

Sacred: Life Infused with Holiness
Sacred Time

Matthew 3:1-3; Romans 13:11-12a

The word for this season, “advent,” means *coming*. By its very name, the season invites us to notice something that has not yet arrived. And so, Advent is a season of waiting.

And the truth is, we hate waiting. From the time we are very young, we have trouble with this. “Are we there yet?” children ask from their car seats. We’ve grown up now, and still we nag hosts at busy restaurants: How much longer until my table is ready? Tell the truth: haven’t you too silently counted the number of items that the person in front of you has taken out of their cart in the Express lane at the grocery store?

What we really hate is not knowing exactly how long we will have to wait. Companies with good customer service have learned to ease our anxiety by making the experience more predictable. “Your estimated hold time is 5 minutes,” that pleasant voice says on the phone. “The doctor is running 15 minutes late,” says the sign on the wall. There are engineers who study these things; they have learned that over-estimating wait time is helpful, so that you’re surprised when your name is called ahead of schedule; and that people get enraged at any arrangement that isn’t clearly first-come-first-served. At Disneyland, where waiting times for rides can be very, very long, there is an app for your phone that lets you check regularly on how much longer until you get to the front of the line. In some places, you can pay extra to reduce your waiting-in-line time.

Maybe what’s hardest about waiting is feeling that someone else is in control of whatever it is you need or want. The DMV clerk who will not move any faster, the people leisurely finishing a conversation over their check in the restaurant, slow traffic on the freeway, the lab at the hospital processing your test results—there is just nothing you can do (politely, at least) to speed things up.

People with less power, and less privilege, wait more. I read just last week an article about a woman named Jelen. She lives in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Jelen has two daughters, but she can only afford to send one of them to school. She chose her younger daughter to send to school, because the younger daughter is smarter—which means that the other daughter will be poor, like Jelen, for the rest of her life.

In the front yard of Jelen’s home is a mango tree. The tree is huge, and it produces hundreds of mangoes every year. Now she sells most of them down the road, for pennies, at a local market. But Jelen knows those mangoes would sell for several dollars each in America. If she could only get them on a ship, she could make enough money to send both her daughters to school.

After the earthquake in 2010, when Haiti was getting a lot more attention from the rest of the world, people talked about a project to help poor Haitian farmers like Jelen ship their mangoes to America. Now, it is five years later. Somewhere along the way, US AID changed its strategy in

Haiti and canceled the project. And so, Jelen still waits, and one of her children will wait with her for something to change her life.

There may be a few people who are rich enough and powerful enough to eliminate waiting from their lives, but most of us will never be that. For most people, waiting is a common part of life. However action-oriented we might think of ourselves, we are not in charge of everything; we cannot re-organize the world to save us time, or erase our dependence on someone else's attention.

So it's a little bit jarring—out of sync with the culture, not that comfortable—when the Church invites you in these four weeks before Christmas into a season of waiting, as if it's a good thing, something we should welcome.

Part of the Advent ritual of waiting is about remembering—re-enacting—that first Christmas, when Mary and Joseph waited for their baby to be born in a manger. But there's another aspect as well to the Advent tradition of waiting. Christianity has always held an expectation that Jesus will come again, to complete the work of changing the world that he began when he was here the first time. In fact, the whole New Testament—the gospels that tell the stories of Jesus, the letters of Paul, explaining what it means to live as people of faith in a risen Christ, the Book of Revelation that describes the end times in detail—all those words were written by people who were waiting for Jesus to come again. In the words we read this morning, from Paul's letter to the Romans: "Now is the moment for you to wake up; the night of waiting is almost gone; the day is near." He wrote that about 30 years following Jesus' death. And he wrote those words confident that Jesus' second coming—God's final action to make things right—was coming very soon—like next year, maybe even next month.

As you probably know, Christ has not come again, at least in any form people have recognized as meeting the predictions. Along the way, some people have made careers out of interpreting the signs, watching for the end times. Other people have given up. As Bishop Will Willimon said once, "It's hard to stand on tiptoes for 2,000 years." But there is this waiting—an *expectancy*—that is built into our story as people of faith. The Messiah has come, and is still coming; God is not yet fully present. The kingdom of God is among us, and the earth is still pretty much a mess. We get a glimpse of the light, and there are layers of stuff in between, that keep us from seeing it fully. We are not yet all that we were created to be. There is more work, more understanding of God's intentions, yet to be done.

We live in the in-between time—what theologians have called *already and not yet*. The Messiah has already come: we have heard the story, and it includes both Christmas and Easter. We know how this one ends: in glory. There is no force in the world that is greater than God's goodness. We have heard the promise: that nothing, not even death, is stronger than God's power to bring life. But at the same time, our hope—Jesus' promise of a world where suffering ceases, where there is justice for everyone, where peace is our way of life, where no one is left out—that hope has not yet been realized.

We are likely to spend our while lives in this in-between time. What shall we do while we are waiting? How shall we live? We could just keep checking our cell phones for new messages,

but I'm pretty sure that distracting ourselves from the wait is not what people of faith are called to do.

This world needs desperately what we can bring in this time: our attentiveness, our faith, our hope in the middle of the already and the not yet. We can be what this time calls for: to live as though the kingdom of God has already arrived, with our hands in the dirt, our hearts in the work of bringing healing and hope into the places where it is sorely missing. *And*, at the same time, we can stand with our faces raised up in hope and anticipation that God will do what *only* God can do. We can wait—patiently, humbly, gracefully—with our ears cocked and our eyes open for signs that the Messiah is being born again, in some way that is not in our control, in some place that will always surprise us.

It's an awkward posture, head up and hands out. It's not natural for evolved and educated humans, who are more inclined either to be cynics bent over under the hopelessness of the world or dreamers whose eternal optimism keeps their heads above the clouds (and the news). But maybe it's the need for that awkward position that makes this waiting time holy...sacred.

This season—longer than Advent, really; perhaps our whole lives—is a time of contradictions, a time when people of faith are called—*when the world needs us*—to hold together things that seem like opposites. Advent is a season that reminds us of how to live in the *already and not yet*:

Waiting in darkness, watching for the light.

With our heads up in anticipation; being still, watching and listening for signs of grace; *and* our hands out in action: giving, helping, saying, “Yes, come along; there will be plenty for everyone.”

Being in and enjoying the warmth and celebration of this season—family and friends, all of it—*and* being attentive to the places where that joy, that abundance, is missing.

Finding space for stillness, centering, depth, in the middle of activity and busy-ness spinning around you.

Being awake, with eyes open to suffering, the reality of this world at this moment; *and* believing, knowing, that right alongside of the evil, the Presence of beauty and peace and goodness is finding a way to slip into this world, over and over again—even when it is far beyond our power to make it happen.

Are we there yet? Have we arrived at the moment when the Messiah comes, when all will be well, when peace on earth reigns and every broken thing will be healed? Not yet; we are still waiting. Has the sacred time, the time of holiness, begun? Absolutely.