

A Lifetime of Waiting

Advent 2020, "What Are We Waiting For?" part 2

Luke 2:25-38

Children's moment – give them gummy bears and tell them to wait before they eat them.

[SLIDE 1] Welcome, friends. It is so good to be here with you today. Turn to someone and tell them, "Jesus loves you so much, he died for you." That is the foundational truth of Christianity, and we can never hear it enough. Today you might just encounter that truth for the very first time.

Will you pray with me? Dear Jesus, come and fill us with your Spirit. You deserve all the glory and all the praise, because you are the Messiah. Have your way with us today, so that we can know you as our Lord. May the words of my mouth and meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, my Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

So here we are, the second Sunday in Advent. As we learned last week, Advent is a season of expectation. As we wait for Christmas, now only 19 days away, we also know that we are awaiting Christ's return to this world.

[SLIDE 2] Waiting is not usually very fun. Hunters will agree with me, I'm sure. The first time I ever went deer hunting, on opening day, I sat by myself and waited all morning, but I saw nothing. After lunch, I decided to sit with my dad at his blind, and within 30 minutes, I had successfully taken my first deer. I soon learned that this is the exception, not the rule, when it comes to hunting. More often than not, I would sit in my blind all day and see nothing. This year, Lucas and I got up earlier than ever before, getting out to the blind before dawn, and we waited. And waited. And waited. All day we waited. Eventually, we had to give up and go home, or we would have missed Thanksgiving dinner! Every deer season, I experience both the joy and frustration of waiting for an incredible moment, and not knowing when, or even if, it will come.

What do you wait for in your own life? A child to be born, an open register at the store, a doctor's appointment, and of course, Christmas Day itself. The wait can be both exciting and exasperating.

[SLIDE 3] In 2019, I celebrated finally finishing seminary. No more papers, no more books, no more professors' dirty looks.... It was a long wait for my

Master's of Divinity. Like any student, the vision of earning the degree and the doors it would open kept me working hard. But can you imagine a student, while waiting, who just sits in their dorm room for four years and never goes to a single lecture, or lab, or class...nothing? That would not be an effective way to wait for your degree, would it? Parents, if that happens to your child, please, stop paying their tuition! Hopefully, that is not how most of us wait for something important.

[SLIDE 4] The Christian life is one of waiting and anticipation. And it's not a passive waiting; it's an active waiting. The season of Advent reminds us that we are in a time when we celebrate Christmas and anticipate the day Christ will return to this earth and usher in his kingdom forever.

Yet there are times when the wait seems unbearable. Like the children with their gummy bears a moment ago (they had to wait to eat them), wouldn't we rather just focus on the immediate and forget about the long-term? Aren't there times when we just want to stop waiting?

If that's you (and I'll admit, that's me a lot of times, too) then there is hope for you in our scripture today. In Luke 2 we find two people, Simeon and Anna, whose stories can encourage us as we wait for Christ to reappear.

[SLIDE 5] Now, you will not find Simeon and Anna characters in any nativity set. Sadly, there are no good carols involving them. In fact, these folks only show up at the tail end of the Christmas story, a footnote after all the pageantry of Elizabeth, Mary, the angels and shepherds. So I want to give Simeon and Anna their props this morning, because they were the king and queen of active waiting.

Let's start with Simeon. Can you imagine God telling you, you would see the Messiah face-to-face before you died? Imagine being Simeon, waiting for Christ, and finally, now that you've seen him, your earthly life is over. How was the wait on him?

[SLIDE 6] Every day, Simeon went to the temple, hoping, wondering if this was the day. I imagine him there, every time a new baby came in to be dedicated, gazing at the child hopefully, and then realizing, it was not the Christ. Did he say, "Oops, I'm sorry, my bad"? Did he turn away in disgust? I don't think so. I imagine Simeon held each baby and blessed them. And then, maybe with a sigh,

he went back to praying and listening to the Holy Spirit. I cannot imagine what a toll it must have been to literally wait a lifetime to see God.

[SLIDE 7] And when he finally did see the Christ child, Simeon gave a very strange blessing! As if Mary and Joseph hadn't seen enough odd events up to that point: angels, shepherds, and mangers. Now, this young couple watches as their child is blessed by an strange, ancient man in the temple.

[SLIDE 8] Simeon said of Jesus, "This child will split Israel down the middle. Some will rise, some will fall. Your child will be in opposition to many. He will reveal the secret thoughts of many hearts, to their chagrin. And you, Mary, will not be immune to suffering, either." (My paraphrase of verses 33-35.)

These are not words you will find on any card from Hallmark. Christ, a divider? That's not a common thought. Isn't the whole idea of Christmas "Peace on earth?" Isn't this the Savior of the world? The answer to both questions is, yes, however, Simeon reveals something even more important. Jesus does not conform to our expectations. [SLIDE 9] Jesus brings peace, and he brings a sword. The Bible even calls Christ a "stumbling block" in 1st Peter 2:8 and 1st Corinthians 1:23. Jesus reveals the very thoughts of our hearts, good and bad.

Simeon's words confront our tendency to make Christ tame. I call it "the temptation of Christmas." (And I don't mean too many cookies.) The temptation of Christmas is to think of Jesus only as the little baby in the manger. Innocent. Peaceful. Sleeping. Well, you know what? Babies wake up. Babies grow up. They make messes! And I want to tell you, if you let him, Jesus Christ will make the biggest, most beautiful mess of your life.

[SLIDE 10] It's no wonder Joseph and Mary were astounded by Simeon's words. They are astounding! Simeon's message is a wake-up call to all of us: Do not become so accustomed to the Christmas message that it loses its power. Do not fall asleep in your waiting. Jesus was not born in Bethlehem simply to make a good story: Jesus entered this world to turn it upside-down right.

[SLIDE 11] Simeon, in his waiting, was able to see the truth about Jesus. There was also another waiter, the widow, Anna. (I suppose I should call her a waitress.) She was actively waiting for Christ, too. She prayed, fasted, and worshipped in the temple, every day. The Bible tells us she was a lonely widow,

without any family. And yet, she, an outcast, was given the privilege of seeing the Christ child. When she finally saw Jesus, she did what every single one of us should do: she went and told everyone she met about Jesus. She had a lifetime to prepare for that moment, and she took full advantage of it, despite her meager circumstances.

[SLIDE 12] If the life of a Christian is full of waiting and anticipation, then we need to learn from these two prophets how to actively wait. Actively waiting for Jesus means having him in mind when we serve. How do we want to have Jesus find us when he returns? Wouldn't it be awesome if we were in worship, serving our neighbor, celebrating communion, praying at our bedside, working on a mission trip, or helping our friends come to Jesus?

[SLIDE 13] If we are going to stay active, we have to constantly remind ourselves of our goal. Our church exists to make disciples of Jesus Christ who transform the world. The church has been waiting almost 2000 years for Christ's return. It might be tomorrow, or next week, or next year, or next decade. No one knows the time. So the way I see it, we have three options in our waiting.

[SLIDE 14] Option One: Ignore the return of Christ. Pretend like it's never going to happen. We can even ignore the whole Christmas message. We can just live life without purpose, without a connection to our Creator, and call it good enough.

I really, really hope, that's not the option you pick. Yet some people do.

[SLIDE 15] Or, there's Option Two: We can assume that Christ will return immediately and let fear paralyze us: build a bunker in your basement, stuff it full of canned food and Twinkies, and just hide out. Maybe we don't do that literally (I hope), but the way some of us live, it's almost the same thing. We shut down, stop engaging people, and hope that this will soon be over. But that's not a great option, either.

[SLIDE 16] Finally, there's Option Three: We can accept that we cannot know the exact day of Jesus' return, and we can still go about the business of being ready. That's actively waiting.

[SLIDE 17] A forester once found a tree blown down in a windstorm. He expected it to be rotten and dead on the inside, but instead discovered that it was

growing right until the day it toppled. That's an example of how Christians should live. We should be growing in Christ right up to the very end.

[SLIDE 18] I have a theory why Luke included Anna and Simeon in the Christmas story. I believe there is no age limit to serving Christ. Jesus is there for the young and old, the male and the female, the Gentile and the Jew. Jesus is the Savior for all. There is no point when we can say, "I'm too old. I'm done serving. I'm done worshiping. I'm done growing in faith."

[SLIDE 19] 2nd Peter 3:8-9 says, "But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." Each day that goes by is a gift from God, another chance to share the gospel. To share God's love. To serve our neighbors. To invite them into a relationship with Jesus Christ. To invite them to church or a bible study. To pray for them. To look at this world with hope and love and realize that every one of us has a decision to make about Jesus. Will we love him or ignore him?

[SLIDE 20] How do you want to be found when Christ returns? For me, I want to be actively praising him and serving him. I'm hoping you do, too. If Simeon and Anna can spend a lifetime actively waiting for Jesus, so can we. Do not let this Christmas pass you by. Let's agree to live a life of active waiting, starting now.

MEMORY VERSES:

John 1:14 – "The Word become flesh and made his dwelling among us."

Isaiah 40:31 - "Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength."

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

1. Think back to when you were a child. What did it feel like to wait for Christmas?
2. What do you most anticipate during the holidays, good or bad?
3. Would you like to have the thoughts of your heart revealed?
4. How can you be active in your waiting for Jesus' return?
5. Who is someone you can invite to church this Christmas?