

"While We Wait"
December 20, 2020

Isaiah 11:1-10

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Call to Worship

We come together as we wait **.As Mary and Joseph waited together.**

We wait with our own struggles and doubts and wonder. **Waiting to remember, waiting to celebrate, Emmanuel! God with us!**

Born to set the people free!

Prayer of Invocation

Holy God, as we ponder the stumbles and strengths of Mary and Joseph, we bring to you our own good intentions that miss the mark, our own cautious waiting to see what you will next do. The days around us often reflect our own harried spirits. All of this we open before you, asking for peace that the world cannot give. You have come among us, O God. You are already Emmanuel. Our Advent wait is both to remember what it is to wait and to wait with longing for you to come again. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.

The Word

Isaiah 11:1-10

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. **His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.**

He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

Living the Word

What do you do while you wait? Do you twiddle your thumbs? Wikipedia says: "While twiddling your thumbs is an expression of at least a moderate amount of manual dexterity, thumb twiddling is frequently used as an example of a useless, time-wasting activity. Thumb twiddling can start out as an innocent activity, but can become a problem if the individual performs this activity to excess. Excessive demonstration of this activity may actually be evidence of a mental or neurological problem.

How about instead a hand game while we wait? Remember this one? Here is the church, here is the steeple. Open the door and see all the people. Not very productive, but certainly more religious than thumb twiddling. When as children the chores were done and we had a long wait in the day, we

would pull out the Monopoly board to fill time. This game included a 'wait your turn' wait within the waiting of the day.

Waiting is a part of the journey we are on. Advent is an annual piece of that journey. So while we wait, we decorate; we find ways to give of ourselves for others; and we set the table and invite others into the wait with us.

We grew up on the farm, and mom was very generous to allow us to invite friends over. But there were a few understandings when they came. First, no matter who was present if there was work to be done we would hear mom say: "Everyone works at our house" and company or not, all were recruited. Another understanding was that you never went to mom and said "we're bored" for mother always had a list of work waiting in response to this. We countered this by always having back-up plans for free times.

We humans were not created for boredom or to wear ourselves out waiting. To say nothing of how nonproductive that is. We were created to be engaged in some way physically, mentally spiritually, and/or emotionally. We can't just 'turn off' during the waiting times. But it is we who make the choices if we will sit and worry or sit and hope.

The scripture shared from the book of Isaiah, urges us to rejoice, for even the desert is blooming. When we look for it, God's promise is visible even in the most unlikely places. This hope has brought many human hearts through history to be able to proclaim "We shall overcome..." even in the darkest days of waiting.

Isaiah was written 800 years before Jesus was yet born. Even so, the people were already waiting for a Messiah, a savior to lead them to peace from their oppression. That is a long wait, but they actively continued on life's journey yearning and believing that there was hope for the future. It is easy for us now to look back and see that they were right to hope. During Advent, the third week, we light the pink candle the candle of joy. Isaiah calls us to rejoice; the season calls us to rejoice.

Jumping forward in time to the other side of Jesus life, death and resurrection, we come to the writings of James. This passage calls us to be patient in the wait for the Lord; to endure, striving to deny the worry and anxiety that waiting can bring. Like the farmer's crop it will come all in good time. Strengthen your heart for the wait. Be ready, for the coming of the Lord is near.

James gives us the very practical reality of waiting. Isaiah gives us hope for the future in the wait. Somehow, we have to live in both: in theory and in reality; rejoicing and enduring while we wait.

Like two ends of the spectrum, it is a paradox. Yet it is in that tension that we find Christ. When we follow Christ, strengthening ourselves by preparing during the wait, we find ourselves surrendering the anxieties and finding the peace that goes beyond understanding and that we celebrate with the fourth Advent Candle.

Think of someone you know that seem to have come through a difficult situation, including waiting for something or someone and looked all together through it all. It is their faith, their prayers, their willingness to follow Christ's lead, their dependence on God's promises...their surrender to whatever

is ahead, with the understanding that they are not alone as the Holy Spirit moves with them that gives them the endurance and the ability to rejoice in the midst of whatever they face.

It is also the Christ they know in the faithful people around them that carry them through. So many times, people going through crisis, who ask for prayer, are surprised at what a great effect that prayer has on their situation. One person told me last week that she was overwhelmed by the prayer support that is gathered around her. What a powerful gift we share as we journey together through the rough times.

Caught between the rejoicing that Isaiah calls for and the patience and endurance James asks of us is the story of Mary and Joseph. Their journey together was never an easy one. Mary is found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Think what a long wait that would be. No immediate pregnancy checks - It would be months before she could know physically for sure that this was true. How did she tell her parents? How could she tell Joseph?

Joseph wasn't too happy at first. He knew that baby wasn't his, even though Mary had been promised to him. "An angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream." With his acceptance, they could now move forward together on this journey. They are to name the baby, Jesus. They are in the midst of a waiting game that began at the beginning of time. They are living out the journey that was foretold in the Hebrew writings of the prophets, Isaiah included. The words of the Old Testament prophets are being fulfilled. This child shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace, Emmanuel.

Listen for God in each part: Mary is found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. (God is there.) An angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream. (God is there.) They are to name the baby Jesus which means 'God saves.' (God is there.) The Old Testament prophet's words are being fulfilled. (God is there.) This child shall be called Emmanuel, 'God with us.' (God is there.) God is always present on our journeys as well. In the strength of our faith, we see 'the Holy one' more clearly.

Mary had a lot of time to 'ponder' as the scripture says, all of this in her heart. With Joseph, there were hours and days and months to wait for whatever God would have next. The mixed blessing of the impending birth would have included many complicated concerns and heart filling joys for these days of waiting. Because both Mary and Joseph were human, they could have made some different decisions or choices in their wait and this could have been a different story.

But we understand Mary's response to God as a complete surrender as she offers herself up for this journey. "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliest of his servant." Humble surrender. "When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him." Another, humble surrender.

This is not a trouble-free story. It is filled with times for grappling and agonizing – but the Creator is in the midst of all of it: the grappling, agonizing and the hope and joy, while they wait.

How do we handle the 'while you wait' short wait? How do you respond to the 45 seconds of the stop light, which you just couldn't get to before the yellow turned red? Do you spend that time preparing? Can't set the table from here, but you can pray and process with your heart and mind. Pray for the

fool who did run through the red light. Pray for the teenagers standing on the corner. Pray for the store keepers of the shop beside you. Process, who needs your prayers.

How do we handle the 'while you wait' long wait? How do you handle a long season that seems too long at the beginning? You can stay in and twiddle your thumbs...yet, you can surrender to the cold – if this might be the season you wait through – by bundling up warmly, walking safely, drinking warm drinks, moving South (if that is possible for a few months) and even marking off days until Spring.

We know that short and long waits are a part of the journey. It seems less difficult to deal with them than the more difficult 'hard wait' –of the unknown wait; the wait with the unknown outcome. You can't bundle enough, you can't count off the time, you can't move away, because you just don't know. The hard waits on the journey are those that take your breath away. Being told that you are pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Being told your intended wife is pregnant when you know you haven't been close-enough to be the father. What have been your hard waits on this journey?

At some point in our lives, we all are faced with a hard wait or many hard waits. This year we have all shared one in COVID-time...They are different for each of us, but none are any less difficult to face and endure.

I wonder do the short and long waits, that we can time, prepare us, strengthen us for the hard waits? Or is it the other way around? Do going through the hard waits make the short and long waits less threatening, easier to cope with? What I do know is that God is with us through it all sharing endurance and hope. The things that we know we can rely on, the words that we do prepare with, stay with us, like Christ, to lead us through the tough spots on the journey.

O Come, O Come Emmanuel - Emmanuel means that God is with us.

And ransom captive Israel – there is a get out of jail free card, which is there for us, when life holds us captive, as well as it was and is for Israel.

That mourns in lonely exile here - God hears our cries, when we cry out.

until the Son of God appear- Christ will come again!

The bittersweet hymn – takes us from the haunting of our endurance in captivity to the expectation of the joy of freedom. Advent gives us time to live in the tension: Live in Mary's tension, live in Joseph's tension and in our own tension. It can be a time for us to look at how we wait, for we will have times of waiting.

Advent gives us time to see as we live in the waiting, that God is ultimately victorious even over time and all of our worries...after all, aren't we Christ followers on a journey toward God's promises? And one of our Creator's promises is known to us as an ultimately victorious ending – through Christ's second coming - worth the journey and the waits.

How we live in the waiting of not enough time, even though we are waiting by counting down the days...Allowing things to happen on God's time, including how long we will have to wait. Sharing the

wait, which might include anything from visiting with people in the masks across the store to sitting quietly-present with a dying friend.

How are we teaching the children to face the wait? Do we find ourselves giving in to their requests for their timing in everything or are we giving them the waiting tools to cope with the short waits and the long waits in anticipation that someday, they too will have to face the hard waits.

If we only teach them to fuss in order to get what they want in that moment, or to just twiddle their thumbs we have done themselves and ourselves a grave disservice. Instead, if we give them the eyes to see what is around them, they can begin to learn how even their help and prayers are needed as we wait together.

What are you waiting for? How will you wait? You know what it is like to wait...Waiting in line at the post office, waiting for sleep to come, waiting to hear from the Doctor about test results. Waiting to sell a house; Waiting to hear on a new job, or any job; Waiting for war to end; waiting for healing and waiting for death. Waiting for a child to be born. Waiting for Christ to come again.

The Messiah is born among us, not as we would have him, but as he is. We prepare again this year for Christ to come into our lives, our hearts and our journeys and lead us in the way we should go. We are called to endure – we are called to rejoice. We are called to give ourselves over to the journey, with all of its stops and starts with waiting in between. Let it be: a time to come together... A time to listen for God's voice...

Please don't try to journey alone, that is a very long and lonely path. We are people created to be in relationship and we can be a gift to each other this season as every season, by sharing our joys and concerns: enduring and rejoicing together.

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