

Romans 8.18-25

“Waiting”

This Advent Season, we will be doing something a bit different than the traditional Advent services. As you already noticed the Advent candle lighting is not following the same themes that we get so used to doing each year. I believe, that we end up doing these themes so often that we become numb to them and to the season. So this Advent season we will lift up four different themes, letting them define our entire worship, as well as giving new meaning to Advent. And our theme for this week will be waiting.

Waiting is not something any of us are particularly good at, it is not something we get used to doing even though we end up doing it all the time. We absolutely hate it. We wait for buses, we wait on the highway, in traffic jams, in airports, we wait in banks and doctors office, we wait upon bureaucracies, and it all drives us a little bit crazy. At Christmas this hatred of waiting becomes even more focused. As children we are waiting for Christmas to come, opening up each day of the Advent calendar, hoping that somehow the days will start to move faster. Or as adults we wait in lines at stores, or we are just waiting for the Christmas music to end, waiting for families to go home, waiting for the Christmas parties to finally be over. After the surgery of a loved one, the doctors come out and say we will just have to wait and see. As we look around and see the violence and hatred of our world and we wonder how long is this all going to go on for, and we are all just waiting to see. There are those who struggle with depression, lonely people, wondering if they will ever get out of this dark hole, waiting to see if someone will be kind to them, let alone love them.

We never get better at waiting, it is not something that any of us enjoy. Waiting is something that continually fills our lives with anxiety, and being told to just be patient only seems to make the waiting worse, more unbearable. We can pray to God, pleading that the waiting will end, but even then the act of prayer implies that we must wait and see how God will respond, how God will act. As much as we hate waiting, it is so fundamental to the human experience, it defines our lives in profound ways.

Growing up, I have very few real memories of either of my grandfathers. Both died within a six months of each other, when I was very young. For my Mom's Dad, I remember a bitter old Irishman, who would swear up a storm as I would tear through his house. And for my Dad's Dad, my Poppop, I remember his love for the Phillies. And that is about it, for both of them. Except for both, what sticks out most to me, is their time of waiting. I cannot remember a time for either one before they were losing their slow battle to cancer. For my Mom's Dad, in his final days, he was waiting to see the birth of my brother, Dylan, his only other grandson. While I remember a bitter old man, worn down by life, in this time of waiting, I remember a different kind of man. A man who only wanted to meet his grandson before he died. And that is exactly what he did, he hung on and about two weeks after, he passed. For my Poppop, he wanted to go out surrounded by his six children and their families. So he planned a family vacation to the Outer Banks, and all of the Callums made their way down. And on that last day, he passed, surrounded by his children and grandchildren. For both, it was in their waiting that I remember them best. I have no memories of who they were before, the memories that most people cling to after they experience loss. For me, they are the man who was waiting to meet a child they would never know, and a man who was waiting to be with his entire family. And that is exactly who they were.

In Scripture the theme of waiting comes up constantly. It is inescapable. God is continually sending His people on journeys of waiting. We find the Israelites wandering and waiting in the desert for forty years, and their waiting in exile, hoping that one day God would lead them back home. We find the Disciples waiting behind locked doors after the death of Jesus, and we find Paul waiting with the churches he ministered to, waiting for the return of their Savior. In Scripture, waiting is not something that the people of God are immune from, it seems to be the exact opposite, they seem to more often find themselves thrust into waiting because God has called them to. Waiting for what God is about to do, waiting to see God's work in the world. Waiting is not just something that we experience as people, it is something that we do as the Church. It is something that God has called us to do, before the return of Christ. It is the calling that we cannot stand, to wait, not knowing for how long. It is something that we do every year, as we celebrate Advent anew, it is something that we do throughout the centuries, joyously proclaiming the coming of Christ into the world, awaiting His coming again. Our celebration of Advent is not just waiting for Christmas, a way to extend the holiday out even further, Advent is a time when we celebrate our waiting, an act which is so foreign to us. It is a time when we are asked again, how do we wait?

It is not always an easy task to wait, to wait for what has come but is still to come. To live in a world which is still suffering from the same ailments, which we claim Christ conquered. This waiting can be difficult, it can leave us feeling aimless. It can leave us feeling bitter, and doubtful, Paul knew this, even in the first century. We hear Paul's words in our reading this morning, going out to a church which was still in the midst of suffering, which still speak to a Church, which continues to suffer. We hear him say to us, who are suffering that "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us". Paul is

not telling them to wait for the hope that so many televangelists promise, that God is going to have favor on you and take away your suffering, your illness, your anxiety, your financial hardships. That is the hope given by cheap charlatans, and you can all think of exactly who I mean, they tempt so many with a hope that is not worth your waiting. That is not how we are meant to wait, searching for a hope to satisfy us in the here and now. That is not the kind of hope Paul promises. The only hope that is worth our waiting, the hope that Paul spoke of, is the waiting God has continued to task the Church with, waiting for the glory revealed in the coming of Christ. His Kingdom which is now but not yet. The hope of the body redeemed and transformed in the resurrection. This is the only hope that is worth the long waiting that the Church continues to participate in, waiting for the final glory of God. Paul assures us that we are not waiting alone, but all creation is anticipating what is coming, the Christ into our world. All creation has been frustrated, in hope that it will be liberated from the bondage of decay and brought into the freedom and glory of God. We hold our breath waiting for the freedom of God, which will liberate us from all our sufferings, the glory of God which will lift us up from what we are, what the world is, into a new heaven and a new earth.

Paul tells the readers of his letter, those who have been waiting, in bitter waiting for the freedom and glory that they were promised, that the whole creation has been groaning in the pains of childbirth. The whole of God's creation is anticipating, awaiting the coming of Christ into the world, awaiting the return of the Savior, whose birth we proclaim during this Advent season. The whole of creation is participating in this waiting, with all of the groaning and pain that anticipate the birth of something new, the Kingdom of God, which will put an end to our waiting. But until the final Advent, we live lives of continual Advent waiting. Waiting may be something that we are never able to get good at, we will always be plagued by impatience, and

frustration, but we have been tasked with waiting. We may wait bitterly for the birth of a world which never seems to be coming, for the birth of a child which seems too far off. We may groan inwardly and outwardly, waiting for the redemption of our bodies. But with all those who came before, all those who waited to see the unfolding of God's Kingdom in the birth of Christ, those who waited to see where His ministry would lead, those who would wait after His death to see what would happen next, and those who have been waiting since His ascension, we wait. We wait for what we do not yet have, we wait for all the things which do not conform to the Kingdom of God to fall away, for those things which we cannot yet see, we wait patiently.

The waiting is frustrating, it is hard, and we groan with the same groans that plagued the Roman Church, but the waiting will not break you, it will reveal you. It will reveal within you who you truly are. This Advent season, remember the waiting, for all of its bitterness, and wait with the whole Creation as we anticipate the birth of the Christ child.