

Three Approaches To Waiting

An Advent Sermon by Pr. David Johnson

Do you enjoy waiting? I don't. In fact, I struggle with it. Imagine being in the crowd of Israelites when Isaiah delivered this amazing message:

Isaiah 40:1-8 ¹ "Comfort, O comfort My people," says your God.

² "Speak kindly to Jerusalem; And call out to her, that her warfare has ended, That her iniquity has been removed, That she has received of the Lord's hand Double for all her sins." ³ A voice is calling, "Clear the way for the Lord in the wilderness; Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God." ⁴ "Let every valley be lifted up, And every mountain and hill be made low; And let the rough ground become a plain, And the rugged terrain a broad valley; ⁵ Then the glory of the Lord will be revealed, And all flesh will see it together; For the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

But not everyone would have struggled with impatience, as I would have. In fact, there are several ways people handle waiting.

Most of you are aware of the situation involving my younger brother, Steve, and his new wife, Julie. Just days before their wedding this past September, she found out that she had ovarian cancer. The question was asked, do they go ahead with the ceremony or wait. There was no question, everything was moving forward without hesitation. Their commitment to each other was not impacted by this new challenge, in fact, it was strengthened. And praise God, things are looking very good medically for Julie.

But their situation reminded me of the plot from one of my favorite movies, *Shadowlands*, in which C.S. Lewis is forced, after years of bachelorhood, to deal with the challenges of a "shared" life. After Lewis meets Joy Gresham, and soon marry in a civil ceremony (*theirs is at first simply a relationship of mutual respect and necessity*), they find that she has developed cancer. This drives Lewis to face the fact that he does, in fact, love Joy, and is now dealing with a situation beyond his control; the battle for Joy's life against this dreadful disease.

As Lewis waited through Joy's radiation treatments, and struggled with the lack of assurances, he ponders the similarities between the movements of seasons from winter to spring, and Joy's desired transition from sickness to wholeness. In the midst of this meditation he is to have said, *"I've always found this a trying time of the year. The leaves not yet out, mud everywhere you go. Frosty mornings gone, sunny mornings not yet come. Give me blizzards and frozen pipes, but not this "nothing" time. Not this waiting room of the world."* Lewis touched on a very real truth; Waiting, when you're surrounded by "hints" and the "almost there" of life, can be very draining.

On the other hand, waiting can also cause a craziness that comes through excessive "preparation;" which can be equally stress inducing. Remember Jesus' interaction with Martha, as Mary sat and listened?

Luke 10:40-42 But Martha was distracted with all her preparations; and she came up to Him and said, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to help me." ⁴¹ But the Lord answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; ⁴² but only one thing is necessary, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her."

When I was young, we would make our annual visit to Grandma and Grandpa Johnson's house after each Christmas. The 2nd week of Christmas vacation was usually spent traveling to Wisconsin to enjoy a few days celebrating a belated Christmas with them and other relatives in the area.

But as my grandparents aged, my parents grew increasingly concerned about the stress that was caused by the anticipation of our visits. So, one year, as we prepared for our annual trip, we kids were told that Grandma and Grandpa weren't going to be told we were coming. We were just going to show up and then adapt to whatever we encountered when we arrived.

Of course, I understood Mom and Dad's concern for Grandma, especially. But I couldn't help thinking, "What if she isn't ready? What if she hadn't baked her famous goodies, or put all those wonderful comforters on the beds?" I know that wasn't very sacrificial of me, but it was the motivation of a grandson, looking forward to reliving those wonderful memories of a Christmas visit.

But the truth was that she was always ready. Although she didn't know exactly when we were coming, she was always prepared because she knew it would happen eventually. In fact, her perspective shifted from the panic of last minute preparations, to the excitement of a preparedness completed.

Yes, waiting can impact people in vastly differing ways. One will wrestle with the prolonged uncertainty and become impatient, confused, and drained. Others find each new day to be filled with new opportunities to panic. These are the people who stress beyond the point of preparation to the point of crazed perfection. But there is a third approach to waiting that should be considered.

One of our AFLC pastors, Pr. Michael Brandt, who now leads a ministry called, *Shepherding the Shepherds*, once addressed this thought in an email to AFLC pastors.

"Waiting is an essential part of God's plan. Ever since His redemptive promise (Genesis 3:15) in the Garden of Eden, He's called us to wait on Him. Waiting is a reminder that we are not in control ... God is. Waiting is a means to an end ... God's perfect will. Waiting is a ministry ... God's ministry in us and through us. Waiting is a privilege ... the One we are waiting for is worth the wait. Waiting is a necessary good ... for God's glory and our good!"

During this season of Advent, we are to remember not only Jesus incarnation (His first coming), but we are also to focus on the reality of His second coming. It is increasingly possible that we are living in the last days. In fact,

as we consider Jesus' description of the time before His return, the world has been living in those days for quite a while: wars, natural disasters, spiritual hypocrisy and deception, persecution, martyrdom, apostasy, etc. All the signs are present, and God's challenge to every believer is to be vigilant and consistently alert. (See Matt. 24:1-31)

But following those extensive exhortations, Jesus moves into still deeper end-times descriptions through prophetic parables, each of them reinforcing this idea:

Matthew 24:42 "Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming.

Matt. 24:32-35—The Fig Tree: Leaves mean summer is coming

Matt. 24:36-41—Days of Noah: Life interrupted

Matt. 24:42-44—The Thief comes expectantly

Matt. 24:45-51—The Faithful Slave: prepared for his master's return

Matt. 25:1-13—The 10 Virgins: Individual, not corporate readiness

Matt. 25: 14-30—The Talents: Responsibility and accountability

Matt. 25: 31-46—The Judgment: The great separation of sheep/goats

In each of these parables, Jesus reinforces the circumstances leading to His return. He raises our awareness to the significance of events preceding His second coming, and then fires several the prophetic warnings as to the sudden and surprising nature of His arrival. But this is not simply to give us some frustrating advance notice, to which we constantly respond, "Are we there yet?" like little children secured in their car seats.

No. Jesus' prophetic warnings of His imminent coming are meant as a type of alarm, on an alarm clock. It allows us to remain occupied with other things, rather than staring at the hands moving around the face of a clock. The prophetic messages scattered throughout the Scriptures are intended to warn, yes; instruct, absolutely. But more than anything, they are intended to challenge and motivate.

My grandmother didn't sit, waiting for Dad's phone call before she prepared for our coming. She knew we would be there eventually. So she made sure she was always ready, because she knew that we would ultimately come. And in reality, everyone who came to their home always got the same special treatment.

Which is the point of Matthew 25:31-46, "*Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, {even} the least {of them,} you did it to Me.*" In the end, our preparation for Christ's return hinges on how prepared we are to meet the needs of those we encounter every day. A lesson many "Lewis's" and "Martha's" need to learn.