



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Advent 1 (B)

November 29, 2020

RCL: Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

During Advent and Christmas, we will be using study prompts and other activities tied to the sermon for the week. Read the sermon aloud and follow-up with spoken responses to the two questions at the end. Find our full sermon compilation for individual, small group, or congregational use, *Sermons for Advent and Christmas 2020* at www.sermonsthatwork.org.

Waiting Upon the Lord

by the Rev. Canon Whitney Rice

Waiting is the hardest thing to do because it feels like you're not doing anything. And it seems twice as hard when you're young. When we're children, Christmas always seems eons away and we think the end of school or our birthday will never arrive.

And we 21st-century folks certainly have an ever-shrinking attention span; our wealth and technology allow us to access virtually anything we want any time we want. Everything is sooner, faster, now. And boy, do we love that speed, especially technological speed. Wait ten seconds to let a webpage load? Are you kidding? Get a faster connection! Wait five seconds for a document to print? What the heck is wrong with this printer? Wait to let yourself cool down before sending that email or posting that social media rant? Are you kidding? Go, go, go! You snooze, you lose, that's our motto. If anyone needs to learn the Advent virtue of waiting upon the Lord, it's us.

Virtually the only things we haven't been able to speed up or shorten are our basic biological processes. It still takes nine long months to have a baby, whether we want to wait that long or not. And so, if we want to be with Mary in her journey toward giving birth to Jesus, we need to settle into the long haul. We've already been busy doing other things for the first eight months, and now in her last month of pregnancy, we're just going to have to take these four weeks of Advent and wait.

Our scripture from Isaiah today has an interesting take on waiting. The writer is marveling at how different the God of Israel is from the other gods in the cultures of the time. And then the writer remembers, "When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence. From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him."

The prophet is surprised not just by the mighty deeds like earthquakes – the writer is equally stunned that here is a God who *works* for the people, and the people for whom God works are the people who wait for God.

Published by the Office of Communication of The Episcopal Church, 815 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017

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What is it like to wait for God? Many of us know exactly what that is like. We wait for God to explain why a family member died too young. We wait for God to open a path out of a marriage that has ended, into a new place where healing might begin. We wait for God to reveal an open door back into a faith community when we've been hurt by so many churches before.

And of course, virtually this entire year has been a time of waiting. We've waited during lockdowns and quarantines. We've waited on masks and respirators and toilet paper. We've waited on test results for the coronavirus, wondering whether we are positive or not. We've waited endless weeks and months, not able to visit our loved ones in hospitals and nursing homes, in order to protect them.

We've waited on our kids going back to school and waited to see if our jobs would hold out during the crisis. We've waited on unemployment checks and stimulus checks. We've waited in line to vote and waited to see if our mail-in ballot went through, and then waited on the results of the election. We've waited for a vaccine. And we've waited and waited and waited to go back to church in the old ways that were familiar and comfortable to us.

2020 has been nothing but a year of waiting. Perhaps we are better equipped now than we ever have been to understand the oft-repeated Biblical mandate to wait upon the Lord. The Good News shared with us today is that God is working for us as we wait for God.

And we're actually doing two kinds of spiritual waiting right now. We're waiting for the coming of the Christ Child on Christmas Day, that glorious moment of incarnation when God comes to be with us in human form. That's a fixed endpoint that we know ahead of time. Come December 25, we will be celebrating Jesus' arrival.

But we're doing another kind of waiting. We're waiting for the signs of the Incarnation in our own lives. We're waiting to see the new and next way that God will be manifest in our own individual time and place. God is with us, but where and how? That is how we keep company with Mary: as the watchful sentinels always on the lookout for the new revelation waiting to be discovered among the everyday.

Patience is a hard-earned virtue, and many of us are deeply wearied by all the waiting we've had to do, all the times we've had to say no to ourselves and our children this year in order to stay safe and keep others safe. It might feel like 2020 is a year out of time, a wasted and empty expanse that consisted of nothing but life on hold.

But is that true? Was this time of waiting really wasted? Mary's time of waiting was almost as long as ours has been. What has been blossoming and growing in your heart during this time of waiting? What new thing is ready to be born in your spiritual community after having been forced to slow down and really ask what is most important about church? How has your family found new strengths and graces by the call to adapt and the sudden multiplication of time together and new challenges with school and work?

Mary's time of waiting was to a purpose. It had a goal and an end, and she faithfully pursued it with God's help. As you reflect on your waiting this year, what has God grown in you? What will be the gift you offer the world this Christmas as Mary did? It takes awake and alert eyes to see the grace even amid the suffering we've endured.

But the Good News is that the slow, necessary, at times painful work of being changed, of being made ready for incarnation, is not up to us alone. God is the agent of our transformation as we wait. Knowing that reminds us that we don't have to figure this out on our own. There is peace and comfort in the truth that as the endless days of waiting crawl by, God is active within us and our communities. Isaiah tells us in our scripture today, "Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand." We are God's work of art, being painstakingly shaped into the vessel of incarnation that will bring the presence of Christ to the world. You are a masterwork. And a masterwork takes time.

And Paul reminds us of what we most need to hold on to through the long weary days of waiting for grace: "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." Look back on this year and see the strength with which you endured its trials. See the creativity with which your spiritual community sought to walk together in new ways. See the call to justice and peace that rang even through our most bitter divides in society. And know that it has all led to this, the season of Advent, the time of upheaval and waiting, of change and pause, of grace and truth.

And so, we pray, and we stick together, and we love one another, and we wait upon the Lord. And Isaiah, the great prophet of the Advent season, announces the Good News: "Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." Amen.

The Rev. Canon Whitney Rice serves as the Canon for Evangelism & Discipleship Development for the Diocese of Missouri. See more of her work at www.roofcrashersandhemgrabbers.com.

1. Compared to when you were a child, how do you handle waiting? Are you more patient? Less patient? Why?

2. Waiting upon the Lord is no easy task – especially given our rapidly-shrinking attention spans and the particular challenges of this past year. What is one thing you can do to wait more patiently and lovingly?