMAN
Heavens no. Once they get off that plane, we're headed home!

TRAVELER
Yeah, but how did you get past security? You'd have to meet at baggage claim.

WOMAN
I know! Can you believe they let me do this? This is going to be such a surprise!

ATTENDANT
(Speaking into a public address microphone)
We're ready for boarding Republic Airlines Flight fifty-eight to Denver. We'll begin boarding for Ruby Republic Honors and guests requiring extra boarding assistance. Please proceed to gate eighteen and have your boarding passes ready.

WOMAN
(Looking at gate, worried but sarcastic)
Oh, those boys better hurry, or they're going to fly them back to Denver!

TRAVELER
(Suspecting something's wrong with WOMAN)
Well ah, I have to get ready for boarding.

WOMAN
Would you ask that nice lady to tell my husband and son to get off that plane while I get things ready with the sign and all!?

TRAVELER
(Exasperated)
Sh, sure.
(Walks to ATTENDANT who is now standing at gate)

ATTENDANT
May I see your boarding pass?

TRAVELER
(Looking back at WOMAN, but snaps to attention)
Huh? Oh yes, yes. Here it is.

ATTENDANT
Republic would like to welcome our Ruby Honors guests. You may board.

TRAVELER
Hey, so, this lady there asked me to ask you...

ATTENDANT
To tell her husband and son to get off the plane before we...fly them back to Denver?

TRAVELER
Yeah but...

ATTENDANT
Don't worry about it.

TRAVELER
Does she, like, have a problem?

ATTENDANT
I just can't do this again.

TRAVELER
I'm sorry, I didn't mean to trouble you. But how did you know what she told me.

ATTENDANT
(Distraught)
Eight Christmas Eves I've had to deal with this.
Why does she do this every year?

TRAVELER
What, do what?

ATTENDANT
Mrs. Rutledge's husband and son died in a car wreck driving to the airport eight years ago.

TRAVELER
Rutledge? You mean?
(Runs over to WOMAN)
A Misses... Misses?

WOMAN

Rutledge, honey. What did the woman say? Pom-pom too much?

TRAVELER

She ah, ah, wanted to know your husband's first name.

WOMAN

Gerald. Both of them, except son is the third. Gerald insisted on another Gerald.
(Giggles)

TRAVELER

Oh my God. Gerald Rutledge.

WOMAN

Now, no need to worry, when you meet him he's a really nice guy.

ATTENDANT

Now boarding all seats all rows. Please proceed to the gate. Last call for flight
fifty-eight to Denver. Last call.

TRAVELER

(Hurries to the ATTENDANT back at gateway)
Gerald Rutledge. He's famous. He died...

ATTENDANT

I know. Please board the plane. She waits until this point...

WOMAN

(Hurries up)

You can't be nice sometimes honey. Ma'am, ma'am please tell my husband to get
my son...

ATTENDANT

Please get on the plane, now.

(TRAVELER torn inside, waits a beat and nervously pushes past ATTENDANT
and WOMAN and hurries through gate)

Please Ms. Rutledge. He's not here.

WOMAN

Where is he then! Just go get him please! Please! Gerald, come on honey. Let's go
home!

ATTENDANT

Security! I'm so, so sorry ma'am!

WOMAN

(Lights fading. Falls crying on ATTENDANT)
No! Go get them! I've been waiting for so long...

(Fade to black)

Waiting in the Wilderness

By Rebecca Morgan

"It is a world of magic and mystery, of deep darkness and flickering starlight. It is a world where terrible things happen and wonderful things, too. It is a world where goodness is pitted against evil, love against hate, order against chaos, in a great struggle where often it is hard to be sure who belongs to which side because appearances are endlessly deceptive. Yet for all its confusion and wildness, it is a world where the battle goes ultimately to the good, who live happily ever after, and where in the long run everybody, good and evil alike, becomes known by his true name... That is the fairy tale of the Gospel with, of course, one crucial difference from all other fairy tales, which is that the claim made for it is that it is true, that it not only happened once upon a time but has kept on happening ever since and is happening still."

-Frederick Buechner,
Telling the Truth



Henry Ossawa Tanner, *Study for Moses and the Burning Bush*, oil on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Jesse O. Tanner, 1983.95.207B
Image Source: <https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/study-moses-and-burning-bush-23692>

Such is the story of Moses. It has been said that Moses spent 40 years learning something in Egypt, the next 40 years learning to be nothing in the desert and then spent the last 40 years proving God to be everything.

His story has my attention this Advent, as these days grow darker, especially because of that second 40 years of his. Most of us have probably had, or will have, an unwanted stay on the "far side of the wilderness." After a peculiarly remarkable start, Moses found himself there.

Learning Something in Egypt

Afraid of the growing number of Israelites he had brutally enslaved, Pharaoh sentenced all Hebrew male infants to be drowned in the Nile. (A foreshadowing of Herod's genocide of the male babies in his attempt to destroy Jesus? One of many striking parallels in the gospel story of Christ and the events of Moses' life.) Pharaoh's daughter mercifully pulled Moses out of the river, but she needed a nursemaid. The baby's sister Miriam seized on that providential opportunity to bring him home again to his enslaved parents, Jochebed and Amran. During that most formative period of early childhood, Moses learned that he belonged to the children of God, the God who had promised Abraham that he would deliver his people out of bondage after 400 years. It had been about 400 years.

But for the next 37 years or so, Moses was a member of the royal house, the son of the Princess of Egypt. "Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in words and deeds." (Acts 7:20) According to Josephus and other ancient historians, Moses received top training in languages, linguistics, writing, mathematics, physics, architecture and

leadership, going on to be a military commander who captured the cities of Hermopolis and Saba.

But God had meticulously prepared him to learn all this for something else.

By the time he was 40, it “came into his heart to visit his brothers, the children of Israel.” (Acts 7:23) He was ready to be an activist against the unjust oppression of his people. “By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God.” (Hebrews 11:24) Witnessing up close an Egyptian violently abusing a Hebrew slave, Moses murdered the man in a rage. He tried to hide the body but the news got out. “He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand.” (Acts 7: 24, 25) He fled from Pharaoh for his life, into the desert of Midian.

Learning to be Nothing in the Desert

“Now Moses was watching the flock of his father-in-law... and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness...” (Exodus 3:1-14)

Watching and watching and watching... the verb tense in Hebrew is one of continuance. How long, Oh Lord? Will you forget me forever? The grief years rolled away with nothing left of the assets he once had. Not even the sheep he was watching were his. His strengths, training, passion and vision had atrophied. Liberate Israel? He is a defeated, forgotten, 80-year-old man. He’s got nothing.

This place of bewildering loss— it’s the place where we come face to face with being pretty much helpless. Like Moses. For some of us, it’s our health or our home. Job or savings. Our family. Our reputation. Our thin illusion of control. The place where we try to process a devastating diagnosis for a loved one. Or for ourselves. Life on the line.

But could that also be the place where God does a new thing? When self-reliance is out of the question, are we perhaps more open to the unexpected liberation that comes from dependence upon God instead?

“And the Angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire, out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning but it was not consumed.” God spoke to Moses, “Moses. Moses!” And he said, ‘Here I am.’” God told him not to come closer and to take off his sandals because he was on holy ground. There, God restored to Moses his true identity. “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.’ And Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look at God.” God told Moses that he had indeed seen the suffering of his people in Egypt. And that he was sending Moses to rescue them.

After that inexplicable 40-year delay, was Moses overjoyed to finally be recognized by God, to be believed in and charged with this daring operation befitting the man he used to think he was? After so long a wait? Maybe not. Moses would have been painfully aware that he had no strength or courage left to help his people’s suffering. Being humbled can be devastating. It can turn into bitterness. God’s inscrutable timing, almost never ours, can push us to despair. But, once the worst sting has worn off, humbling can also bring a strangely freeing epiphany: “Oh, it’s not up to me to fix my broken world after all. And I never could have. It will have to be God!”

Dear Lord,

*I praise you for your words to Moses, "But I will be with you" and I take these words into my own heart for this day, this night and forever. I praise you, Emmanuel, God with us. I praise you for redeeming us, for enduring the Cross, for the Resurrection, for the gift of your Holy Spirit indwelling us and for the gift of faith. I praise you that we will one day see you face to face. Help me to rely on you, not myself. Even when trouble overwhelms me, free me from fear and worry by humbling me to wait for You, confident in your grace and mercy by the power of your Holy Spirit.
In Jesus' name. Amen*

How would Moses respond?

"Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh to bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?"

Proving God to be Everything

And in reply, what did God say? "But I will be with you..." I am all you need, Moses. If you could understand what I am about to do, you would want exactly what I've given you in preparation. You would even want that wilderness delay that taught you the grave danger of trusting in the things I gave you, rather than in me.

I will be with you. I AM with you.

Still Moses pressed God, wanting to know his name. No one in biblical history had ever asked for God's name, but God gave it to him. "I AM WHO I AM. Say to this people, I AM has sent me to you."

YHWH. Yahweh. In Hebrew, "To Be." "Being." Like the supernatural flame of fire, needing no fuel, that stirred Moses' curiosity, Yahweh- the One true God without beginning or end- was graciously allowing Moses to use His name as his calling card. And still Moses made two more objections, amounting to, "Send somebody else, this job is way beyond me!" But is it possible that his plea was a delight to God? Did it signify that in fact Moses was finally ready, humble enough to rely on God for the task ahead?

In response, God miraculously transformed his shepherd's staff to do wonders, gave him a promise that when the job was done, Moses would meet God on that very mountain, and also sent for his brother Aaron to help him. Together, they went to Pharaoh and delivered Yahweh's people out of bondage in Egypt, shepherding them through the wilderness toward the Promised Land.

In spite of Moses' initial reluctance, he was changing deeply. Several times, Moses was alone for 40 days with Yahweh on Mount Sinai. (Jesus would spend 40 days in the wilderness alone, being tempted.) Soon, after pleading with the Lord to forgive his stiff-necked people, Moses expressed a longing to know his God more fully, to see his glory and goodness. Moses could not look upon God's face, but God spoke to him in answer. And allowed him to see his back. From the cleft in the rock, protected, Moses watched God's glory pass by him. God proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness..." (Ex. 34:6) And much later, on the Mount of Transfiguration at a far distant time in Moses' future, the Son of God was preparing for the Cross. Moses was brought with Elijah "in glory" to be with the true Messiah, the merciful and gracious Lord Jesus Christ. (Luke 9:30) The three of them spoke together of Jesus' imminent "departure" (his "Exodus" in Hebrew) when He would forever deliver His people from bondage to fear and death.

I wonder what Moses said to his Lord about that.

Art Reflection

John 10:7-15



St. Spyridon of Cyprus, the Wonderworker. Patron saint of potters.

Image Source: <https://www.facebook.com/smkyqtzxtl/photos/pb.100071295229325.-2207520000./4377883378970499/?type=3>

So Jesus again said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. (John 10:7-15)



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