

The Gift of Waiting

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

Well to begin today I want to ask you to think about the idea of waiting. What's something that you've waited for recently? Some of you even in the prayer request mentioned waiting for something. Maybe you're waiting for something kind of simple and mundane: you're waiting for your favorite TV series to start it's next season. Or maybe you're waiting for something, anything to happen, in *The Walking Dead* this season.

[Laughter]

Maybe you waited in traffic recently. You know Rochester's traffic really isn't that bad but we like to think it is and it gets annoying. Maybe you've been at a restaurant and you're waiting for the food, how annoying is that! The custom meal that the person is making for me at the counter back there is five minutes later than I wanted to be! Maybe you've waited at the doctor's office. I recently waited fifty four minutes at my rheumatologist...after the nurse took my vitals. That wasn't pleasant! He came in and he said sorry I'm running a little bit behind. I was like: "I know. You went to medical school, how about you tell me something I don't know." I didn't say that, I'm not really that sarcastic in real life. Only from a distance. You know maybe you're waiting for something a little bit more serious. Maybe you or someone you love is pregnant: you're waiting for a new baby. Maybe you are waiting for the results of a medical test. Maybe you're waiting for someone. Someone you love who's far away, who's been separated from you for a long time, you're waiting to see that person again.

So let me ask you this question: How do you pass the time while you wait? What are the things you do when you're waiting? Maybe you check your phone while you're waiting. How many of you check your phone when you're waiting for something? Right. Or maybe you stare at your phone while you're waiting. Maybe you read a book, or maybe you gaze lovingly at your...phone.

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[Laughter]

Maybe you enjoy a conversation with friends or family, or maybe you look at your phone while you're waiting. I don't know what you do while you're waiting, but I know what I do!

[Laughter]

I got thinking about this: what if we could magically turn our waiting time, which feels so wasted and useless, into something productive and generative and useful. One of my favorite authors is Austin Kleon. He tends to write about creative work and how to harness your creative energy and that kind of thing. He writes for artists basically. And he wrote a blog post once about how to read more books, he had read a lot of books that year and people thought: how do you read so many books when you're such a busy person? I'm a busy person, I'd like to read more books and whatever you're drinking, I want one. And so he made a list: thirty three ways to read more books this year. And step one was throw your phone into the ocean. Step two, the first one that anybody will actually do, was very simple: it was just have a book with you at all times. So when you're waiting fifty four minutes in the Rheumatologist's office you can read a book, as I did. I happened to have the book with me that day. It's not the first time this doctor's been a little bit behind. And so I read, well it wasn't like Charles Dickens or anything, it was a, you know, a sarcastic collection of jokey e-mails that people sent. It wasn't, like highbrow, is what I'm saying, but I read a book.

[Laughter]

So I didn't get all the way to being productive in my waiting time but I have another check on my list of books I wanted to read this year. Imagine having a book with you at all times, how much more productive or useful your wait could be, or frankly just a little bit less annoying.

Well as every every church nerd in the room knows, the reason I'm talking about waiting is because the whole Christian Church is in a season right now of waiting. Today is the first Sunday of Advent, which is when the Christian calendar kicks off. So happy Christian new year everybody. Advent, week one, of year B today. And the season of Advent in addition to being the Christian New Year is a time when we anticipate the coming of Jesus. Now in one sense, in the most obvious sense, what that means is that it's a precursor to Christmas. It's a way for us as a people to tap the brakes a little bit before we get to that beautiful day. And in fact, part of tapping the brakes for us at Artisan means that we don't generally sing very many Christmas carols during the month of December, much to many people's frustration - I get the e-mails. And the reason is because liturgically it's not Christmas yet, it's actually more liturgically appropriate to sing Christmas songs in the weeks following Christmas Day, which by then

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everyone is like “please no more” or “I can't do it, no more”. Anyway we make exceptions on both sides of that and it kind of works out in the end, but ideally it's not just about singing. We're not just singing about, but also thinking about and reading about and praying about all the ways that the birth of Christ will change the world, has changed the world. And here's the other thing: it's not just that first coming of Christ that we anticipate in the season of Advent, it's also a time when we ponder the second coming, wherever that may be and whenever.

Because ever since the ascension, remember that story in the Bible when when Christ's physical form was no longer present on earth, it was taken up into the clouds. Ever since that day all Christians have been caught in between two times. Can you imagine their confusion, by the way? They've walked with Jesus three years during his ministry on earth, they've seen him arrested executed, raised from the dead, appearing to them over the course of forty days and they're just getting used to that. And imagine trying to get used to that, when suddenly, they're with him and he's taken up into the clouds. I can just see their mouths going: “Wait, what?!” That question, “wait, what?!” that's the advent question. That's the question that all of us have been asking in one form or another ever since that moment because we are caught between two times. The birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus has already happened and it changed everything. The start of the process, anyway. The Messiah had arrived, but the full restoration of the world -- the creation of the new heavens and the new earth -- that has not yet happened. There is more work that needs to be done. And so theologians and, you know, pastors during Advent sometimes refer to the reality that we live in this way: we call it the already slash not yet reality. Some of you have gone to seminary, I look and see some seminarians out there, you know about the already/not yet, don't you? If you've been an Artisan a long time, you've heard me use this phrase. I use it every Advent: already/not yet. That's the tension that we live in. That's what the season of Advent points us to.

Jesus has already been born but his message of peace has not yet taken root in the hearts of all people. God has already, in the words of John the Evangelist, put on flesh and dwelt among us, but we have not yet learned to see God when we look into the eyes of our neighbors, let alone the eyes of our enemies. Jesus already bore the full weight of our sin but we have not yet fully accepted or even understood what that means, let alone allowed it to transform us. Jesus already conquered death, but we have not yet shaken off its sting completely. And we long for the day when we will finally experience the fullness of the work of Jesus Christ -- the work that has already been done but which we have not yet seen make its full final impact. This is why the season of Advent is so important: because much like its counterpart Lent, which leads us up to Easter, Advent forces us to slow down, to sit and stew in the pain of the world without jumping

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prematurely and artificially to the moment of happy, happy, joy, joy. Which is not yet a reality for so many of us and for so much of the world.

Advent forces us to recognize our ongoing need for God's ongoing redemption.

Remember how the apostle Paul says "for those of us who are being saved", this thing that kind of unfolds over the course of our lives. And Advent calls us to do our part in bringing that redemption into God's world. Because, guess what? That's how it comes into God's world: when we do our part. But here's the other thing that Advent does for us, it's it's such a gift. And those of you who are experiencing pain right now, we heard your pain in the in the prayers of the people. Some of you weren't able to share what's happening in your life, it's too painful. Advent affirms the pain of waiting because, as any of you know who shared those prayer requests today, or anybody who's ever been in one of those in-between times, I can tell you waiting hurts sometimes. The parents who are waiting for the birth of their new baby spend every single day not just dreaming about what specific type of professional athlete that child will be and making plans for the really *nice* nursing home, but also hoping and praying desperately that everything will be OK when the child is born. There's not a moment that you can separate either one of those things from your life. The patient who's had that test, who's waiting for the the biopsy results, is not just hoping that it will come back benign, but also running through the nightmare scenarios: what if it's malignant? The spouse or partner of the one who's in the military, or on a business trip, or in prison, is not just waiting for a happy reunion, they're also dreading what would happen if the reunion never actually takes place.

These are all normal parts of the already/not yet world that we're living in. And that's why I think it's so helpful that the season of Advent gives us an opportunity to stand in solidarity with God's people, and for them to stand in solidarity with us, which sometimes is more what we need. Who have felt the pain of waiting and wondering, who have drank the confusing cocktail of anticipation and doubt that life seems to serve us, about once a week. And so the lectionary texts during the season of Advent will affirm this tension, this pain for us, again and again and again. You're going to hear it in the texts that we read in service every week between now and Christmas, that's what Advent gives us. I mean just think about the ones that you've heard today. Hopefully you were here early enough to hear all of them, but I can reiterate some of them for you. That passage from Isaiah 64 that Mel read right in the middle of that really unsettling U2 song "Wake up dead man". It was like, "OK this text might be more unsettling than the song we are listening to right now." "Oh that you would come and tear the heavens open and come down so that the mountains would quake at your presence as when you did awesome deeds in the past." In other words, "why are we sitting here waiting for you to do

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something? You acted in the past, and nothing is happening now.” That's the implication of that text, if you didn't catch that. Wake up dead man indeed!

We had the apocalyptic kind of waiting in the Gospel reading from Mark 13: “but in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light and the stars will be falling from heaven and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory, so keep alert, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly.” Texts like that can be a little bit scary. Certainly they're kind of leverage by the church sometimes to scare people into a premature conversion. I'll try not to do too much of that here, but the text is scary even after you've had that moment of conversion because you're not quite sure what it means because it's confusing and confusion is scary. What's Jesus talking about there? “This generation will not pass away until these things happen.” Did that already happen? Is that a metaphor? What's going on? What is the second coming? Did it happen in 70 AD? Is it happening sometime in the future? What's the deal? There's libraries of books written on these questions.

You know, maybe even more immediately: how do we square these kind of harsh dire warnings of Jesus with the more inclusive words of Jesus that we are much more fond of quoting? You know, meanwhile we're stuck in the middle of these two realities. We're often left feeling both the pain of wishing God would do something in the world or in our life and then the pain of fearing what will happen if God does. Because very often we want God to act over there; we are not quite so keen on God acting right here. But what if, in the midst of all this spiritual angst that comes with waiting, what if we could redeem that time? What's the spiritual equivalent of having a book with you at all times so that you have something to do while you're waiting? Something that comforts you, something that gives you a sense of purpose and direction. By the way, what's the spiritual equivalent of just staring at your phone every time you have ten seconds free? It's probably staring at your phone every time you have ten seconds free. News flash! But what if there was some way, spiritually, to make the best of this hopeful, painful, scary, confusing, stuck-in-the-middle time that we're in?

I would suggest that our epistle reading for today, which comes from 1 Corinthians Chapter 1 offers us something. It may not be enough to soothe us completely, but the reality of our life, my friends, is that we don't really ever get the thing that soothes us completely. And if you do, if you think you have, be warned that it is probably artificial and potentially dangerous. But here's what the Apostle Paul writes to the church in Corinth. This is 1 Corinthians 1:3-9:

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father in the Lord Jesus Christ. I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus. For in every

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way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind. Just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you, so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful. By him you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.”

So how is it that we can wait well in this hopeful, painful, scary, confusing, in-the-middle time? There's a few things that this passage kind of throws out to us and maybe one or all of them will be useful to you. The first one that I see is: allow the testimony of Christ to be strengthened in you. In other words, the strength that you receive from the testimony of Christ accrues to you according to how much you seek it out. It's one of those things where if you don't, kind of, place yourself under the waterfall of grace, you won't get wet. So read the Gospels. Maybe even read the lives of the Saints, or whatever the Protestant equivalent would be -- stories of God's people who have lived in the way of Jesus, who have experienced the pain and longing and suffering that comes with that, and who have made it through and made something beautiful, and seen God make something beautiful through them and around them and because of them, maybe not even in their time. So allow the testimony of Christ, both from the Scriptures and from the tradition of the church, to be strengthened in you.

Here's the next thing: receive *and* give the spiritual gifts. Do you see how the Apostle Paul stuck this in there? “Just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you, so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.” So while you're waiting, you should not be lacking in spiritual gifts. Now, if you're not a church nerd and you don't know what spiritual gift even means, let me just give you that definition really quickly. The idea, as it's presented throughout the New Testament, is that the Holy Spirit gifts every believer uniquely with one or some spiritual gifts. And there's several lists in the New Testament. None of them all agree with each other perfectly, which tells me that it's an incomplete list anyway, that the Holy Spirit gifts individuals in lots of different ways many of which are included in the scriptures and some of which probably wouldn't even be a thing at that time. But here's a list of some of them. I want you to tell me after I read this list how many of you have all of these. OK. The gift of exhortation, the gift of giving, the gift of leadership, the gift of mercy, service, teaching, discernment, faith, and knowledge. How many of you, by show of hands, have every one of those gifts? OK. Alright, let the record show for podcast listeners that no one raised their hand when I said that, as was my purpose in giving the list. How many of you have one or more of those gifts, you think? OK, now the hands are starting to go up. This is why we need the church and Paul hammers this over and over again in all of his letters to his churches. The church needs *everybody* because maybe you're a person who does not have the spiritual gift of faith, maybe right now you are on empty in that regard. Guess what?! There is

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someone in the room who has a little bit extra and *their* job as a member of the Christian church is to share it with you. That's why we passed the peace: some of us are not at peace and we need someone to say to us "peace be with you", not in a shallow way but in a liturgical way. Maybe, you know we already talked about the idea of giving, maybe you don't have the gift of giving or the means to do it; someone else in the community has a little bit extra and they will pick up that slack. And the beautiful thing is that each and every one of you in the room has at least something, at least one gift, that the Holy Spirit has given to you for the purpose of building up this community, this church, this city, this world. And the church exists to help you discover that and to give you a context for where to use it and to help you see the blessing of that gift being given to the world around you, just as it was given to you by the Spirit. So do you lack the gifts? Do you excel in the gifts? That's what the church is for and that is part of how we get through the waiting: by giving and receiving the spiritual gifts in the church.

Here's the next one, nobody likes this idea, it's the idea of being blameless. Once again, show of hands how many people are entirely blameless, you didn't do a single thing wrong this week. OK, once again we have a zero on that one. Holiness is the work of a lifetime. In other words, you're not going to get there overnight. You have the rest of your life to become blameless and depending on which theological stream you're from you're never going to get there, or you only get there at the very end, or whatever. I don't really care about that stuff, I care about right now and right now the idea is you are maybe, like, 2.7% blameless. You feel like you have a long way to go and you can't even get to 5% this month or this year. You get to one more tenth of one percent closer to blameless. No, you know, holiness is not something that should be quantified, there's not a machine we can hook you up to. You get what I'm saying though, right? One little piece at a time, that's the only way anything worth doing gets done. "Be found blameless on the day of Christ." So get a little bit more blameless today, and a little bit more tomorrow, a bit more the next day, and then lastly, most of all, when you allow the testimony of Christ to be strengthened in you, when you've received and given the gift of the Holy Spirit in your church community, when you have taken those next kind of steps on the path toward blamelessness, toward holiness, then you can sit and wait in the strength of the Lord. It doesn't mean that all the stuff that you're waiting for, all the pain that comes in that waiting, is going to suddenly magically be fine and different. But, you can wait in the strength of the Lord. The promise of Scripture here is that He will strengthen you until the end. God is faithful. And it is entirely consistent with the story of scripture to shake your fist at God and say, "I don't see it! It hurts too much!" and I'm telling you, if that's where you are, don't fight it because it's the only way you're going to get to be in that peaceful waiting in that strength-of-the-Lord moment".

Let me give you this concluding reflection, which was our worship meditation, that comes from St Jerome, in a writing that he wrote on the same text from 1 Corinthians. He said, "I have been

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planted in the house of the Lord. I mean the church, not in the walls but in its doctrines. Everyone who has been planted in the house of the Lord, who has put down roots there, brings forth flowers.” I wanted to get a really beautiful image to put that text over and so I searched for winter flowers thinking I’d get, like, tulips coming up out of the snow, or something, and instead I got this beautiful ice flower. I don't know what it is, I've never actually seen one, but it's beautiful. And it's so perfect because whatever beautiful thing you think you're waiting for, God is very likely to surprise you with something beautiful in an entirely different way. But, it is my sincere belief that your hope is not misplaced and if you wait, you will find that the strength of the Lord is there for you, because God is faithful. So this advent season let me encourage you, and let me encourage all of us, to put down roots here, not in the walls of this church, but in its doctrines, its teachings, in Christ. And may we all be strong until the end.

Let's pray together. God we place our hope in you. We trust, and hope, and pray that we will see glimmers of light in the darkness. That we will sense your presence when we haven't before, when we will hear your voice when it's been silence for so long. Help us to bear each other's burdens, to build up one another to use our gifts in the context of our church community. Help us to meet each other's needs, to encourage each other's hearts. And may this advent season be for all of us a time where we acknowledge the pain of waiting and where we are able to apprehend and accept and receive even the tiniest bit of hope that something better awaits. We wait in the strength of the Lord. And it's in Christ's name that we pray. Amen

And so the Band will come back up and is going to lead us in another couple of songs at the end of our service here. Our communion table will be open during that whole time. Artisan's table is an open table, which means that all are welcome to partake of this holy sacrament. You can take a piece of the bread and dip it in the cups, either the wine or the juice. May it be for you the Body and Blood of the Savior. May it be food for your hungry souls. May it be a reminder that you live in community with each other that you have gifts to give and to offer and to receive. If you prefer to receive prayer during this time there will be a member of the prayer team at the back of the room. And your kids are probably, no doubt, waiting for you, and their teachers as well. And so you can collect them and have them be part of this if you'd like, or right after you're done you can get them, whatever works better for you. Our table is open. Let's continue to worship God in song, in sacrament, and in prayer. Amen.

[end of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information visit us at ArtisanChurch.com