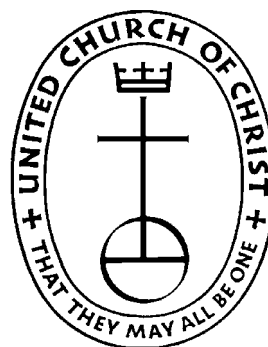


A Season of Waiting

A Sermon By —
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The Advent season of waiting teaches us four things: when waiting is difficult, we must reach out to others, sharing our fear and sadness and accepting their embraces; we need to enjoy good times when we can; God will walk with us in the most difficult periods of waiting; and sometimes we are called to an active, steadfast waiting.

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*A Liberal Church, Welcoming of All,
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Rev. Jerald Stinson
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First Congregational Church
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A Season of Waiting

Last week, Libby's sermon suggested that the season of Advent is a time for quiet, reflective preparation leading up to the celebration of Christmas. She noted that often in North American churches, Advent is essentially skipped as people move directly from Thanksgiving to Christmas, singing Christmas carols while avoiding the Advent hymns in minor keys.

I must admit that for most of my years in the ministry, I have been one of those Advent-avoiders. But Libby has worked on me, helped by others like Harold Sutherland and Robert Stapp, and I am beginning to appreciate the value of separating a time of preparation from the joyous celebration of Christmas itself.

A theme traditionally associated with Advent is "waiting" – waiting while we reflect and prepare. And waiting is something at which I'm not very good. I get too impatient. Last week, Libby talked with the children about taking her dog Sophie on walks. Sophie is not good at waiting either. She pulls at the leash, trying to run so she doesn't have to have to wait to see if she can find squirrels or cats to chase. She is too anxious to endure waiting.

I understand that. I hate waiting to be seated at a restaurant, or waiting in a doctor's office (especially one with outdated magazines), or waiting in a traffic jam. When our three daughters were teenagers, which has been a while ago, somehow I always ended up taking them clothes shopping. Endless hours in the junior department of clothing stores, listening to loud rock music while they tried on one outfit after another. And worst of all was taking our daughter Emily, who put me through that endless waiting and then had me go back the next day so she could return everything she bought and start shopping all over again.

I get impatient with waiting. But waiting is part of all of our lives. It is just something we have to do.

Two important Advent stories focus on waiting. On Christmas Eve, we will read the Christmas story starting with the second chapter of Luke. But Luke's first chapter is about preparing for the Christmas event, about waiting for things to happen.

So listen to two stories from Luke 1. They are stories. It doesn't matter if what

they describe actually happened; what matters is if the stories help bring meaning to our lives.

The first story, about Elizabeth:

In the days of the ruler Herod, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the priestly class of Abijah. His wife Elizabeth was a descendent of Aaron. Both were worthy in the sight of God and scrupulously observed all the commandments and ordinances of our God. They were childless – unable to conceive – and were both advanced in years.

As Zechariah was fulfilling his priestly office before God, he entered the sanctuary of our God to offer incense. While the full assembly of people was praying outside, an angel appeared to Zechariah standing to the right of the altar of incense. Zechariah, deeply disturbed, was overcome by fear.

The angel said to him, “Don’t be frightened, Zechariah. Your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear a son, whom you will name John. He will be your joy and delight and many will rejoice at his birth.”

So Elizabeth and Zechariah moved into a period of waiting for the birth of her son. Now the second story:

Six months later, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town in the Galilee called Nazareth, to a young woman named Mary who was engaged to a man named Joseph of the house of David. Upon arriving, the angel said to Mary, “Rejoice, highly favored one! God is with you! Blessed are you among women!”

Mary was deeply troubled by these words and wondered what the angel’s greeting meant. The angel went on to say, “Don’t be afraid, Mary. You have found favor with God. You’ll conceive and bear a son and give him the name Jesus. His dignity will be great and he will be called the Only Begotten of God.”

So Mary and Joseph also moved into a time of waiting, of anticipation of this birth.

Sometimes waiting can be a good experience – hopeful, positive anticipation. On Christmas morning, Kay and I will have our youngest granddaughter with us to celebrate her second Christmas. Then we will fly to Idaho where on Christmas evening we will celebrate Christmas with our other three grandchildren. The waiting for those things to happen is a good kind of waiting.

Sometimes a college student, perhaps in a difficult semester, waits with anticipa-

tion to return home for the holidays. Sometimes people who have purchased a new house wait with good anticipation to be able to move in. Sometimes there is good waiting for an exciting new job to begin, or good waiting for a much anticipated vacation trip.

At other times the waiting is hard, perhaps filled with fear, sadness or grief. Waiting for Christmas when you anticipate being alone. Waiting for Christmas when you are affected by an economic climate which means limited gifts, celebrating in a diminished capacity. Waiting for Christmas after a relationship ends – maybe children are with the former partner so Christmas won't be like past years. Waiting for Christmas after the death of a parent, spouse, child or good friend – knowing Christmas will never be the same without the one you loved.

There is waiting while you are out of work, money is running out and bills keep coming in. There is the waiting for the results of a biopsy, waiting to see if the chemotherapy is going to work, waiting on a transplant list.

Those are all difficult, fearful times of waiting.

And sometimes waiting is simultaneously good and bad. On the day I wrote this sermon, I sat with Lowell Johnson's family as the end of his life drew near. We sat around his bed waiting – watching his breath. The family didn't want him to die; they didn't want to lose him from their midst – so it was a profoundly sad kind of waiting. But they also didn't want him to continue without the dignity he so cherished, without any meaning to his life. Death would bring peace and completion. So in that sense, we were waiting for a good thing. Good and bad together.

I imagine it was the same in the storyteller's mind for Elizabeth and Mary. Elizabeth was beyond child-bearing age; there must have been fear related to her pregnancy. Mary was unwed; there would have been fears of stigma. But at the same time, both were overjoyed to be pregnant. Waiting with fear, waiting with joyful anticipation.

Now is there anything our faith can say to us about times of waiting? I think there is, and I want to list four things.

First, when waiting is difficult, when it is fearful or sad, that's when we need to reach out to others to let them know about our pain and to accept the offer of their embrace.

Let me return to Luke's words about Mary and Elizabeth, to the point where the two stories come together:

Within a few days (of the angel's appearance), Mary set out and hurried to the hill country of Judah where she entered Zechariah's house and greeted Elizabeth. As soon as Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her own womb and Elizabeth was filled with God's spirit and in a loud voice she exclaimed, "Blessed are you (Mary), among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb."

The story goes on to say that Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months. In her own mix of fearful and joyous waiting, Mary shared Elizabeth's waiting. They nurtured and sustained each other. We can't hold our fears in; we need to trust our friends, family and faith community with those fears, with our sadness, with our grief.

As Bud Kilsby began his rapid journey into death, Mary Ellen sent out emails to a long list of friends informing them about what was happening. That allowed people to reach out to her and to share their love for her as she dealt with the death of one for whom she had such long and deep love. She surrounded herself with family and they ministered to one another's grief and fear. Waiting – she did it the right way!

On several occasions, I have talked about my experiences last summer in the Palestinian village of Bil'in. Several times each week, Israeli soldiers come at night to beat, harass and arrest people. The villagers have lost most of their land to an Israeli settlement and the Israeli wall. They don't know if the village will survive. They demonstrate at the wall every Friday and are joined by courageous Israelis and international folk. They invite folks like my group to come and spend the night in their homes in case the soldiers attack. Villagers share their fears with these outsiders and let themselves be supported even as they continue the long wait for some kind of justice.

So when waiting is difficult, we must reach out to others, sharing our fear and sadness and accepting their embraces.

Secondly, we need to enjoy good times when we can. We need to avoid putting things off when we have an opportunity to be with those we love and those who care about us. We need to take those moments when they present themselves to us.

My mother could never let herself enjoy the present; it was as if she needed to always anticipate and worry about the possibility of something negative. In college, I would fly home at Christmas and as I entered the terminal, she would embrace me and say, "Can't you stay longer than two weeks?" Worry about the future, waiting for negative things to happen, kept her from enjoying the present. We need to enjoy the good times, the relationships, the opportunities to meaningfully serve others, in the present moment.

Jesus spoke of a rich landowner who put off that which he found meaningful so he could build more barns to hold his abundant crops. He postponed that which would have brought him happiness, and in Jesus' story, he died while building those barns. We must live in the present.

Third, our faith itself speaks to difficult waiting. Libby and I frequently use Bishop Jack Spong's Trinitarian formula in our preaching, prayers and benedictions: "God is the mystery of life, the mystery of love and the mystery of being."

There is so much in life that we don't fully comprehend, so much mystery. And sometimes people work so hard to fill in all the blanks with dogma, to eliminate the mystery. But Spong says that we find God in the mystery itself.

In my theology – which may differ radically from some of your theologies – there is a force, a spirit of love, a mysterious eternal presence that I call God. I think I can understand enough about that eternal presence to find ways to live meaningfully and with purpose. For me, the path to that understanding is the human Jesus, my teacher and guide. For others, it is Jesus the divine Christ. For others the path to that understanding comes through traditions of Moses and the Torah, or through Mohammad or the Buddha.

But what's important is that we can link ourselves with that eternal presence and in some mysterious way we can sense that presence when we find ourselves waiting with fear and sadness. There is no promise that we can avoid painful periods of waiting, but the Psalmist assures us with a beautiful metaphor that God is our shepherd and will walk with us in the darkest of times, in the most difficult periods of waiting.

Theologian Paul Tillich said, "Our time is a time of waiting; waiting is its special destiny. And every time is a time of waiting, waiting for the breaking in of eternity. All time, both history and in personal life, is expectation."

Now the fourth and final faith response to waiting. Sometimes we are called to an active, steadfast waiting. Middle East scholar and UCC minister Dale Bishop once wrote about the Arabic word *sumud*. He said, "*Sumud* means patience and more. It carries a sense of steadfastness and downright stubbornness." Palestinians use that word to describe their refusal to leave their land in the face of occupation.

In 1948, when Israel became a nation, 530 Palestinian villages were destroyed and their residents had to flee. I visited the remnants of two of those villages last summer. Our guide, now 65, was a child in 1948. His village is currently an Israeli suburb with only an abandoned mosque and a couple houses left from its Palestinian days. He

continues to wait in the hope that someday he can go home. Over one million Palestinian refugees still live in United Nations camps – waiting to return to their homes. There is a kind of steadfastness in that waiting.

Likewise, last summer I visited some Jewish residents of Sderot, the city targeted by rockets from Gaza. They are in dialogue with people from Gaza and are equally steadfast in waiting for a kind of peace that will mean they don't have to live in fear of rocket attacks.

For some who are active in the peace movement, this past week was difficult. Some of us feel that an American president in whom we had placed great hope has let us down and is leading us on another pathway to more futile death and destruction. Others of you may see the surge of troops in Afghanistan in a different way than I do.

But the day after President Obama's speech, hundreds of people participated in the World March for Peace and Nonviolence. Most of us in that march are critical of the President's decision, but the speeches were filled with hope – a steadfast stubborn waiting that says peace is indeed possible.

Ammon Hennacy, a famous World War I pacifist, was once asked: "Hennacy, do you think you can really change the world?" He replied: "Perhaps not, but I'll be damned if it can change me."

There is a story in the Gospel of Luke about a widow who appears every day at the ruler's court demanding justice, *sumud*, stubborn steadfast waiting – and her persistence was rewarded by the ruler's grudging concession.

Sumud is a kind of waiting steeped in hope. Dale Bishop, talking about *sumud*, said, "We Christians are stubborn in our dreams. We await the improbable, knowing that God's grace defies all accepted wisdom. We await Jesus' birth knowing the heavy odds against the possibility that a child born to a poor family, in Roman occupied territory, in the most humble of circumstances, could turn our world upside down."

That's Advent waiting; that's *sumud*.

Advent is not simply a season to await the coming of Christmas. It is instead an opportunity to reflect on all the waiting in our lives and to do so by renewing and enlarging our hopes.

Let me end with three quotations.

George Bernard Shaw once wrote, "You see things and you say, 'Why?' But I

dream things that never were and I say, 'Why not?'" That's the hope that can infuse steadfast waiting.

Father Henri Nouwen wrote, "The spiritual life is a life in which we wait, actively present to the moment, trusting that new things will happen to us, new things that are far beyond our own imagination, fantasy or prediction." That's the hope that speaks to our waiting.

And finally, Emily Dickinson wrote, "Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul. And sings the tune without the words, and never stops, at all."

May all of our waiting this Advent season be filled with a hope that keeps singing and never stops. Amen.