

Advent: Waiting in Hope
The Rev. Christi O. Brown
FPC Spartanburg
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Psalm 130

This Psalm titled “Out of the depths.” It is a lament of an individual waiting for divine redemption. The Psalmist begins by crying out for God’s help and then affirms his trust in God and finally calls on the community to trust in the Lord as well. He indicates that forgiveness and redemption flow to those who wait for the Lord.¹ In this Advent season, as we too wait on our Redeemer, listen for the Word of God.

¹Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. ²Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications! ³If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? ⁴But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered. ⁵I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; ⁶my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning. ⁷O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem. ⁸It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities.

Romans 15:12-13

This passage picks up at the end of a long letter from Paul to the Roman church, where he encouraged the Jews and Gentiles to live together in harmony. Paul frames this entire section in hope, beginning with the words, “For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.” (v4). Paul ends with the two verses we will read now, where he quotes the prophet Isaiah and then concludes with a benediction that sums up the points of the entire letter, as well as what life in Christ is all about. Notice how he emphasizes hope three times in these two verses. Hear now the Word of God:

¹ “Excursus: Penitential Psalms”, NISB, 797.

¹²And again Isaiah says, “The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope.” ¹³May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Prayer for Illumination

Even as our souls wait for you, O Lord, by the power of your Holy Spirit, open our ears, our minds and hearts to your word for us today. In your Son, Jesus Christ’s name we pray, Amen.

Sermon

I must confess, if there is one thing I just can't stand doing, it's waiting. Whether it's the grocery store line or waiting on my children to get out the door (why does that always take so long?), having to wait is so frustrating. You might call me a Gogovite.² I really can't help it. I have a degree in Industrial Engineering for heaven's sake. Listen to its very definition: "Industrial engineering deals with the optimization of complex processes, systems or organizations, working to eliminate waste of time, money, materials, man-hours, energy and other resources."³ I love efficiency, and waiting is the opposite of that. Actually, I've met very few people who do like to wait. And yet, no matter how well we plan, or how efficient we might be, or how difficult or frustrating it is, waiting is simply a part of life.

And today we find ourselves here on the first day of Advent, the beginning of a deliberate waiting period. Advent is a time of expectant waiting and preparation for the celebration of Christ's birth. The season of Advent anticipates the coming of Christ, both his First Coming as the Christ-child Messiah, as well as his Second Coming for which we continue to wait. This time of Advent waiting is also a time to live into God's hope, peace, joy and love, each represented by the Advent wreath candles that we light each week, which highlights our waiting. At home we are used to lighting all the candles on our table at once, but here, we only light one candle a week, as we build up to the Christ candle in the center that we light on Christmas Eve. This simple practice is an intentional slowing and focusing on what we're waiting for in Advent.

² See Children's Sermon. "The Waiting Man: An Advent Fable" by Ken Yaussy, Dec. 2000.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Industrial_engineering

The candle we lit today is hope, which is fitting as we begin to wait this season. The two distinct Hebrew words for wait and hope in the Psalm we read today are essentially interchangeable, indicating that in our faith tradition, there is no hope without waiting, and no waiting without hope. Even as the Psalmist waited on the Lord, he hoped in God's word.

To wait is to be human. People have waited on God since the beginning of time. There are so many instances of waiting in the Bible. Think of Noah, Sarah, Abraham, Moses, the Israelites, Joseph, David, Naomi, Ruth, Ester, Daniel, Hannah, Elizabeth, Paul, and the list goes on and on. And think about how excruciating many of their waits were, especially the Israelites who escaped slavery, only to wander in the dessert for 40 more years. We've seen in the Bible over and over again how God is faithful to his promises, but how we must wait on God's timing. But even when we know and believe this in our hearts, it's still a struggle to wait, isn't it?

It's especially hard in this modern day, instant gratification, microwave world we live in. There are so many things we can simply decide to do and voila, it's done. Or it may be a goal that takes a long time to accomplish, but we're able to make tangible things happen during that time to accomplish that goal. But when we are waiting on the Lord, we are not in control. We can't make something happen or fix the situation. We have to rely on our faith and trust in God, and realize it will be on God's timeline, not ours.

One thing that unites us all is that we've all had and will have difficult waits in our lifetime. I posed this question on social media this week: "What are some of the hardest things you've had to wait on in life?" I got over 50 responses from friends

from all over the world. Here were some of the answers: for the right person to come along, for children, for medical and surgery results, for healing, for the right job, for reconciliation with a loved one, for clarification on moving, for exam results, school admissions, tryouts, to be reunited with a spouse or children, for healthy pregnancies and healthy babies to be born, the adoption process, for healthy relationships and communication, for spiritual growth, for patience, for children to find their way, forgiveness, knowledge and trust in God, deployment to begin or end, for God's voice, to overcome depression, and finally, for a beloved family member to die in peace. These are all deep, difficult things that are agonizing to wait on in life. The only way I've found to get through these excruciating waiting periods is to hope and trust in our Almighty God, but that is not always easy.

Personally, the most difficult things I've waited for in my life were my precious children. Beginning with delayed marriage to infertility with no answers to the financial and emotional costs of adoption, it felt like an unfairly long and taxing road to motherhood. But finally, after a bumpy adoption road, on this very day six years ago, the child who made us parents was born. After the call that the birth mother was in labor, we drove 12 hours, met our baby that night in the hospital, and named her Lettie, which means "one who brings joy." We've always called her our Thanksgiving baby, for not only was she born Thanksgiving weekend, but we are forever grateful to God for this amazing gift in our lives.

When we adopted our second child several years later, it was an even longer, more excruciating wait in the adoption process. When our eldest daughter turned two, we decided we were ready to adopt another child. We completed the mounds of paperwork, home visits, and submitted our applications. Now all we had to do was

wait. So we waited and waited, and nothing much happened. There were a few potential matches, but none of them were right for one reason or another. An entire, agonizingly long year passed. We had to go through the paperwork of the home study visits once again to renew our status for another year, and then we matched with a baby early November. Cautiously optimistic, we put down our large deposit. We received the ultrasound picture. We began to dream about our child who would be born several months later. We ordered a big sister t-shirt and book for our daughter who was turning three. We planned to have her open that present at our family Thanksgiving celebration as a way to share the news with our extended family. But four days before Thanksgiving, we received the news that the adoption had fallen through. We were frustrated, angry and devastated. We lost our baby, our money and our hearts.

Once again, we waited. After five more months with no activity, we decided that it was too emotionally taxing and hard on our marriage and family to be in a state of constant waiting, and so we decided that we would not renew the home study again. We had six months left to adopt a baby. In my mother's heart, I knew I was meant to have two children, but there was nothing else I could do about it but wait. I was stressed, anxious and emotionally exhausted. I hit a breaking point. One April day, I walked into our weekly program staff meeting here at the church and said, "I need you to pray for me, because I'm prayed out at this point. For an entire year and a half, I have spent every waking minute praying for a baby to come into our life. I'm beginning to lose hope, and I need your help." My colleagues stepped up to the plate.

Less than a month later, six days after celebrating a bittersweet Mother's Day, we received a call on a Saturday afternoon that we had matched with a 10-day old

baby girl, and that we needed to show up in Florida Monday morning at 9am if we wanted her. You better believe we were there. We call Ella Jane our “wait and hurry up” baby. Both our girls were answers to prayer, but both came in unexpected ways at unexpected times with painful waits. In hindsight, God’s timing was perfect, but the waits were hard nonetheless.

Many theologians have talked about the spiritual discipline of waiting on the Lord. Waiting is a time of patience, preparation, and trust that increases our strength. It reminds us of God’s sovereignty. It is a time ripe with spiritual growth. It is a time to listen and learn. It’s a time when God teaches and transforms us. Waiting is not in vain, and it’s not a time of dormancy. Waiting is purposeful.

One of the greatest examples of this concept is the Chinese bamboo tree. When gardeners plant a bamboo seed, they will see nothing but a single, one inch shoot coming out of the bulb for five years. But it still requires regular tending to and watering. Then, at the end of five long years, the plant will grow an amazing 90 feet tall in only 90 days. It turns out the unseen part of the plant, the root system, had been growing rapidly the entire five years, preparing to support the incredible heights the tree would eventually reach. God works the same way in us. We may not be able to see or feel our growth during the waiting period, but we can trust that we are being transformed and prepared. And therefore, we can wait in hope.

I know many of you currently find yourselves in difficult times of waiting. Some of you are waiting for your first job, while others are waiting for retirement. Some of you are waiting to have children or grandchildren. Some of you are waiting for healing in your marriage, or for an estranged loved one to come back into your life. Some of you are waiting for a parent or spouse with a terminal illness to die in

peace. Some of you are waiting on things we don't even know or can't even fathom. Whatever you are waiting for in life, know that you do not wait without purpose or hope, and you do not wait alone. That is why your church family is here. That is why our pastoral care team and Stephen Ministers are here. If you find yourself prayed out, like I did, then ask us to pray for you. It is a privilege for us to do so.

And always remember the steadfast love of God that the Psalmist proclaimed. We have a God whose timing we may not know or understand, but who is always working in and for us. God's love for and devotion to us enables us to wait in hope, even when the waiting is painful or feels excruciatingly long. Our Christian hope is grounded in the promises of God and looks forward to the reality to which the gospel of Jesus Christ bears witness. This hope draws us beyond the darkness of today and toward the light of the new tomorrow.⁴

This Advent season, we wait, prepare for and celebrate the birth of the Christ-child, in whom the hopes and fears of all our years are met. His name is Emmanuel, "God with us." And he will fill us with all joy and peace in believing, so that we may forever abound in hope.

All glory and honor be to God the Father, Son & Holy Spirit, Amen.

⁴ Joanna M. Adams. "Romans 15:4-13." *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 1*. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 43.