

Waiting in America

(Or Growing Antsy at Advent)

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Edmund Steimle uses a phrase, which I believe he borrowed from Niebuhr, to suggest that preaching should be incarnational. By that, he means preaching should be human, worldly, relevant. The sermon should meet people where they are, as the incarnation meets us where we are—in the world. Surely Advent, of all the seasons of the year, calls for incarnational preaching. This means that those of us who are serious about the task of preaching Advent sermons must give some consideration to the state of the world we are addressing.

Advent is shorter than it used to be—literally shorter. There was a time when Advent consisted of six Sundays. It later dwindled to five, and today of course, it is four: a bit of history which must gladden most Americans. Because the truth is, we Americans do not wait well. We are impatient and anxious for action. (“Antsy” is, after all, an American word.) No marketing technique in America can insure more immediate success for virtually any commodity or service than those two simple words “No waiting.” Americans are indeed the “now generation”: reared on throw-away diapers and fast food, entertained by instantaneous electronic media, educated by digests, condensed novels and crash courses, culturized by pop art and pop music, indoctrinated by an economic system which insists on “instant” credit for which we are encouraged to fly now and pay later, programmed by a society which promotes immediate gratification, cured of ills by miracle drugs and laser beams, and evangelized by a religion which tilts decidedly more toward freedom than discipline. Is it any wonder we grow weary of waiting? To wait is a contradiction of the values of the very culture which has birthed us and which shapes us daily. Goldie Hawn expresses the majority mood of America in the movie version of that delightful American drama *Butterflies Are Free*, when in response to her new acquaintance’s question about her college background, she replies “Oh, I started to go to UCLA, but I couldn’t find a place to park.” America is a land where the level of commitment is more frequently in obverse relationship to the length of the line.

But wait! If we tire of waiting, we know also that we have no choice but to wait. The human gestation process still takes nine months. Old wine still tastes better than new wine. Even the most romantic among us knows there is no such thing as “love at first sight.” No speed reading course can ever accelerate the acquiring of wisdom. And it still remains so that “It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power.” We have no choice but to wait. Thus our dilemma. Perhaps the best clue to the true American frustration is to be found in that old Army phrase, now appropriated to the culture at large, “Hurry up and wait.” Americans are we who find ourselves increasingly encouraged to hurry up, only to discover that still we must wait. This is the tension in which we live, a tension which of course is no different

from that of any age or place, except perhaps in its intensity. In truth, the whole world waits.

Incarnational preaching, however, not only meets men and women where they are in the world; it breaks into their world the person, the word, the purpose of God. Thus, the sermon can never be simply a replay of the "Today Show." The sermon's unique contribution is the truth which God introduces. So, since "to wait" is our human condition, it is instructive to remember that God also waits. The images of God one finds in scripture are those of one who takes his time—no hurry; who, in truth has all the time in the world, who will indeed work his purposes out, but who will do it in his own good time. Creation pulsates to a divinely ordered rhythm which reserves a place for waiting. God, we are led to believe, is one of interminable patience. Moreover, Jesus, the paradigm of our own humanity, identified with us in our waiting. The Gethsemane experience gathers together all the agonizing emotions that go with waiting—fear, anxiety, sadness, impatience, frustration, helplessness—all human emotions. Plus, of course, there is anger at those who would not wait with him even one hour. The biblical story hints at that strange wisdom which is to be found in waiting. It is a wisdom which refuses to be rushed, a wisdom contradictory to the values and goals of American culture, a wisdom which will come for us only in time and by faith. Harold B. Sanderson, Jr., is a young minister who seems to have glimpsed this mysterious wisdom of waiting. He speaks of it in a poem which, he says, "grew out of my visits with Chrysynda Lee Ellis, a terminally ill high school girl. After six months, trying to keep her alive, all efforts failed and she died. The poem was written when there was still hope for her physical recovery, but now it takes on a far more important dimension, pointing to a life beyond our struggles and striving, waiting to welcome us home. Faith sees the world as nothing else sees the world." The poem can only be understood in the context of that life situation.

"The Waiting"

The waiting in early spring
On dark grey afternoons
Requires such patience as
Only snow-bound crocus buds
Can share.
Long winter watches for
Some signs of sun returning
To warm the barren earth
And stir still silent life
Are over.
Yet once warmed and wakened
Beginning, petal by petal,
Blossoming—an interminable
Pause only fragile crocus buds
Can bear.
This seems to us no answer
In our waiting for new life,
But petal by petal bright
Against the snow, why we wait
We come to know.

Why we wait, we come to know—in time. We wait in order to discern more distinguishably the one who waits for us. It is God. Theilike's theological insight is never more keen than when he reverses subject and object in the parable of the impatient prodigal son and renames the parable, "The Waiting Father." All our anxiety at waiting, our fury, frustration and despair at having to wait—for faith, or truth, or peace, or love, or meaning (whatever that overworked word means)—all our waiting must be understood in the larger, ultimate context of God's waiting.

"In the fulness of time (God's own time) God revealed to us a Son." Christmas addresses the problem of our impatience. Christmas reveals the one for whom we have waited. But wait! The one who came is also the one who is coming. While Advent properly celebrated has always had about it the element of history, recalling those pre-Christmas days in that pre-Christian era as the world awaited the Bethlehem birth, Advent has never been exclusively the recollection of history. Properly celebrated, Advent has always had about it also the element of hope. Even as we celebrate the one who came, we await the one who comes. Paul Tillich is particularly perceptive at this point: "Waiting means not having and having at the same time. . . . The fact that we wait for something shows that in some way we already possess it. . . . If we wait in hope and patience, the power of that for which we wait is already effective within us. He who waits in an ultimate sense is not far from that for which he waits. He who waits in absolute seriousness is already grasped by that for which he waits. He who waits in patience has already received the power of that for which he waits. He who waits passionately is already an active power himself, the greatest power of transformation in personal and historical life. We are stronger when we wait than when we possess. When we possess God, we reduce him to that small thing we knew and grasped of him; and we make it an idol. Only in idol worship can one believe in the possession of God." Thus "waiting" becomes descriptive of the life style of those who live in the theological tension between having and not having. "Waiting" is the Bible's way of describing the kind of relationship we have with God in the world. But waiting is not despair. As Tillich puts it, "It is the acceptance of our not having, in the power of that which we already have." Waiting in America is essentially no different from waiting in Bethlehem, for every time is a time of waiting. It is the human condition. We wait, but we wait not as those who have nothing for which to wait—no hope. We wait for that which we already have. We wait for God. Jesus, of course, is the one whom God sent to show us what it means to wait. He is the unique one who came to tell us it is all right to trust our hope. He is the model for our own waiting, who demonstrates in history the nature of that hope for which we wait. Jesus revealed the nature and purpose of God, who has come but who still comes; whom we have, but do not have. Thus the season of Advent, in which we celebrate both our past history and our future hope, becomes a parable of our own existence. That is where we are, as W. H. Auden accurately describes it, "in the meantime."

So what do we do—in this meantime—while we wait. Even the Advent sermon ought to offer the suggestion of a response on the part of the hearers. An incarnational sermon, after all, ought to be as specific in its call for action as the incarnation itself. So, in the style of Paul Lehmann whose ethics is an attempt to answer the question of all church people "What am I as a believer in Jesus Christ and a member of his church to do?", so the sermon should

conclude with some specific, incarnational suggestions. One thing certain, the scriptural understanding of waiting is not idle inactivity. The patience of God is not passive, nor is Jesus' waiting depicted as indifference. Neither, then is our waiting period to be characterized by inactivity. Father Henri Nouwen writes of rediscovering an old legend in the Talmud, which seems to suggest a stance for our waiting:

Rabbi Yoshua ben Levi came upon Elijah the prophet while he was standing at the entrance of Rabbi Simeron ben Yohai's cave. . . .He asked Elijah, "When will the Messiah come?" Elijah replied,
"Go and ask him yourself."
"Where is he?"
"Sitting at the gates of the city."
"How shall I know him?"
"He is sitting among the poor covered with wounds. The others unbind all their wounds at the same time and then bind them up again, but he unbinds one at a time and binds it up again, saying to himself, 'Perhaps I shall be needed: if so I must always be ready so as not to delay for a moment.'" (Taken from the tractate Sanhedrin).

According to the legend, the Messiah is sitting among the poor, binding his wounds one at a time, waiting for the moment when he is needed. Thus the clue to the character of our own waiting. While we wait, we tend to our own wounds, but we do it in such a manner that we are not so preoccupied with our own self that we are prevented from ministering to the needs of others. We are, as the Christ before us, in Father Nouwen's words "the wounded healer." It is a mystery to be sure, that "by his stripes we are healed." So un-American! The self-sufficiency of the American character prefers that I "do it myself." That another's suffering is the source of my health is an offense to my American individualism. Nevertheless, that is the mystery of God's grace which is the context of our waiting. Likewise, that is the clue to the character of our own waiting—not idleness, despair or indifference. While we wait on the Lord, we do the Lord's work, and the repeated mystery is that our sufferings too possess the potential for healing.

No one understood this mystery, or demonstrated this life style, any better than Martin Luther King, Jr. In his volume *Why We Can't Wait*, King includes his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" addressed to his fellow clergymen who were suggesting that the "timing" was wrong, and that King and his civil rights colleagues might do better to wait a little. In that epistle, which bears remarkable resemblance to some of St. Paul's, Martin King wrote "For years now I have heard the word 'Wait.' It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This 'Wait' has almost always meant 'Never'. . . .We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights. . . .I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience." There is a legitimate impatience that belongs to those who wait on the Lord. Even as we wait, we grow impatient with injustice, suffering, loneliness, oppression, and despair

precisely because we live in the faith knowledge of a kingdom where all these are already overcome. We both await and possess citizenship in a kingdom where God rules. Thus even as we wait, we live ready to bear witness to the one who has already come. And the mystery is that even our waiting, when it possesses those qualities of trust, expectation and impatience, becomes the source of another's redemptive insight into their own human situation.

According to the Talmud, when Elijah explained to Rabbi Joshua ben Levi where he could find the Messiah, the Rabbi went to him and said

"Peace unto you, my master and teacher."

The Messiah answered, "Peace unto you, son of Levi."

He asked, "When is the master coming?"

"Today," he answered.

Rabbi Joshua returned to Elijah, who asked,

"What did he tell you?"

"He indeed has deceived me, for he said

'Today I am coming' and he has not come."

Elijah said, "This is what he told you:

'Today if you would listen to His voice.'"

(Psalm 95:7)

The ancient legend bears a strange resemblance to the more recent American legend by Frank Baum, "The Wizard of Oz." In Baum's American tale, Dorothy and her three companions (the Scarecrow, the Tin Woodman, and the Cowardly Lion) went searching for those ingredients which would make them whole again; in their case, brains, a heart, courage, and for Dorothy, a home. Only, as every child knows, the story ends with the discovery that the very things they sought—waited for—they already possessed. It is an American secular version of the eternal drama. We wait for what we already have. We long for the one who is already here.

It comes as no surprise that Americans are less than enthusiastic in the observance of Advent. Who wants to celebrate having to wait? Theologically, however, that is unfortunate, because to understand the meaning of Advent is to gain insight into his own human situation. Even impatient America must wait. But we wait not in idleness or without direction. There is meaning to our meantime. It is a meaning fashioned from our hope in the one who has come, and for whom we wait. The one "who waits in an ultimate sense is not far from that for which he waits," as Paul Tillich has said.

And so we wait—rejoicing in the ancient arrival of him who has, in truth redeemed all our waiting from despair—while in the meantime, joining with the church both ancient and modern to pray again and again the Advent prayer, "Come, Lord Jesus."