

Expectant waiting
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11, Advent 3, Year B
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Of the twentieth century's popular bards and story-tellers, perhaps none captures the breadth of ordinary human emotion quite like the Eagles. "New Kid in Town," "Lyin' Eyes," "Wasted Time"...In addition to being top forty hits, these songs have the enduring ability to grab hold of our various feelings of confusion, guilt, and regret and well them to the surface.

A lesser known Eagles song is Glen Frey's "The Girl from Yesterday." In the song, a couple says goodbye, as the man takes his leave and travels across the ocean. The woman steels herself to wait for him. Years come and go, and still the woman keeps her vigil. But those who hear the song discern the truth. He's not coming back. Ever. And so expectant waiting on the future is exposed as a *pining* for a past that never again will be. As the years pass, nothing changes. The woman's life is arrested on the day her lover leaves. The song ends:

The light's on in the window. She's waiting by the phone.
Talking to a memory that's never coming home.
She dreams of his returning, and the things that he might say.
But she'll always be the girl from yesterday.
Yes, she'll always be the girl from yesterday.

The image is not unlike Miss Havisham in Dickens' *Great Expectations*. In her ever-deteriorating wedding gown, Miss Havisham pines away for the past, having convinced herself that she is waiting expectantly on the future.

We talk a lot about waiting during the season of Advent. We do our very best—at least within these walls on Sundays—to fend off the culture's Christmas rush and participate in the season of expectation. But what, we might ask, is the character of our waiting?

Too often, the Christmas upon which we wait is entirely backward-looking. It is a pining for what we perceive to have been a simpler, more agreeable time. Sometimes we hearken to images from our childhood. For me, it's the film "A Christmas Story" about little Ralphie Parker who wants nothing for Christmas but a Red Rider BB gun. For my parents, it's Frank Capra's "It's a Wonderful Life" about George Bailey and the good people of Bedford Falls.

We also, it's true, set our expectation on the stable, the star, and the shepherds in Bethlehem. But these, too, are usually imagined in the manner of Precious Moments ceramic

figurines, gathered together doe-eyed in a table top Nativity scene. Is that the kind of expectant waiting Advent intends, or is it a pining for some real or imagined past?

I am a runner. In high school, despite my spindly build, I was a sprinter, serving as the first leg of the 800 meter relay. With clarity, I remember those few seconds crouched in the starting blocks before each race, *waiting* for the relay to begin.

The year of our best relay squad I was the youngest and slowest of the four on our team. As I approached the blocks, I would scan the track and take in my fellow team members. Immediately in front of me was Zach Branch, beyond Zach was Bradley Welchel, and finally there was Chad Register—the anchor leg—who could release a burst of speed on which I hung a fair amount of hope. I would look at these three and take a deep breath, acknowledging that my near future was tied to theirs. And then I'd set my feet in the blocks.

The next few seconds were some of the fullest I've experienced. Before it ever fired, I could hear the crack of the starting pistol. I could smell its acrid smoke. Energy pulsed through me in those moments, my legs wanting to burst out of the blocks toward their destination. In my mind I could see myself bending into the curve of the track. I could feel the sure and practiced contact as I passed the baton to Zach. With clarity, I could see Chad crossing the finish line, having anchored us all and won the race. I imagined what was to come with such vividness that it was almost as real to me in the blocks as when I actually ran the track. In the small and insignificant event of a high school track meet, I lived into the future with all that I was. It truly was *expectant waiting*.

Why don't I wait this way upon things of real import? Why don't any of us? Why don't we anticipate and expect an explosive, transformative, potent and pulsating future—one in which we play a part—instead of pining for what was or, worse yet, for an idealized and sanitized past that may never have been?

This morning we read the prophet Isaiah. Hear again these words:

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to comfort those who mourn...[God's people] will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory. They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities...all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed.

What's remarkable about this passage is that Isaiah writes long before these events occur. During the time he writes, Judah is at best a beleaguered and threatened nation and at worst a people stripped of their homes and families and cast into exile in a foreign land. And yet, Isaiah does not pine for the past. Rather, he sees himself *in God's promised future*. "The Lord has anointed *me*," he says, "to bind up the brokenhearted." Isaiah understands that even he is an agent of God's vision, and his waiting pulsates with energy, as he can already imagine an Israel in which new life reigns.

When our Advent waiting is merely a pining, then *nothing changes*, either within ourselves or in the world round about us. Advent is spent nostalgically, and when Christmas comes, for two days (if we're lucky) we greet one another with an unaccustomed courtesy. But then we slip back into the cadences of our lives. The tinsel and ornaments are put away, and we remain the same. Like a stiff mug of eggnog, Christmas becomes a palliative to get us through what is otherwise a bleak and cold time of year. It numbs us.

But for the runner in the blocks, numbness is deadly. The runner needs to feel every nerve ending crackle and experience the pulsating energy that readies him for the sound of the gun. He needs not to dwell on some past race but *to envision the coming one*, hoping that he'll be transformed by the experience. So it is with Advent. We are called to wait *expectantly* like the runner in the blocks, to imagine that we *will be transformed* when Christ arrives among us. We're called to see ourselves bending into the track, carrying forward the baton of God's vision, sometimes passing it on to others and other times taking it into our hands, but always knowing that there are those who run this race with us.

We're ten days away. Can you smell the stable stall? Can you hear the cry of the anxious mother about to give birth, the sounds of the skittish animals gathered round? Can you anticipate what the unknowing shepherds will soon see erupt in the night sky? Can you imagine what it will mean for the God who so loves the world to be born into it—and to come again at the Second Advent—to begin the work of remaking the *whole* world according to Isaiah's vision?

Hear again our collect for the day: "Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us!" He *is* coming. Feel it in your muscles and your bones as we wait expectantly, not pining for a porcelain figurine of a God, but readied to fire out of the blocks and become, like Isaiah, the agents of a mighty and blessed vision for the world.

Amen.