

Redefining the Wait

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It is Advent! Finally! Christmas is one week closer, and I don't know about you, but I couldn't be more excited. I know that many people have the rule of not putting up Christmas decorations or not listening to Christmas music before Thanksgiving and I get it—sometimes there is too much of a good thing. But, in the Nutter Dowling home, we've gotten in the tradition of putting up our tree on November 1st. With all the travels that we do as a young family and the craziness that is the Advent season in the church, we found that if we waited to decorate, it became a thing to check off on a list instead of something that brought us joy. And normally we feel like we're fighting the whole world when we set it up that early—people are appalled! But this year—this year felt different. It seems like the whole world is ready for Christmas.

Because there's something magical that happens in December. The lights shine a little bit brighter, our families seem a little more tolerable, and our struts are a little bit bouncier. And I think that we all needed that a little sooner this year. Whether your personal life has been rainbows and sunshines or more like rain clouds and lightning, as a collective community, it's been a rough year. Children separated from their families at the border, freaky weather patterns due to climate changes, too many mass shootings to even remember which one is which—and things a little closer to home, scandals within our cathedrals, refugees and immigrants being targeted on Buffalo's West side, death and sicknesses within our congregation and community... It's been hard.

And so I think a lot of us were ready for the Christmas bug to bite. And yet, as Presbyterians, we're called to a season of Advent. What does this even mean? Advent has traditionally been known as a time of waiting—waiting for the Christ Child to come to save us. A time for us to examine our day to day lives, make time for a devotional or at least time to read scripture before starting our full schedules.

Typically, I, your preacher for week 1 of Advent would get up here and denounce capitalism, the never ending list of things to do and buy by December 25th, the hustle and bustle and move move moving that happens this month. And I, your week 1 Advent preacher, would talk about our need as Christians to sit in wait, to pray, to meditate, and to simply be. I believe all of those things are true. How many of us Marie Kondo'ed our houses this past summer—got rid of bag after bag full of "stuff" that we don't really need? And how many of us have forgotten to pray because our to do list was so long

that from the moment we woke til the moment we fell asleep we were thinking about all the things we had to do?

Typically, Advent is a time where we talk about waiting. Waiting for the Christ child to show up. Waiting for December 24th to finally get here. Waiting for peace and love and justice to come in the form of a Savior that would humble himself to come as the most vulnerable thing in the world: a baby.

Well, I wonder if waiting is what God really wants us to do for the next 24 days. Or does God want us to spend the next 24 days reprioritizing our lives into the things that can wait—that never ending to do list, going into debt to show our loved ones that we love them, etc—and the ones that can't wait—giving to the poor, befriending the lonely, standing up for the oppressed? I don't think that God is giving us December off from being good Christians—this isn't a Black Friday sale! In Advent we hear the Good News: Jesus is coming! Peace and love are coming! So why do we think it's time to wait idly by?

We hear this same proclamation in this morning's text: He, Jesus, shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob (that's us!), come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!

So, I'm making this suggestion for us this Advent: instead of idly waiting by for justice to come, let us think of this advent as a time of preparation. Preparing ourselves for justice and peace and love in the form of Jesus coming. Preparing ourselves for a new life and a new covenant with God. Preparing our hearts for a time where people will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Preparing our world for a time of peace.

We believe in a God that calls us to join God in the work that they are already doing in the world—not a big God in the sky that comes down and rights all the wrongs and bangs Gods gavel judging the good from the bad. Our God is an invitational one—one that tells us that we have a job to do cleaning up this mess. At the end of our verses today it doesn't say, "O House of Jacob, wait around til God comes!" It calls us to actively live in the path that the Lord is lighting for us to go down.

I'll admit that this isn't an idea that only I am asking you all to do. I have some friends of mine that own a company called A Sanctified Art. If you've ever seen someone painting or drawing or sculpting on stage at anything Presbyterian over the last couple of years,

it was probably one of these women. The company is owned by 4 ordained female pastors around my age who began this movement in the PCUSA on the belief that congregations deserve better liturgy, art, and creativity in worship while recognizing that Pastors are often times too busy to make and find good art on their own while balancing all the other duties it takes to serve our churches well.

These 4 women work together to create art, help others create art, write liturgy, devotionals, and workshops for us to experience God in new ways that we could never have done before. They believe deeply that the Word is best interpreted in community with the full breadth of our creativity—whether that be making art or just looking at it, reading poetry or writing it, all the while being inspired to explore our Holy texts in new ways from new perspectives.

This Advent, they have created a devotional that I am asking you all to take home, read, and truly give yourself to for the next 24 days. I know you're busy. I know this might seem like another thing to check off your list that honestly has no more space to add to. But we believe, we meaning Pastor Tom and even the session that I presented it to two weeks ago, believe that this will be something that will help you with that to do list—it will help you to discern the things that can wait from the things that can't.

Because the theme can be kind of confusing for those of us who have tied Advent to waiting for quite some time. It is "What Can't Wait?" And it calls us to do just what I've asked us to do this advent: shift our definition of waiting from just pointless stand by to intentional planning, preparing, and laying the groundwork. We've got to make the cradle that the baby Jesus will sleep in. We've got to say "yes" like Mary does when presented with an unplanned pregnancy. We've got to turn on the fire that will allow God to turn our swords into plowshares, Frankly, we've got to get our business in order.

In the short months since I've been here, Pastor Tom and I have talked about how wonderful this church is to serve. You all love a challenging sermon. You take your baptismal vows seriously in caring for our littlest theologians. Just last month you all broke records in supporting the youth fundraiser of this church. The music program here is unmatched in the area. The three Sunday School classes we have here are teaching basics of the faith in new and fresh ways. You all connect the dots between what Jesus calls us to do and the social justice implications of what Jesus calls us to do. You do so many things so well.

But, of course, like all churches, we have our growing edges. As your Christian Educator, I feel called to help us grow together in our daily Christian practices. I think a lot of people who are still attending church (which is becoming less and less as the

years progress) think of church as a box that they've checked off for the week. On Sunday afternoons, we can tell ourselves "perfect! We got our God for the week! See you again next Sunday morning!" And we pat ourselves on the back because how many people even still go to church anyway? There are times in our lives that making time to do daily spiritual disciplines are easy and there are times when it is much harder. And I say this as a spiritual leader—for us too, there are times when prayer and meditation and scripture reading is as easy as pie and there are times when it isn't.

Something I hope you will see our leadership giving you over the next couple of years are opportunities to learn about how to integrate your relationship with God into your workplaces and kitchen tables in ways that are practical and realistic. One of those opportunities is over the next 4 weeks of Advent through this devotional. I pray that it is something that can bring you peace in a month of chaos, bring you inspiration in a world that sucks everything out of you, and brings you a solid foundation to build 2020 onto.

I will leave you with just one piece of poetry from the devotional that I believe will wet your tastebuds for actually completing the devotional while helping to explain the theme for our Advent together:

What If God Had Waited?

What if God had waited
For Mary to be wed,
For Herod to relent,
For a legitimate birthing bed?

What if God had waited
Until the powerful promoted peace,
And the politicians agreed?

What if God had waited
For a plan with no risk of failure,
For a place that felt safe and secure?

What if God had waited
For the anxious to find rest,
For the cynic to know hope,
For the brokenhearted to be whole?
For the wars to cease,
For the violence to end,
For the fears to pass,

For the weapons to be banned?

What if God had waited
For the earth to heal,
For the laws to change,
For every life to matter the same,
For the addict to be freed from shame,
For the refugees to not be blamed?

What if God had waited
Until all was calm,
All was bright,
For a future that might
Never come?

What if God had waited?

But God couldn't wait.

God couldn't wait to be love known in
flesh and bone--

And neither should we.

Advent Week 1 is the week where we light the Hope candle. And this year, let's have an active hope instead of a wish upon a star magic kind. Let's bring hope to those around us who are waiting and maybe, just maybe, that act of hope will be the one to turn our swords into plowshares and be the one that unlearns war. Let's hope together. Amen.