

December 8, 2024

Second Sunday in Advent

Texts: Luke 21:25-36; Romans 15:4-13; Malachi 4:1-6

“Hurry up and wait!” How often does that thought cross your mind? Life is full of waiting – waiting for big things and little things, for things we’re excited for and for things we don’t want to come. Having to wait for things is a defining part of our lives as humans; we can’t avoid it.

That’s no doubt why the Scriptures are full of teaching on patience – how to wait rightly. Learning to wait as Christians is a major theme of the season of Advent as well. When we learn to trust in God and wait on His timing, we’re blessed both by the coming of what we’re waiting for, as well as the time of waiting itself.

So why is it that waiting can be such an irritating, frustrating, or even sometimes unbearable thing for us? I’d say this comes from the fact that waiting reminds us that there are things outside of our control. When you are made to wait, it’s because you are unable, for one reason or another, to have or do what you want at the time you’d choose. Someone else, ultimately God, sets the time, and we do best when we wait for that time.

Look at the parable that Jesus gives about the trees. You can’t force the trees to bud and come into leaf, nor can you make summer come before its time. You merely watch, and wait, observing the signs of the times.

Now, our sinful flesh rebels against this limitation and tries to get around the waiting through our own efforts. And as with all rebellion against God’s ways, this always makes things worse. Just consider some of the examples written for our instruction in the Bible.

Abraham and Sarah are promised a son, through whom they and all the nations of the earth will be blessed. But they grow tired of waiting, and Sarah gives her maidservant Hagar to Abraham to father a child with. This sets off a conflict between Sarah and Hagar, between Hagar’s son Ishmael and Sarah’s son Isaac, and even still today with Muslims, Jews, and Christians.

Or remember when Saul didn’t wait for Samuel to offer the proper sacrifice and instead offered it himself, out of fear of losing the people’s trust? That act, which God had forbid, causes the Lord to reject Saul and seek out a king who will serve Him rightly.

The whole book of Malachi is written to God’s people as they wait. They’re back from exile, and the temple is rebuilt, but no golden age of Israel has been brought back, and there’s no Messiah to be seen, yet. As the people wait, they decide that it doesn’t really matter if they follow God’s law with their whole heart, or just half-heartedly. The priests get lazy in their leading the worship, the people offer up the rejects from their herds rather than the firstfruits, and the men divorce their wives and seek others among the Gentiles.

God sends His prophet, both to remind the people that the wonderful day of the Lord is still coming with healing in its wings, and also that those who arrogantly mock God and ignore His word will be consumed by the fires of judgment.

In addition to the examples in Scripture, think of all the hardship and sorrow that's seen in our day when people refuse to wait. How many arguments, how much anger, comes from people who don't wait before responding to a comment that upsets them? Someone says something, often for the purpose of stirring the pot, and rather than waiting to consider fully what they've said, or the context in which they're saying it, or to realize that it's just an inflammatory comment, someone else fires right back with a shot of his own.

Or how many people are crushed by debt, and the worry and despair and anger that it brings, because rather than waiting to save up for something – and waiting to make sure they actually need it – they impulsively buy it, spending down their savings, taking out loans, racking up credit card debt, and then being forced to forgo other good things, or having to work jobs that take them away from their families and church, just to pay the bills?

An unwillingness to wait also causes all sorts of harm in relationships as well. People don't wait to be married before having sex, and then you end up with children born to a mom and a dad who are unwilling to commit to each other, or sadly who put their unborn children to death because they don't believe they're ready for them.

You also find where people are wanting a relationship, but who don't want to wait for someone who shares their values, their faith, and so they end up in a turbulent, strife-filled relationship once the rose-colored glasses fall off. This often ends in divorce, with everyone involved suffering great harm, children most of all.

These are just a few examples. The overarching truth is that, when we men are unwilling to wait on God's timing, and instead try to force through what we desire, it always brings harm.

How then do we learn to wait rightly – to wait with patience? We can't do it on our own. Rather, patience is itself a gift from God, a fruit of the Spirit, and He gives and grows it in us through several different ways. The first is through the Scriptures. Note how St. Paul speaks about them in our reading from Romans: "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." The Scriptures are written for us to give us endurance (or patience), encouragement, and hope.

When we read the Bible, we hear example after example of God's faithfulness to His people, how His plans and His timing are always a blessing, how He strengthens His people to endure times of waiting and testing. Since God's character is unchanging, we can have the confidence that, as He strengthened the people in the Bible, He will do the same for us as well.

Does that mean that the waiting will be easy? No. Again, consider the struggles that the faithful endured as they waited for the Lord. But whatever their struggles were, the Lord granted them the patience, the endurance to withstand them and make it through them.

Likewise, the Scriptures also give us comfort when we fall into temptation while we wait. When God's people of old failed to wait, He would discipline them, and call them to repent. And when they would repent, turn from their sins and walk in His ways, again wait on Him, He would forgive them. Now, they still often would have to suffer the consequences of their actions, but nevertheless God had forgiven them, taken away their sin, restored them to Himself.

When you sin, failing to wait on and trust in the Lord, but then repent, He will forgive you. You may have to live with the consequences of your actions, and often the Lord causes this so that those consequences serve as reminders to keep us from falling into the sin again. But be comforted by the fact that, when you sincerely confess your sins, God is faithful and just, and He will instantly forgive those sins and cleanse you from all unrighteousness.

The Scriptures give hope as well, for they show us that God has never failed to keep His promises. Those listening to Malachi preach could remember when their fathers had been led out of Egypt rejoicing, and have hope that the day would come when they would go forth, “leaping like calves from the stall.” The Romans could read all the Old Testament passages St. Paul quotes about the Gentiles being brought in and have confidence and hope that they were included in those words of God.

When you feel like you’re in the times of Malachi, tempted toward spiritual laziness or hopelessness because it doesn’t seem like God’s doing anything big, then remember how the Lord has sent the Elijah to come – John the Baptist – and even more so the One whose way John prepared: Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Because the Son of God came, just as He has promised, we can have absolute confidence that He is going to come again. His first advent as a baby in Bethlehem guarantees His second advent in glory at the Last Day. Our hope is grounded in God’s faithfulness and love, and those are shown perfectly and concretely in the cross of Jesus.

In addition to the Scriptures and the patience, encouragement, and hope that the Holy Spirit gives us through them, our Lord has also given us the gift of prayer to help us in our time of waiting. When you’re waiting for something, one of the most helpful things is having someone you can talk to while you wait – someone with whom you can share your worries, or your frustrations, or your excitement, even! In prayer, you can take all that to God Himself!

To those worried about the end times and if they’ll be able to make it through them, Jesus says, “But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.” If God tells you to pray for strength, then He’s also promising to give you that strength.

When you’re waiting, and it seems that things are going from bad to worse, then pray the promises of the Lord back to Him, such as in Psalm 37: “Wait for the Lord and keep His way, and He will exalt you to inherit the land; you will look on when the wicked are cut off.”

When you are waiting, and you feel downcast and even hopeless, sing one of the wonderful hymns that we’re blessed with in the Church. Pray “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” and hear in those seven stanzas both the cry of the Church through the ages for the Lord to deliver her as well as promises of God to be the one who sets us free and shines the light of dawn into the gloomy clouds of night.

Lastly, as you dwell in God’s word and pray that word back to Him, know that the Lord does one other thing to teach you to wait: He makes you wait. Again, this is seen all throughout the Scriptures. And, it’s also a lesson that the Church has taught historically through having the season of

Advent. Every season in the church year focuses on something, and Advent focuses on waiting for the Lord.

If you've ever wondered why your pastor doesn't pick Christmas hymns to sing during Advent, or why we don't read any of Luke 2 during this time, it's not because I'm Ebenezer Scrooge. It's because the point of Advent is learning to wait, learning to have patience.

If you're wanting to teach a small child patience, is it enough just to define what patience means, and talk about how it's a good thing, but then letting the child have whatever he wants, right when he wants it? Of course not! Your actions would cancel out your words there. To teach a child patience, you have to make him actually wait for something.

So it is that, in the Church, we reflect the ancient practice of a period of preparation and waiting before a big festival. Feasts, in the Bible and church history, were always preceded by fasts. This helps us to focus on what is truly important – the coming of Jesus – and to not be swept away by the worldly tides of greed and envy and overindulgence that mark this time of the secular year. The wait helps us appreciate the gift when it finally does arrive.

Through the Scriptures and through prayer, then, we are granted patience to wait as Christians. When the wait is long, we are given endurance. When the wait is frightening, we are given comfort. When the wait is hard, we are given strength. But in whatever situation we find ourselves waiting, we are able to lift up our heads, as Jesus says, for our redemption is drawing near.

In the name of Jesus, amen.