

Why Wait for Advent? Isaiah 40:1-11, II Peter 3:8-15

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We live in an impatient world. All of us feel the pressure, but also enjoy the pleasures, of the instant and the immediate. Many of us can remember when the world was not so instant. When we ordered something by mail, it came in a couple of weeks, which was okay. Dinner took time to prepare. Restaurants served promptly, but not fast. Time was measured in hours.

Then with the arrival of “instant coffee” in the 1960s and fast food service in the 1970s, we started to expect that answers to our questions would come more quickly, and services would be delivered more promptly. Then the microwave arrived, and dinner was ready in minutes. Fast food restaurants turned out lunches in two minutes or less. Time was measured by the minute.

In the 1990s, with the advent of personal computers and the explosion of the Internet, we began to measure time in seconds. Through computing and Internet access, we could get needed information whether from school, the library, or the world without even leaving our home. Online news networks could now serve us information immediately from everywhere around the globe, 24 hours a day.

And these days, most of our phones are smarter and faster than our five-year old home computer. Needs or wants are expected to be met instantaneously; whether it's your question answered by Google, or checking your home's security from halfway across the nation, or getting the latest movie now streamed right to your TV, Ipad, or phone; or all three simultaneously. And what about that order you placed on Amazon? In a big city it will be on your doorstep within hours; for us country folk we still have to wait until tomorrow. Technologically, culturally, we now live by “instant gratification.” When we want something, we expect our wants to be fulfilled immediately.

But, while technology has changed most of our expectations about time, we find that relationships do not work in seconds. Love and compassion are not achieved in an instant. The same thing is true in our walk with God. **From our side, building an intimate relationship with God takes time, probably a lifetime.** We have to confront our unhappiness when God does not answer our requests or fulfill our needs (at least as we understand them) as soon as we ask.

The prayer of the modern American is, “*Dear God, grant me patience. And I want it right now!*” Perhaps it always has been a part of human nature to be impatient with the passage of time. That was also the case in the early church. Jesus had died, risen from the dead, and ascended into the presence of God. The persistent promise that people in the early church heard was that Jesus was coming again in power and great triumph to judge the living and the dead, and to claim his people for all eternity. But where was the fulfillment of his promise to return.

The Apostle Peter wrote his second letter to address the impatience that these Christians were expressing because Jesus had not yet come again. Years had passed; the believers still toiled and struggled and faced persecution, and the promise of Christ still had not been fulfilled. And so Peter reminds them ...

But do not ignore this one fact, beloved,
that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years,
and a thousand years are like one day.

The Lord is not slow about his promise,
as some think of slowness,
but is patient with you,
not wanting any to perish
2 Peter 3:8

While we may work hard and efficiently, and strive for instant results by getting all of the right pieces into place, we cannot control how and when God works. God is in charge of timing. We may pray diligently and want instant answers, but God will provide them in His own time and His own way. God will come when the time is right, and that likely will not be on a schedule we have created.

In the mid-twentieth century, the great evangelical teacher A. W. Tozer said, "*The faith of Christ offers no buttons to push for quick service. The new order must wait the Lord's own time, and that is too much for the man in a hurry. He just gives up and becomes interested in something else.*" That is the temptation we face: when God does not work on our schedule, we may become interested in something else. We may try to take the responsibility for trying to make things happen right now. We have limited power to make anything holy or right happen in our time, or in our way, or to our preferences. This is a hard lesson to learn, but one that we must learn early in life.

Advent can help us learn such patience. Advent can help us and our children learn to slow down, to wait for God's time. Like purposely watching for a pot to boil, when we intentionally count down the days of Advent we can help slow down time a bit. We can learn to patiently wait for God's timing like the prophet Isaiah who twice told of Israel's future, both immediate and far distant.

First Isaiah spoke of Judah's imminent exile as God's punishment for their failure to keep their covenant with Him. But since he lived and spoke in a time just before their

exile, his prophecies were not welcomed. Isaiah was considered a traitor and troublemaker, suffering many indignities, and eventually even being killed at the command of kings who did not want to hear his message of impending judgment.

Yet, right in the middle of his judgment prophecies, beginning with the portion we read today, Isaiah switches from a message of judgment to a message of hope. He began speaking of Israel's eventual restoration and God's grace shown to all people by the one called "the root of Jesse," God's "suffering servant," "the arm of the Lord." That person whom he said we would one day name "*wonderful counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace*" (Isaiah 9:6-9).

This change of tone from judgment to hope was so radical that many commentators are convinced that another author (called "Deutero Isaiah"), was now writing from within that future exile, wanting to add a more positive spin to all of Isaiah's previous doom and gloom. Personally, I just think that Isaiah himself was skipping ahead in time and telling Israel the end of their story so that they might have sufficient hope to live through its middle.

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
Isaiah 40:1

Isaiah had just gone from looking at their immediate exile to what would soon become Israel's deep longing for restoration; along with the salvation of all humanity, which had been their original commission. Who could have guessed that Isaiah's promised "child born to us" would take another 600 years before even beginning to come to pass (Isaiah 7:14). And now some 2,600 years later we are still waiting for many aspects of Isaiah's prophecy to find their final fulfillment.

See, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.
He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
Isaiah 40:10-11

These days, we are privileged to celebrate the first portion of Isaiah's promise—"God with us"—every Christmas. The second portion is still yet to be, and even now, it will only come in God's good time.

So this season of Advent helps us to patiently wait for both of these comings. Unlike those Hebrews of old, we have witnessed the birth of the Messiah; we have watched his life of God's love lived out; we have witnessed his sacrificial death and resurrection, offering salvation for us—and everyone else who "calls upon the name of the Lord" (Romans 10:13). The ancient promise of God's salvation for all who live by faith has been fulfilled and we are now witnesses to this good news.

But the second portion of Isaiah's prophecy will not be fulfilled until after that time Peter has identified as "the Day of the Lord," a time of judgment, fire, and destruction, when Jesus will return not as savior but as King and Judge. This is when the arm of the Lord will bring God's reward and recompense for all the earth. And only after that, if we have read our prophecies rightly—will Israel be restored as in the days of old.

When it does come, this "Day of the Lord," God can and will intervene faster than we can imagine. As both Jesus and Peter warned, this second coming of our Lord will be sudden and frightening, *like a thief in the night* (Matthew 24:43, 1 Thessalonians 5:2, and II Peter 3:10). In view of this day, Peter had some very profound warnings for those impatient Christians.

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

II Peter 3:10

Jesus will return as King and Judge and He will neither be quiet nor go unnoticed as at His first coming. As heavens and earth melt away, people will be running from the face of the Lord but finding no place to hide. Again if we have rightly interpreted our Bibles, we may be there on that day but only be as observers. The Day of the Lord will not be a joyous one for God, for us, or for anyone else.

Since all these things are to be ...
what sort of people ought you to be ?
Waiting for and hastening the coming of the day
of God? II Peter 3:11

So Peter asked them and us a very pointed question. Why would we want to hurry up what God Himself is holding off as long as possible, patiently waiting “not wanting any to perish.” That is a question we each need to answer for ourselves. What is it in us that wants judgment and punishment for others while craving grace and mercy for ourselves? Can we learn to wait patiently for God’s grace to work its fullest effect?

(pause)

The Lord is not slow about his promise,
as some think of slowness,
but is patient with you,
not wanting any to perish,
but all to come to repentance.

II Peter 3:9

Then, Peter advised them as he now advises us, on the proper way to wait for the Lord.

[We should be] leading lives of
holiness and godliness,
[while] waiting for the new heavens
and a new earth,
where righteousness is at home.

II Peter 3: 11-13

This is one reason why the season of Advent is good for us. In the midst of a world and a season ironically gone mad with consumerism, Advent helps us learn to live godly lives while patiently waiting for that day--not when evil is destroyed--but waiting for that day when righteousness finally once again feels at home.

Peter concludes with this very wise advice for those impatient Christians of old and for us--for completely different reasons--impatient Christians now.

Therefore, beloved,
while you are waiting for these things,
strive to be found by Him at peace,
without spot or blemish;
and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.

II Peter 3:15

Advent is here to help us learn the patience of a people who live in hope--not waiting for coming destruction but for coming salvation. And, having witnessed the first coming of our Lord, we now live as His witnesses until His second coming.

A child was working with a parent to put up a swing set in the backyard of the house. Since the instructions came in pictures, the child started to put some of the pieces together, and the parent helped. As the child worked with the tools, the pieces did not fit together too well, and the child worked harder and harder and with greater and greater frustration to make things fit. And the child wanted to do the work quickly so that the swing set could be used right away. It was then that the parent uttered those wise parental words we all should never forget: "Don't force it!"

As believers, this is our ongoing lesson in life. We can help God's program move along by sharing His good news with whomever and whenever the opportunity allows us. We can receive answers to questions; we can obtain the information we need, and we can enjoy all that life has to offer. But that parental advice must ring in our ears: **Don't force it.** We have to learn patience to wait for God to move in life, and we have to develop spiritual depth to discern God's perfect timing.

Some of us have Advent calendars--the kind that have little doors and flaps that open for each of the days leading up to Christmas. Most of us find it hard to open one day at a time to see what is behind that specific door or flap. We long to open all the flaps or go to the last window, Christmas Day, to see the end of the season. God's timing is such that we have to learn the spiritual discipline of opening the doors of our lives one day at a time to discern God's perfect plan for us. In this season, let us move away from the human "instant" and focus on the divine "eternal," and find peace and joy as we wait with patience. For as Scripture declares ... (Let's read this together).

The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.

The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand for ever.

Isaiah 40:7-8