

"Can You Wait?"  
James 5:7-11

December 11, 2016

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent

"I just can't wait!" This is the time of year when there is a lot of waiting required, but seemingly little patience is available. Children just can't wait for Christmas to come with all the gifts, candy, and treats. Adults, perhaps, just can't wait for Christmas to be over so that normal life may resume. Can you wait? What are you waiting for? And, most importantly, how do you wait?

As Christians, we are waiting for more than Santa Claus, gifts, office parties, family gatherings, holiday concerts, and the like. While there is nothing inherently wrong with any of these things and we can enjoy them very much, we are focused on something far more important: the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Since there is so much merriment going on in our culture characterized by rampant materialism, eating and drinking to excess, and party after party, we simply assume that our waiting for our Lord's coming should have the same tone and feeling. But is this true?

There is not much merriment about Jesus' first coming. We have romanticized the circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth. Given today's circumstances, we may forget how shameful it was for Mary to be an unwed mother. Likewise, we overlook the embarrassment Joseph endured over his fiancée's assumed unfaithfulness. The journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem was difficult, especially for a pregnant young girl. The coldness of the stable and the roughness of the manger made this a very difficult endeavor. I doubt that the Son of God said, "I just can't wait to do that."

More importantly, we regard lightly the reason for Jesus' first coming. This was no vacation trip for the Son of God. He came with a very specific mission. He was born as a baby so that he might die as a man. He came to die for the sin of the world. This includes your sin and my sin. He would endure the wrath of God against our sin and suffer the punishment for that sin. How much merriment is there in knowing that someone would die because of something you did? I doubt that any of us did say, "I just can't wait for someone to die because I did wrong." Should we not feel guilt and shame instead?

There is a second emphasis in our observance of Advent which even some Christians forget. We are waiting for our Lord Jesus Christ to come again a second time. Again, there is not much merriment here, either. This time, Jesus will not come as a poor weak baby. Rather, Jesus returns as a mighty Judge who will judge the guilt or innocence according to the Law of God of all people who have ever lived. He will reward the righteous with everlasting life, but he will condemn the sinful to hell and everlasting death. Who can't wait to stand before a Judge with their entire lives – all thoughts conceived, all words spoken, and all deeds ever done – open before him? When you did something wrong as a kid and your mother said, "you just wait until your father gets home," how many of you said, "I just can't wait until dad gets home,"? Should not the coming of a perfect Judge fill us with fear and dread?

But there is another side to this story of Advent. It is exemplified by the pink (or rose) colored candle in our Advent wreath which is lit today. The light color of the candle signifies the joy involved in Advent. While Advent is a penitential season (and not just a pre-Christmas) for us to meditate upon our sin as the reason for Jesus' first coming and to contemplate Jesus' return as Judge at His second coming, there is still much joy here for which we can't wait.

There is much joy at Jesus' first coming. That's what the angel said to the shepherds on the first Christmas night: "good news of great joy that will be for all the people." The good news and the great joy is not because the baby was born, but what this baby would do and why. Jesus came into this world on that Christmas night to do precisely what he did: bear our sin for us under God's judgment and wrath and freed us from it. No one forced Him to do it. He didn't get caught in a bad situation from which he could not escape. Jesus took your sin upon Himself because he loved you. Jesus stood between you and the wrath of God because He loved you. Jesus endured the punishment for all your sin, including hell itself, because He loved you.

This is reason for great joy, especially when we realize the extent of our sin and the depth of our guilt before God. Jesus' first coming earns forgiveness for all of our sins of thought, word, and deed and wipes our slate clean. We are at peace with God and no longer face His righteous anger. We face no punishment from God in this life or in the life that is to come since Jesus said on the cross, "It is finished! The debt has been paid in full!"

This means there is also much joy for us at Jesus' second coming. Jesus is coming to judge, but that shouldn't frighten us or make us nervous at all. We've already been judged and the verdict is: "Not Guilty!" Our sin was condemned and punished with Jesus on the cross. In our Baptism, God washed away our sin and clothed us Christ's righteousness. When God looks at you, He sees not your sin, but Christ.

This is reason for great joy, too. Jesus comes, not to judge us, but simply to bring us home with Him in heaven, to the place which He has prepared specifically for you and for me. At His coming, we shall hear words

of welcome, rather than words of judgment. We will hear Jesus say to each of us, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." (Matthew 25:34)

But how do we wait to receive this great joy? We wait to receive the great joy of Jesus' first coming by waiting, in faith, around His Word and Sacraments. It is good, course, to hear His Word in the Christmas season and be reminded of the beginning for that great joy. But it is even more crucial to gather around His Word throughout the year. Jesus has promised that, whenever we gather together in His Name, He is there among us. Through His Word and through His very body and blood in Holy Communion, Jesus gives to us personally the blessings He won for us at his first coming: forgiveness, new life, and salvation.

In our epistle lesson for today, James tells us how to wait for the great joy of Jesus' second coming. First, he says, "Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord." It's not easy to be patient in our culture where we want everything right now! It's difficult to wait patiently because Holy Scripture has given us an inkling of the joy waiting for us in heaven. There, we will enjoy a life without suffering, pain, or even death in the direct presence of our Lord with all who have died in the faith that lasts forever. I don't know about you, but I just can't wait to get there.

Is also difficult to wait patiently as we suffer more and more in this world. We suffer in this world corrupted by sin and all of the problems that brings: financial problems, health problems, aging, and death. We also endure apathy and rejection by those around us for our faith in Christ. We are saddened by those who drift away from faith in Christ. We are disappointed by those who reject Christ. I don't know about you, but I just can't wait to get away from all of this.

James encourages us a second time to be patient. He says, "You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge standing at the door." Do not lose heart, brothers and sisters, the coming of the Lord is soon. But remember this is "soon" as the Lord measures it. In the meantime, let us not become impatient and turn on each other in our frustration. Rather, let us remain united in our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and in our love for one another. Let us give the Judge no reason to judge us guilty.

James gives us three great examples of how to live the patient life. First, he directs our attention toward farmers. The farmers know that their difficult lives are not rewarded with instant gratification and they are fine with that. Instead, they trust God to send the early rains, the late rains, and finally the precious fruit of the earth. In the same way, the life the Christian is often not rewarded with instant gratification. Let us be fine with that and trust the Lord to ultimately give us all that He has promised us.

Secondly, James directs our attention to the prophets. Many of them were met with apathy and rejection as they served the Lord. Yet, they continued to faithfully and patiently speak the Word of the Lord, and during any suffering that came with it. Let us learn from their behavior as well. Let us continue to faithfully speak the Word of the Lord in our congregation and in our community, being patient for any results and accepting any suffering that goes with it.

Thirdly, James directs our attention to Job, a famous figure from the Old Testament whom we all know. Job remained steadfast, refusing to give up his faith in God, even though he had lost everything – his family, his possessions, and his health. Yet the Lord's purpose was ultimately to be compassionate and merciful to Job. The Lord restored to Job more than he had lost. Let us remain steadfast in faith, in love, and in service to one another, no matter how much resistance we meet or how much we lose. The Lord will be compassionate and merciful to us, as well. In the life that is to come, he will give us much more than we ever had in the first place.

To truly be joyful at this time of year, keep your eyes on the prize and do not be distracted by the empty glory which this world offers. That which the Lord has waiting for us is more valuable than anything this world has to offer and lasts eternally. As you wait, reinforce your faith with the wonderful promises from the Word of God and the bountiful blessings of His Holy Sacraments. And never forget the joy which is yours, no matter how bad things get. The blessings which Jesus earned for you at his first coming – forgiveness and new life – and the blessings which Jesus comes to bring you at his second coming – heaven and eternal life – are joyful beyond your ability to even imagine it. If you are thinking, "I just can't wait!" when it comes to these blessings, you're going to have to. It may be difficult. It may be tiresome. It may even be discouraging and painful. But wait with patience. Wait with faith. Wait with hope. Wait with joy. You will enjoy the blessings Jesus has for you now. You will receive the blessings Jesus has in store for you then. And the wait will be possible and will be worth it. Amen