

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious Loving God, on this the first week of Advent, we remember that the world waits in hope; the world prepares for its completion. The world holds its breath for God to come fully in power and strength. There are signs throughout history that your coming will come to completion in your time, and we take signs more as signals that everything is happening right now as we want it to be. Your first coming wasn't immediate, nor will your second one be; they come as the Kingdom has and will: in the fullness of time. Lead us to be faithful in watching, faithful in serving, mindful in living, so that we faithfully make our schedule to be yours. Gracious God, we pray for those on our minds and our hearts, and ask that you be present in whatever waiting we feel to trust in you and act accordingly.

In this season of waiting, we long to not search prematurely. We try to wait for you to come in your own time, for although we try to trust in you, our oh so human desire is always to have it right now. We want results; we want progress, we want all of the benefits right now at our leisure. This is not your way. Christ came in the right time, in God's own time, and you came when it was right, when all things truly came together. You came in your own purpose, you came with truth, you came with goodness when the time was right. We pray for the wisdom to see and the hope to trust in you working in the right time for us personally and for the greater world. We pray all these things in the name of the Lord who always shows up when the time is right, Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray as one people...

## SERMON

We don't have time to delay in today's fast paced world. The other day, I sat down to write a little at Starbucks and found myself waiting five minutes for my drink. I found myself a bit annoyed at them. How hard is it, you know, to make a grande chai? There was

only about five other people waiting for drinks, so it seemed like it shouldn't have taken that long. OK, got my drink, no big deal. When I sat down to get to work, I found myself getting frustrated because the internet signal on my phone kept cutting in and out when I was trying to play a game. It was so irritating when things are moving so fast, to have the problem of...cutting...out...when...you...are...trying...to...keep...things...pretty...stable. That evening, we took off on our plane, only to find a delay when we landed. There didn't happen to be any open gates at the airport, so we had to wait for a gate. They made us wait two and a half hours, I mean two and a half hours, on the tarmac just to park ourselves at the gate. There were people hooting and hollering because, you know, life didn't just go the way they wanted it to go. I found myself very annoyed at these people grumbling a little too loud. What could the people in the airline do when the airport wasn't helping them out? Then I realized my problem. I was a bit hypocritical looking at them with judgment when just a few hours earlier, I was internally complaining about internet signal and my late chai tea. We all fall into the easy trap of our world today: right now.

We need all the conveniences of the world right now. We need cell reception, TV, restaurant service, we want to be healed of all our ailments; you name it: we want it right now. We get completely bent out of shape when these seemingly important things don't happen on our schedules and the way we expect, whether that be an unexpected delay on a flight or simply getting the drink you ordered. The issue is subtle and dangerous. It's called control, and we all fall under its power. Big or small, we all do it. Hold off, God, you're already so busy; leave this to me. I can take care of it all right now before lunch! It's an easy trap whether you worship in church or just happen to preach there.

The ultimate alternative is trusting the one truly in control because “right now” and the way we want isn’t the right expectation when we follow Jesus Christ. Today we recognize a special message: hope, and hope carries with it two ideas. The first is “wait.” The second is surprise. In other words, God doesn’t always move on our schedule and always in the way that we expect or want. God moves when God decides it is right and sometimes in ways that we don’t want or least expect. We forget that God is already here; God is working in God’s way, perhaps the way that we don’t particularly want or expect. The message is key on this first Sunday of Advent, the time we traditionally preach about the coming again of Jesus Christ. That topic carries a lot of expectations. In this day in age and maybe every age, every Christian wants the Day of the Lord to come as quickly as possible, to end everything horrible happening in the world. Jesus message emphasizes, though, that God comes and goes as God does, and God’s ways aren’t always ours. God may be, right now, moving in ways we don’t see or don’t expect.

Our scripture lesson comes from Luke, of Jesus explaining the signs of what is to come with the Kingdom’s coming. There will be signs in the sun and the moon; there will be confusion among the nations, and before you know it, the Kingdom of God is at hand. Our ears hear this automatically as the Second Coming of the Lord, but Jesus is also saying something much more simple and present. He speaks of the eventual coming of the Kingdom, what we call the Second Coming, and the ever-present coming of the Kingdom of God. They are both present and later. As he says, “This present generation will not pass away before all things have taken place.” In other words, the Second Coming of Christ has not yet taken place, but God is here; the Kingdom of God is at hand. It simply shows up where it is least expected and sometimes least wanted.

It's the same problem throughout history with God. Just with Jesus, we remember that the Son of God showed up not as a King but a carpenter peasant. The Son of God showed up when the time was ripe, not when the world expected its Messiah. And, in turn, the Messiah says that "Hey, things are gonna happen as and when they should. Hold tight, watch, and wait for God to work. When you got your eyes open, when you are listening well, you'll know when God's gonna do what God's gonna do." He takes us out of the equation here, but there are those times when God is asking us to step up. It's all a matter of, as he says, being watchful and waiting for the right time, not being weighed down with things we cannot control. Our worries, instead, are with growing the Kingdom in the here and now. We have to just wait for God to do as God is going to do, leaving behind control.

In our dog training, one of our commands is "wait." It's especially integral when we are feeding the dog. If you know the typical dog, mealtime is one of the most exciting times of the day for the pup. Whenever we feed Willoughby, we hold his meal dish and tell him "wait." He is to stop, look, and wait for the signal, which is "OK." It's a signal to the dog to hold on a second, but ultimately, the patience will lead to the rewards he wants. If he tries to take control and races toward the bowl, the bowl gets lifted up, and he has to go back into a sit until the signal is given. He quickly learned that the rewards he wants will come in due time as long as he doesn't take control. We are acting for the dog's ultimate benefit, even as the dog is saying, "Hey, where's my meal? I'm hungry right now!" Patience rewards him, even though we aren't always working on the schedule and way he particularly wants. You know it when he starts carrying around his food bowl.

There's another bible story that shows us the importance on waiting for God to do as God would do. It is one of the earliest stories of Abraham and Sarah, some of the

greatest heroes of the faith. As Genesis tells us, God favored Abraham over all others. God told Abraham, "I will give you such an amazing lineage that your descendants will be more than the grains of sand on the seashore!" Just one little problem: Abraham and Sarah had no children. They were already old, and try as they might, they simply could not conceive a child. Sure, God spoke directly to Abraham and delivered this message, but, well, why wait when you can take matters into your own hands, and ya know, help God out a bit? Sarah told Abraham that she cannot conceive, so why don't you take my servant and have a child with her so that I will have children through her? Abraham had a child with Sarah's servant Hagar, a son named Ishmael. Alright! God's plan is back on track, right? Well, that works, but then later, whadda know?? Sarah conceives a son she names Isaac. Oops. Now we have a situation on our hands. OK, there is the proper heir, Isaac, but there is now another factor in the mix, Hagar and Ishmael. Sarah convinced Abraham that Hagar would steal her thunder and make Ishmael more important, so she asked him to kick them out of the household. Abraham didn't want to, but he followed her orders nonetheless. Not only did Sarah and Abraham become more concerned with their own control over the situation, they became cruel in kicking out a valued member of the household over jealousy. Issue after issue started piling on because it seemed like a better idea to take control into their own hands instead of letting God's plan come to being as it should. Nevertheless, as we all know, everything came to be as it should. Isaac's lineage allowed God's promise to Abraham come true, and although they were dismissed, God took care of Hagar and Ishmael. It just could have been a lot easier if they had let go of the results they wanted and simply trusted that God would act when and how God knew would be best.

But we easily act the same way. Ill just help God here...oh wait...oops. God's telling us that all will come to completion, all will be exactly as it should in due time; leave control behind. Instead, be watchful for the Kingdom of God and work for its benefit. Don't let the precious time we have here go to waste with worry, because there is still so much we need to do: feed the hungry, worship faithfully, live lives that continually grow and seek after our God to continually grow that Kingdom in the here and now. But as for the great day of the Lord, its far out of our hands. As we talked about a couple of weeks ago, Jesus says: "no one but the father knows the day or time," but our stubborn humanity thinks that if we put a couple of verses together in the right way, the puzzle will be apparent that God had it laid out all along. False. It's the subtle danger of figuring out God and establish our control.

This is a key message this season. Today we begin Advent. It is a time for being observant, for expecting God in the least expected places and the least expected times. It is a time for remembering this is Advent. This is the time to focus on very hard things: to wait, to prepare, to make way for the coming of the Lord. Consider the Advent calendar. If you have one of these, you open one door each day, and you receive something, whether that be chocolate or a prize, each day. I get a LEGO advent calendar this year. It is an appropriate image. Each day is a mystery. Each day provides its own prize or complication, and sometimes you get something you don't exactly expect and staves off instant gratification. The world preaches something different: it's no fun having to wait and prepare! It's more about right now, and that's the problem, when our gospel preaches keeping watch. After all, God comes when God comes; God shows up where God shows up.

We live in a confusing time and a frustrating time, where things never seem to be as they should. We can easily get bent out of shape because of our lack of control, and we

often do, no one excepted. But there is an alternative that is much more faithful, much more biblical, than our frustration at the ghost of control. I'll repeat the same advice the great philosopher Aaron Rodgers once told a large group of misguided people called Packer Fans, and I bet you know this, Jeff: "R-E-L-A-X. Relax." Just relax, because the One who should be in control IS in control. In our time, it's the invitation to simply let our God be God, which is hard for us folks that love control. God is working as God will, and our task is ever the same this Advent and the seasons to follow: pursue faithfulness and cultivate waiting on the Lord, for God always comes in God's time. Guaranteed, or your money back. Thanks be to God who calls us to act faithfully and wait...and the answers will come in their time. Amen...and Amen.