

“What Are We Waiting For?”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
First Sunday of Advent – December 2, 2012

Jeremiah 33: 14-16
1 Thessalonians 3: 9-13

Our family has two pets. We have a dog named Ethel, and a cat named Bella. And, in their own ways, they each have a way of testing my patience.

For the dog, it happens whenever we go for walks. Ethel loves to go outside and explore, and much of the time she gets on a scent and goes full bore – pulling me like an Alaskan Huskie, even though she’s a Cairn Terrier. Unfortunately, she also gets easily distracted by various things, especially the numerous fat squirrels in our neighborhood, and she forgets to do “her business.” It’s not uncommon for me to get frustrated, thinking, “Dog, you’re wasting my time out here!”

For the cat, it’s her insistence on when she should receive her food. After sleeping and lounging the entire day, she comes parading around about 9:00 p.m., and starts meowing over and over. She will jump in your lap, not to sleep, but to demand her food. We hold off until around 10:00, and give her her food. The mornings are worse. It can start around 5:00. Debbie or I wake up to this pawing on our chest, arms, or even our face. Bella will even wake Debbie up by licking her on her nose – she doesn’t do that to me. And she continues this until someone gets up and feeds her. Needless to say, our animals test our patience on many an occasion.

We are not normally patient creatures, us human beings. John Buchanan, retired pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, has some great reflections on this fact. He writes:

The large Christmas tree in Macy’s department store in downtown Chicago was lighted in a festive public ceremony on November 2, two days after Halloween and almost eight weeks before Christmas. The event made me think of an observation about Americans that Henri Nouwen made after he’d lived and taught in the United States for decades. We are not very good at waiting, Nouwen noted. In fact, most people consider waiting to be a huge waste of time. The culture says don’t just sit there – do something!

Patience is not one of our stronger characteristics. A flight delay at the airport, an unanticipated traffic jam on the freeway or a doctor’s appointment that leaves us too long in the waiting room can become an emotional and physical crisis, bringing with it stress, a racing heart and elevated blood pressure.

*Our culture celebrates action, results and instant gratification. Relentless and highly sophisticated advertising convinces us that we deserve to have whatever we want now. As a result, Nouwen observed, waiting is an awful desert between where we are and where we want to be (*Christian Century*, “Awaiting God’s Reign,” November 28, 2012: 3).*

As we begin the Season of Advent today, we are reminded of where we are and where we want to be. We are neck-deep in the stresses of our work, and we want to be retired and free of that never-ending strain. We watch a loved one suffering from illness, and we wait impatiently for a future full of health. We wait in the desert of uncertainty, and yearn for a future of direction and fulfillment.

In both of our scripture lessons today, we hear the message of expectant waiting for a hopeful future. The prophet Jeremiah speaks to a people in exile, full of despair, in a

present which is hopeless and despondent. The Israelites yearn for a new day, but it is hard for them to see light amid the darkness which surrounds them.

“The days are surely coming when I will fulfill my promise, says the Lord.” That promise is much deeper than happy holiday feelings or nostalgic sentiments. That promise is full of justice and righteousness. And it will come from “a righteous Branch to spring up for David.” That righteous Branch will save Judah and keep Jerusalem safe. What are we waiting for? We await justice, righteousness, and peace, for it is the Lord who is our righteousness.

The church in Thessalonica was not in exile like the Israelites of Jeremiah’s time. But they were spiritually confused about what their future held as followers of Christ. This letter is one of the earliest of Paul’s, and it speaks to a church which believes the risen Christ is coming back to earth in the very near future. It is an undeveloped yet eager faith which these believers possess. And Paul is eager to speak the gospel message to them.

“How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you?” There is great admiration by Paul for the Thessalonians’ faithfulness and commitment to this new hopeful faith. And he offers a charge and blessing to the church for living out this hopeful faith: “And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you.” H. Richard Niebuhr once asserted that, rooted in the Great Commandment, “the purpose of the church is the increase of the love of God and neighbor” (*Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2009: 16*). What are we waiting for? The good, the just, and the true which comes with the in-breaking of Christ’s Kingdom.

John Buchanan continues: *Near the end of his life Jesus began to prepare his disciples for something that was still to come. He told his followers to wait hopefully and actively anticipate the future. “Watch. Stand up. Stay awake. Be alert.” Christians trust that something is coming that is not yet fully here: redemption, fulfillment, wholeness, peace and the world as God intends it. The reign of God will be characterized by peace among nations and justice for all people – particularly for oppressed people. In this world, old and young will be secure and safe, little ones will not be shot in random street violence, people will not suffer for lack of access to adequate health care, and weapons will be melted down and recast into farm implements.*

That’s why we do some serious waiting during Advent. Yes, Advent waiting is patient and unhurried, to be sure. But it is also living into the promised future. Advent waiting is gently but steadily working for the reign of God here and now. It is waiting for the birth of a child, and working for the future that that child promised and embodied and taught and lived (ibid).

What are we waiting for? The coming of the Christ Child. What are we yearning for? Justice, peace, renewal, purpose. What are we seeking this Advent Season? I will leave the Spirit of God to work in each of our hearts to answer that question.

Thanks be to God for this time of expectant waiting for what God will do. Amen.