

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian Church on December 13, 2020.

WATCHING AND WAITING

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word do I hope. Psalm 130:5

The theme of our devotional for the third week in Advent is “Watching and Waiting.” Today I would like us to focus on the second word in this theme, waiting. The season of Advent teaches us one of the most basic lessons of human existence. Advent reminds us that most of the important things of life require waiting and waiting requires both effort and time.

During the season of Advent everyone learns what it means to be patient.

If we have been taught anything during this Covid season it is the need for patience.

We have practiced patience standing in line hoping to find paper products.

Men and women have sought to overcome impatience as they wait to be
Allowed to get a haircut.

The endurance of teachers has been tested trying to get
technology to cooperate.

Parents have had their patience challenged as they
seek to keep their young children engaged in learning.

Many of us have had our forbearance pushed to the limit by the people who won't socially distance or properly wear their masks. We wonder how long this will go on.

We all have grown weary waiting, waiting for the health crises to pass.

In our readings from the Bible for today the passages speak of patient waiting. Indeed, the theme of Advent could well be understood as being all about learning patience. James tells us to be patient as we wait for God.

The virtue of patience in the Bible includes the two pillars of waiting and action.

Patience means the ability to wait for future gratification. You and I live in an instant world. There are so many things that you and I can have at the flick of a switch, an exchange of cash or by a simple request. We have instant coffee, soup, and oatmeal. We can turn on our television sets or look at our phones and have instant news and entertainment. We click send on Amazon and a whole host of goods are at our door the next day.

Modern life has conditioned us to expect everything to happen right away. Many of our modern conveniences have helped us to overcome that which we always seem to be fighting, the clock. These instant conveniences allow us more time to do other things.

Most of the time we do not pretend that these instant products are better. We call freshly ground-perked coffee "real coffee as opposed to instant. I doubt there is anyone who would contend that those instant mash potatoes that can be made from a box in five minutes are as satisfying as real mashed potatoes. We do not pretend that "Wonder Bread" has much relation to the bread that someone takes all day to make.

We are willing at times to be satisfied with a lowering of quality because we do not really care that much. We are willing to make a trade-off. We are willing to exchange quality for time and energy. Instant things are often things which we do not really place a high value on.

It is fine for us to make this kind of value judgment for ourselves such as "tonight I will have a frozen dinner in the Microwave because I will be leaving in less than an hour." The problem comes when we begin to be trapped by the need for instant gratification. There are times when we no longer are able to make the choice ourselves, but rather are in the control of our need for an instant pay-off. There are aspects of life where there is no short cut or quick return on our investment of time and energy. The need for instant gratification can be destructive.

This same ethos has led people to enter what they think are instant marriages. They seem to believe that the marriage ceremony acts like water in instant cocoa. They feel that just the exchanging of vows will instantly create a full, complete and happy relationship. When this does not happen, they figure something must be wrong. Many marriage relationships end because of unrealistic expectations.

This same desire for instant gratification can be seen in the way people manage their material resources. Men and women in this nation have come to expect that they would enjoy material goods now, not later. A newspaper article from a couple of years ago was concerned with the lack of savings by the younger generation. The article told the story of a 35-year-old professional woman. She was single and had made \$100,000 for several years. Yet she did not own a home and all that she had saved was 13,000 dollars. She had spent money now to satisfy her desires.

The growth of wealth for individuals or nations takes time and sacrifice. We have seen the growth of gambling all around the country. Gambling feeds into people's desire for get rich quick schemes. The hunger for instant gratification is promoted by the State of New York, which tells us "Hey You Never Know."

The one sure way to create a pool of savings is through the magic of compound interest. Compound interest has two aspects. The first is to save a little now. One must forgo some enjoyment now in order to build for the future. You cannot eat one's cake now and still have it for the future. The second aspect of compound interest is time. Small savings at interest over time yields positive results. One has the choice of small gratification now or more in the future.

Unfortunately, this same desire for instant gratification has also become present in our spiritual lives. We want some sure-fire program that will give us complete spiritual fulfillment. We want to be made whole all at once. We witness people following one person after

another, one guru after another, and one self-help program after another in an attempt to gain a spiritual high. Over the last twenty-five years there has been a growth of all kinds of groups and people from Scientology to personal growth gurus on PBS who promise spiritual wholeness in ten easy steps.

Even the growth of many fundamentalist Christian bodies has been based on instant gratification. They promise an instant emotional high. If you look at the worship services of groups such as the Assemblies of God, they are often attempts to stir up peoples' emotions in order to give them an instant experience. They tend to promise the instant fix. They promise that God will change everything at once. When the emotional high fades, it is not surprising that so many people drift from group to group seeking that all encompassing high. The needs expressed are real, but the expectations of instant results are not.

We are often the same way with spiritual practices such as prayer. We think that if we start praying for something today, we will have results tomorrow. We seem to believe that if we are not given clear direction after a couple of minutes of prayer then prayer is empty.

Advent reminds us that the important things in life take time. James tells us to remember "the farmer who waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient over it until it receives the early and the late rain." The farmer cannot gather all his fruit on the day he plants the seeds. He must wait for the harvest.

The important things in life take time. Abraham was promised a son, but Isaac was not born until Abraham was very old. Israel was promised a new land when they left Egypt; but they had to wander for 40 years before they were able to possess it. The prophets promised that a Messiah would come to save the people, but it took generations before the coming of Jesus.

So, it is with all good things. Human relationships take time to build. Marriages are built on interactions over long periods of time. It is through trust, sharing and living through the ups and downs of a relationship that a marriage grows. One can be attracted to another person quickly, but it takes time and hard work to enable a relationship to grow and become real.

It is the same with our spiritual lives. In our baptism God has claimed us as his own. He has called us to become new people. We are being molded in the image of Jesus. This is not something that happens all at once it takes time and effort. We may experience times of spiritual highs, these are good and positive, yet they will fade and there will be times when God would seem to be absent from our lives. Growing in faith means holding on and waiting for God to act. Growing in faith means having the patience to wait for God's voice.

Patience means giving up our expectation to have everything happen all at once. It means allowing our desire for instant gratification to fade and remembering that all the good things in life take time.

Waiting is not merely passive. We are called to act in preparation for God's coming.

I recently watched again one of the great baseball movies. In the movie "Field of Dreams" the lead character, an Iowa farmer played by Kevin Costner, hears a voice, which tells him to build a baseball diamond in the middle of his cornfield. The voice told him if he builds the field they will come. He did not know who they were exactly, but he started to build the field. The people in his community thought that he was a little bit crazy to waste his time and energy. He persisted and struggled and built a baseball diamond complete with lights. He was forced to wait. Finally, the Ghosts of the Major league players and his father came and played on the field. His patience was rewarded, and he found reconciliation with the memory of his Dad.

In like manner we do not just wait passively hoping God will act. We actively wait. The purpose of spiritual practices is to help us wait with purpose.

Worship, prayer, reading Scripture, fasting are all ways to actively wait and be ready for God's coming to us.

So, as we live through this Advent Season may we learn to wait. As one writer tells us:

One reason many people never see God working in their lives is because they never hang in long enough for God to show his power.

One final truth, Christian waiting is rooted in hope. The famous 19th century preacher Charles Spurgeon reminds us:

Those who do not hope cannot wait; but if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it.

So, we can wait because of our hope and trust in God.

This Advent season may we learn patient, active waiting.

Even when we don't seem to get immediate results – continue to worship.

Even when God seems silent – keep praying.

Even when you wonder why bother – talk to God.

Listen to the words of the Psalmist –

**I wait for the Lord,
my soul waits,
and in his word do I hope.**