

Waiting Is the Hardest Part
Mark 13:24–37; 1 Corinthians 1:3–9
Sunday, November 29, 2020 (Advent 1)

Well, that's just great! After everything we've already been through this year – a pandemic, lockdowns, political and racial tension like we haven't seen in *decades* resulting in protests and riots all over the country, hurricanes and wildfires, natural disasters all over our country, not to mention the fact that we haven't been *here* worshipping *together* in over *eight months*, and the fact that we lost Sean Connery and Alex Trebek in the same year – all we want now is a little Christmas spirit, tidings of comfort and joy, but instead we get *this*. Jesus going on about suffering and the sun being darkened and the moon not giving light and stars falling from heaven and the powers in the heavens being shaken (whatever *that* means). Is it too much to ask for a little Christmas joy? Because I think we've *earned* it this year!

We get Jesus telling us to “keep awake.” Well, I've lost enough sleep worrying about a whole *litany* of things this year, thank you very much! Jesus telling us to be patient and wait, when *all we've been doing* this year is *waiting*! I'm *tired* of waiting. Tired of waiting for an end to this pandemic. Tired of waiting to be back together. Tired of waiting for good news. Tired of waiting for peace and joy and love to be made real and manifest in this world and in our lives. Tired of waiting for Christ to come and make this whole mess new.

In fact, you know me, you know how much of a stickler I am for not celebrating Christmas before it is time. We don't sing Christmas carols during Advent; we wait for Christmas Eve. We don't decorate before Thanksgiving. For everything there is a season, and we need to wait until it is the proper season to do these things, because God has so ordered our lives. Well, in our house, the Christmas tree has been up and lit for *weeks*. The Christmas music has been playing on the radio and Christmas movies on TV for *a solid month now*. Jen is *loving* it,

because she has been decorating the whole house, and I haven't said anything about it, *because I'm tired of waiting*. I need a little joy and Christmas spirit in my life right now. But then we come *here* and get *Advent*.

Advent is a season of waiting. No matter how ready we are for Christmas, no matter how badly we need a savior to come *right now*, we are called to wait. To slow down in the midst of our hectic lives and non-stop world. To order our lives by the divine rhythms. To practice patience. To take a breath. To hope. Things that will serve us well, not just in Advent, but the rest of the year, too. Especially this year.

Just as a woman has to wait 40 weeks for the birth of her child, so *we* are called to wait with Mary for the birth of the one who will be named Jesus. But here's the thing. Advent is not just about waiting to celebrate the birth of Christ 2,000 years ago. It is *also* about waiting, expecting, hoping for Christ to come *again* into this world and into our lives to make all things new. Advent is not just about the *first* coming of Christ, it is also about the *second* coming of Christ.

And so we get this text from Mark, where Jesus talks about "the Son of man coming in the clouds with great power and glory." And while this might not be the text that we *want*, it's the text that we *get*. While this might not be the *season* that we *want*, it's the season that we *get*. This has not been the *year* that we wanted, but it's the year that we *got*. And our calling as the faithful people of God is to *wait* and *watch* for the ways that Christ is coming to us, *even in this*. But not just to wait *passively*, sitting around, doing nothing, killing time until Christmas. What Christ calls us to here is *active waiting*, *expectant* waiting, waiting with a *purpose*. And there is *work* to do, even in the wait.

Every year around this time, we get our kids these Advent calendars from Trader Joe's, and it has become one of their favorite things about this season. Each day, they open up a square and get a little piece of chocolate as they count down the days until Christmas. But last year I noticed that, while two of the calendars had the appropriate number of squares opened, *one* of them had not been opened at all. And so we asked about it, "Don't you want your Advent calendar this year?" And the response we got was, "Yeah, I'm just waiting to open them all at the end, so I can get all of the chocolate at once." And while I was *proud* of that level of delayed gratification in a child, I had to say, "You know, the chocolate's not really the point. These calendars help us count down the number of days to Christmas. They help us *expect* the coming of Christ. We're not just waiting til the end to get the big reward. We're building up to it. We are *doing something* while we wait." But their response was, "When I want to know how many days it is until Christmas, I just ask Siri!" (Which they *do*, multiple times each day.)

But you know, this question of, "How long is it until Christ comes," is actually what *drives* our scripture reading today. What Jesus says here is *in response* to a question asked by his disciples back at the beginning of chapter 13. Jesus is talking about the temple being destroyed, and his disciples ask him, "When will this be, and what will be the signs that it's about to happen?" They're constantly doing this. Jesus says something about the end of the age and the coming of the Son of Man, and the disciples are always, "When? When? When is this going to happen? How will we know?"

So what Jesus says here is couched in this larger response to their question. And what he ultimately says is, "Don't worry about it. People are going to tell you, 'Oh, now's the time! This is it! See, these things that are happening?' But when it's time, you'll know. Just like when you see leaves on a fig tree, you know that summer is near. When you see these things

taking place, you'll know that it's time. But until then, don't worry about it. Just keep watching and stay alert." And then he tells this story about a man going on a long journey and leaving his servants in charge of his home until he returns. He leaves them, Jesus says, "Each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch." Then he turns to his disciples and to us and says, "Therefore, keep awake, for you do not know when the master of the house will come, and you don't want him to find you asleep. So *keep awake.*"

Jesus' message here is that we need to stay vigilant in our waiting and keep doing the things we've been called by him to do until he comes again. That's a message we could hear *any* Advent. But I'm particularly mindful of something as I hear it *this* year. Like I said, what Jesus is saying here is *in response* to his statement that the temple will be destroyed and a question from his disciples about *when*. For Jewish people in the first century, the temple was the center of religious life. And the thought of having the temple *taken away* from them – *again* – and not being able to worship God there was *deeply troubling*.

I hear that, and I think about where *we* are right now. Our church building – most church buildings around the country – have been closed to public worship since March. Most of us have not set foot in here, and we haven't been able to *worship together* here, for eight months. And while this building hasn't been physically destroyed like what Jesus is talking about, the regular rhythms and rituals of our religious life have been significantly *disrupted*. Our place of corporate worship has been taken away from us, and our question, like the disciples, is, "When?" *When is this going to be over? When are we going to be able to come back? When will things go back to "normal?" When will it be safe again?*

And I don't want to dismiss those questions. Those are valid questions expressing real concern and real loss and pain, and I've been asking those same questions myself. But I also think that Jesus' response to *those* questions is the same as his response to his *disciples'* questions. "Don't worry about it. When it's time, you'll know. But until then, you've got work to do." It's about *using* our wait to prepare for what's *next*. And that's what Advent is, too. Using the wait of this season to prepare our hearts and minds and lives and world for the new way that Christ is coming among us.

Waiting is *hard*. And in our culture of instant gratification, we don't always like *doing* it, and we're not always very *good* at it. Fortunately, we have *another* scripture reading today that speaks to that. It's from 1 Corinthians chapter 1, verses 3 through 9, where Paul writes:

"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind – just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you – so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord."

Now, what strikes me here is that Paul is writing this to the Christians in Corinth, a church that we know was facing a lot of problems. Their life together was disjointed due to some conflict that they had been experiencing. And Paul has been *apart* from them for some time. Paul is like the man in Jesus' story who goes on a long journey and leaves the servants in charge, each with his work. But then Paul receives these reports that things aren't going so well.

So he writes to them, this church with so many problems, and instead of chastising them for their inability to wait productively until he returns and keep doing the work that they have been called to do, instead of doing *that*, Paul's first words to them are, "Grace to you. Peace to you. I give

thanks to God for you, for in every way you have been *enriched* in him, *strengthened* in him, so that you are not lacking in *any spiritual gift*.”

This isn't what we *expect* to hear Paul say to a church that is facing such difficult circumstances. But what he says to them is, “God has *already given you* everything you need to face this.” Not, “God *will* give you everything you need to face this.” “God has *already given you* everything you need. God has given you *grace*. God has given you *peace*. God has given you *every spiritual gift you need*. God has *enriched* you and *strengthened* you. And God will strengthen you to the end. *God is faithful*,” he says, “by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” That word Paul uses for *fellowship* is the Greek word *koinonian*, and it means *community*. “God has called you into the community established by his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” Paul is saying here, “God has given you everything you need, and God has given you *each other*.”

These Christians in Corinth, they are *waiting* for Paul to come back. They are *waiting* for Christ to come back. They are *waiting* for the peace and love and joy and *healing* that they need as a community of faith. And waiting is *hard*. So “Paul begins by reminding them of what they seem to have forgotten. That everything they *have* and *are* comes from God. That there would be no church without God. And whatever problems they are facing, the God who called them is powerful enough not only to help them find a way forward, but to *strengthen* them even as they await the revelation of Jesus. God is *faithful*. God is the one who has called them together in this fellowship. And God will see them through.”¹

¹ Carla Works, [Commentary on 1 Corinthians 1:3-9 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#)

And so now – 2,000 years later – we find ourselves *waiting*. Waiting for Christ. Waiting for the peace and love and joy and healing that we need as individuals, as a community of faith, and as a *world*. And waiting is hard. When you're waiting for something that doesn't seem to be happening, it can cause you to lose focus. It can cause you to doubt that it's ever going to happen at all. But what Jesus and Paul are saying to us here is to keep waiting, keep watching, keep working. God has already given us everything we need to endure this. And we don't have to endure it alone. Because God has given us each other, the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Whatever problems we are facing, whatever we're waiting for, *God is faithful*, and God will see us through. Let us pray...