

Waiters

Mark 13:24-37

There is nothing more aggravating than waiting. As someone said the other day, the problem with instant gratification is that it takes too long. A preacher stands before his congregation with a bandage on his face. "Please excuse my appearance," he says, "I was thinking about my sermon this morning while I was shaving, and I cut my face." As he is shaking hands at the door afterward, one smart aleck church member remarks, "Next time, try thinking about your face, and cut your sermon."

We are impatient people. In a world where internet speeds are measured in thousandths of a second and television programs solve every problem known to humankind in 30 minutes – 22 if you don't count the commercials – we see no reason to wait for anything. And, at the heart of this visceral abhorrence of waiting is the fact that waiting brings us face to face with the truth we like most to avoid: just how powerless we are in life. In spite of the heat we turn on in the winter and the AC we use in the summer, the bricks and concrete and steel we surround ourselves with, thinking that we are safe and in control, the truth is we are not.

Ask someone waiting for results of a test for cancer just how much control they feel they have over their situation.

Ask a family waiting for their loved one to come out of surgery.

Ask a woman in her 7th or 8th month of pregnancy what it feels like to wait – just how much control she has over her own body as she waits for the child within to be ready to be born.

Waiting for a loved one to fulfill their tour of duty and return safely will remind you how powerless you are. And, if you are the one who is away, with a girl or a guy who has promised to wait for you to come back, how hard it is to wait to see if they waited.

Waiting to hear if you've been accepted into college... or waiting to hear if you got the job...such a powerless feeling.

When I was a kid, there were few words I dreaded more than my mother saying, "Just wait till your father gets home." In that case, the powerlessness was in trying to prolong the waiting time!

Advent is about waiting, but, not just the kind of waiting we usually think of. Most of the time we think Advent is about waiting for Christmas, waiting for the birth of Jesus to be celebrated once again. It's the time for candles and wreaths, manger and shepherds, angels and wise men. The kids make their lists and wait for the big man to come down the chimney – speaking of feeling powerless! How do you make the clock and calendar move faster?

But, here, on this first Sunday of Advent, we remind ourselves of the other event we await: Jesus' return. We've been reminded recently, in the parables of the wise and foolish bridesmaids, and the parable of the talents, that Jesus' return is good news. We often get stuck on the judgment message – we even call Jesus' return "Judgment Day" – but it is really good news. Jesus' return is God's ultimate plan and our ultimate hope. He will usher in the kingdom of peace, joy and love; the eternal era in which the tears will be wiped from our eyes; death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the former things will have passed away.

When Paul finishes his first letter to the Corinthians, he writes a Hebrew phrase, *maranatha*, meaning "our Lord, come." At the end of the Bible, in the final chapter of the Book of Revelation, John of Patmos writes, "The one who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' Amen. *Maranatha*. Come, Lord Jesus!"

The problem for us is that it has now been 2,000 years, and we are prone to forget, or doubt, or even give up on the waiting. We forget to say *maranatha*; we wonder if we should keep on saying, "Come, Lord Jesus." Advent is, first of all, when we are reminded that God isn't finished with us, or this world, just yet. Jesus' first coming is only half the story. He is coming back, and the first thing we know is that we don't know when that will be. The second thing we know is that it is our duty to wait, and, not only to wait, but to wait in a special and particular way.

Here is a truth we often miss: although there is much powerlessness in waiting, we do have power over how we wait. Have you ever stood in a long checkout line at a store, noticing how the people around you are waiting for their turn? There are some people who you can just see the anger building the longer they wait; some people begin to get rude; someone else will try to break in line rather than wait their turn; and, some people will stand in line, patiently waiting their turn, and then, be gracious and appreciative

toward the cashier. We may have no choice about the length of the wait, but we do have a choice over how we wait, and, how we wait reveals how much we value what it is we are waiting for.

When Jesus tells his disciples about the day of his return, the message he keeps repeating is not about when or where or how, but about the quality of their waiting. What he keeps saying over and over again is to have an air of expectancy about us. "...about that day or hour no one knows...Beware, keep alert...keep awake...what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

Martin Copenhaver writes, "Although December 25 is fixed on the calendar, we never know when the Spirit of Christ will be born in our midst. Our task is to live with an air of expectation because it could be any time, even today, and anywhere, even here."¹

First, we wait with an air of expectation. God may show up – most likely will show up – in the most unexpected places and at the most unexpected times. Jesus will return, and in the most surprising of ways and times. Stay awake; keep your eyes open. One thing is for sure, until the day when he does return, he fills this time with his presence, too. The question is, are we awake enough to see him?

So, first, we live expectantly, like a woman nine-months pregnant, wondering each day if this is the day, listening to her body for any sign of her child's coming.

Second, we wait for Jesus by waiting *on* others. Do you think it is a just a coincidence of our language that we call those who serve us in restaurants "waiters"? In the Bible, the first deacons of the church were so named because of their role as servants to the church because the Greek word *diakonos* means one who waits on others. As we await Jesus' return, we become waiters, servants to those around us.

Paul tells us in Philippians 2 that we should have the same mind that was in Christ, who, though he was in the form of God, he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness, humbling himself even to death on a cross. While we await Jesus' return, that is our job; that is how we stay awake. Good waiters are good servants, and good servants are good waiters.

John Ortberg says, "Biblically, waiting is not just something we have to do until we get what we want. Waiting is part of the process of becoming what God wants us to be."

Jesus promises us that he is coming back, and, he wants us to wait for him, to wait for his return. The quality of our waiting is also part of the process of becoming what God wants us to be. Living with an air of expectancy, and serving, giving up power, giving up being number one, placing others above ourselves, this is love; this is serving; this is waiting. This is how we say, *maranatha*, come, Lord Jesus, come.

¹ http://act.ucc.org/site/MessageViewer?em_id=38742.0&dlv_id=48643