

# ADVENT IS NO DRIVE-THROUGH SEASON

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December 12, 2010 - The Third Sunday of Advent

James 5:7-10 and Matthew 11:2-11

## Opening Prayer

I want to begin with a prayer from St. Anselm. (St. Anselm wrote and used this prayer before he did his theological work.)

*Come now, Little Man [one], turn aside for a while from your daily employment, escape for a moment from the tumult of your thoughts.*

*Turn aside your weighty cares, let your burdensome distractions wait, free yourself awhile for God and rest awhile in him.*

*Enter the inner chamber of your soul, shut out everything except God and that which can help you in seeking him, and when you have shut the door, seek him.*

*Now, my (your) whole heart, say to God, "I seek your face, Lord it is your face I seek."*

## Our impatience

Most of us are impatient. Waiting is not our forte. We do not like traffic jams, long lines, being stuck in airports, being left on hold or waiting for our computers to boot up, download, or deliver what we want immediately. The little computer hour glass is so annoying.

We live in and are formed by a culture of impatience that tells us faster is better. That's why so called "snail mail" gave way to the fax, which gave way to email, which gave way to chatting and posting, which gave way to texting, which brought about tweeting. . . Important people in our culture do not wait for their mail.

In like manner, for some, telephones hooked up to walls gave way to beepers, then to car phones, and then to cell phones. Then cell phones became computers, which used to take up a whole building, then sat on a desk, then became portable in a briefcase. But now, your phone is a computer and it sits in your pocket until it makes an annoying sound. Do you remember the black dial telephone where a bell actually rang?

Do you remember phone booths? I wonder where Superman would change today? Perhaps in his pocket! Now there is no need to wait until we get to a wall to make a call. Or, for that matter, to wait for a wall to access most of the information in the world, including secrets of state. It is all in the palm of your hand or in your pocket.

How about TV commercials? Two-minute commercials gave way to one minute commercials that gave way to 30-second commercials that gave way to 15-second commercials that gave way to 10-second commercials, which, in some cases, gave way to even shorter commercials.

Some restaurants with *waiters* and *waitresses* became fast-food restaurants, most of which have become drive-through, fast-food restaurants. We have drive-through pharmacies, drive-through dry cleaners with one-hour service, and drive-through banks with instant credit. Whatever this all means, it certainly means that waiting is out of vogue.

### **Waiting as Meaningless**

The philosopher Viktor Frankl wrote a book entitled *Man's Search for Meaning*. It grew out of his three years at Auschwitz. His key insight is that humans can withstand anything as long as they believe it to be meaningful. The opposite is also true: We have a hard time withstanding things that we believe are meaningless. In our culture waiting is no longer meaningful. It has no inherent value. It is a waste of time. It is not even neutral. In an instant world, waiting is a negative.

### **Waiting for God**

This is a major problem for our religious lives because we spend much, if not most, of our time waiting for God. There is nothing new about this. The Jews waited for God. The psalms are filled with the woes of waiting. The Jews waited for a Messiah and after he came, the early Christians waited for the Messiah to return. That is what James is referring to in this morning's Epistle when he writes, "Be patient...beloved, until the coming of the Lord." James's advice is still pertinent for us today, but in a somewhat different context.

We often hear during the season of Easter that we are an Easter people, formed after, and in light of, the Resurrection. This is true. But is it not also true that in our daily faith-lives, most of us, most of the time, are Advent people? Is not waiting a bigger component of our daily religious lives than the Resurrection? Do we not spend most of our so-called time with God waiting for God? And when we pray, does it not seem like we spend most of our time waiting for God to show up? The truth is God is there. We are the ones who are not present.

Some of the writings of Simone Weil, the Jewish French philosopher and mystic, were posthumously published in a book entitled *Waiting for God*. In it she writes, "Waiting patiently in expectation is the foundation of

the spiritual life." Waiting patiently in expectation is, in part, the business of Advent.

### **The Hiddenness of God**

The reason we have to wait is that often God remains hidden to us. Even in those wonderful moments when we experience the presence of God's grace, and even when we know intuitively or intellectually that God is present, the Lord remains hidden. This is a great mystery and frustration to us. There is always an aspect of God that is hidden.

### **Waiting on God**

Waiting on the hiddenness of God is not the same as waiting in a traffic jam. Waiting on God has a meaning all its own. It is not simply negative or neutral time; it is positive time. It is transformative time. When we wait on God, the Lord works in our souls in a passive way, in a way that we do not often perceive at the time, but that is nonetheless real, and every bit as life-changing as those moments when God's grace breaks into our lives with great clarity.

### **Waiting and Wine**

Think about fine wines. Just as those wonderful red Bordeaux Cabernet Sauvignon wines are made fine through waiting, so the soul is made holy through waiting. To not let these wines age would be to rob them of their potential. So it is with the soul. For a soul that is not aged through waiting can never grow to its potential holiness. When a Cabernet Sauvignon is aged, the harshness of the tannin in the grape skin is softened and latent flavors emerge. By analogy, this is what happens to a soul that patiently waits on God. The harshness of our thick-skinned ways becomes softened, and the latent Godliness in our souls begins to emerge, and we begin to see the presence of God, which is latent in all things, emerge in divine glory. One of the fruits of patiently waiting upon God is the revealing of the hiddenness of God. This is called illumination.

### **Fruits of Patience and *Rejoice in the Lamb***

We see this so beautifully in the cantata *Rejoice in the Lamb*, which is our anthem today. While the writer Christopher Smart was waiting upon the Lord in the unlikely place of an asylum, some of the mysterious hiddenness of the Divine was mystically revealed to him. Now through Benjamin Britten's music, we hear the truth that all things worship God in their own way. We see the hidden holiness of things we usually do not think of as holy. We usually miss that cats, like Christopher Smart's cat Jeoffry, are servants "of the Living God, duly and daily serving him" We usually miss that mice are creatures "of great personal valor." We usually miss that "flowers are peculiarly the poetry of Christ." We usually miss the hiddenness of God.

### **Advent**

So in Advent we wait. Like a bottle of fine wine on the shelf, while the Lord ages and softens our soul so that we do not miss the greatest hidden holiness of all – God hidden in a babe in the unlikely place of an animal's trough in a barn in the small town of Bethlehem in Judea 2,000 years ago.

But if we skip Advent, we will miss Christmas. If we treat Advent like a drive-through season, then we will simply drive by Christmas, and the babe in the manger will be a blur. If we do not patiently wait upon the hiddenness of God now, then we will impatiently miss the revelation of God in the season to come. If we spend more time with the Christmas goose than the Christmas God, then in January we will know that Godly shame, we will know that empty feeling, when we admit to ourselves that yet again, yet again, we missed it, we missed the gift our heart longs for. If we do not resist worldly impatience now and slow down and patiently wait upon the hiddenness of the Lord in Advent, then we will end up savoring the Christmas goose and not the Christmas

Savior. The goose can feed our bellies, but only the Savior can feed our souls.

*Good Lord, give us the grace to slow down and wait upon you so you can work your mystical magic in us.*

*Amen.*