



Living Between the First Coming and the Second Coming

Mark 13:24-37

First Sunday of Advent, November 27, 2005

How much of your life have you spent waiting for one thing or another? Waiting for the stop light to change, waiting for your cheeseburger to be ready, waiting for your Prince Charming, waiting for your team to win the Super Bowl ... If you could rewind your life and then play it back and take a stopwatch to time all the waiting parts, how much of your life will you have spent waiting? We wait for our turn at bat. We wait for our children to get potty trained. We wait for a loved one to come home from war. We spend a lot of time waiting.

It occurs to me that much of what I do as your pastor is to wait with you on the edge of the key events of your lives. I wait with you in the waiting room until the baby is born. I wait with you in the baptistery until time to go into the waters. At weddings, I wait with the groom before we hear the chiming of the wedding hour. In the hospital, I wait with the family in the hospice ward. It is a great privilege to wait with you through the significant events in your lives.

Most of you know that I've been doing some sad waiting this month. We have had several deaths. A couple of them were sudden, but most of them meant waiting with a family as the body of their loved one slowly wore out. That kind of waiting takes a lot out of you.

But I have also been doing a very different kind of waiting with other families this season -- waiting for a birth, for the arrival of a brand new person. And right now we have a lot of families waiting for babies, a veritable baby boomlet! That is a fun kind of waiting for me, although those of you who are uncomfortably great with child may retort, "Easy for YOU to say!"

We spend a lot of our lives waiting for sadness, waiting for joy, waiting for death, waiting for new life.

And guess what Advent is time for? It's time for waiting for the birth of Jesus. Now you might ask, "Why wait for something that happened two thousand years ago?" Good question. We wait for what has already happened, because we are re-living it, we are putting ourselves back there and then with the magi and the shepherds and the angels. We are letting it happen again to us for the first time. So we light the Advent candles week by week to mark the time until the Sunday when there are four candles lit and we can say, "Christ is born!"

Christ is born. Christ has come. AND, we add, Christ will come again! Advent is the time of waiting when we look back to the first coming, and we look forward to the second coming. As we practice how to wait for the first coming of Jesus, we learn how to wait for the second coming of Jesus. We learn how to live in this in-between time twixt the first coming and the second.

NOW, THERE IS A RIGHT WAY TO WAIT FOR THE SECOND COMING, AND THERE IS A WRONG WAY TO WAIT FOR IT. For example, it seems that some people just can't wait for the day when people will be sent to eternal damnation. And sometimes they let their impatience show: those folks who said that New Orleans was struck because it's such a sinful place, for example (as if Wilson were any less sinful!). Or Pat Robertson: when a Pennsylvania county school board voted against creationism, Robertson told them don' be surprised if some calamity comes upon their land! Yes, we do wait eagerly for Jesus to come again. Yes, there will be punishment and judgment. But if that is all we are looking forward to, vengeance, then we are waiting in the wrong way. Listen to Louis Evely, to the passage printed in your worship folder:

To believe in God is to believe in the salvation of the world. The paradox of our time is that those who believe in God do not believe in the salvation of the world, and those who believe in the future of the world do not believe in God.

Christians believe in "the end of the world," they expect the final catastrophe, the punishment of others.

Atheists in their turn invent doctrines of salvation, try to give a meaning to life, work, the future of humankind, and refuse to believe in God because Christians believe in Him and take no interest in the world.

All ignore the true God: He who has so loved the world! But which is the more culpable ignorance?

To love God is to love the world. To love God passionately is to love the world passionately. To hope in God is to hope for the salvation of the world.

I often say to myself that, in our religion, God must feel very much alone: for is there anyone besides God who believes in the salvation of the world? God seeks among us sons and daughters who resemble Him enough, who love the world enough, that He could send them into the world to save it.

(From "In the Christian Spirit" by Louis Evely)

Some Christians wait for the end of the world with, frankly, a little too much glee. In contrast, atheists wait for the future of the world, but they pretend they have the power to achieve it. But God is waiting for the salvation of the world. God is waiting for us to realize that God is with us. God is waiting for us to answer God's call and to go and help save the world. Rather than curse the people of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, Baptist Men and Women went there helped them clean up the mess. Now that is how to wait for

the Second Coming, by doing something, rather than cursing someone. And it is the first coming that helps us understand this, for the message of the first coming of Jesus was that “God sent not his son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved.” (John 3:17) If we get that meaning of the first coming of Jesus, then we will be ready for the second coming. If we practice waiting for the first Advent, then we’ll also know how to wait for the second advent, when the Son of Man will come with great power and glory:

He will send out the angels,
 And gather his elect from the four winds,
 From the ends of the earth
 To the ends of heaven. Mark 13:26-27

That is what we are waiting for.

ANOTHER THING ABOUT WAITING: IT IS NOT PASSIVE WAITING, BUT ACTIVE WAITING. It is not waiting that lets life pass you by, but it is waiting that take hold of every moment of life. As you know, Lee Griffin, age 98, is very sick right now. I will likely do her funeral soon, as I did the funeral for her husband Willie yesterday. Lee’s children found a clipping from a newspaper that sums up well Lee’s attitude toward life:

First I was dying to finish high school and start college.
 And then I was dying to finish college and start working.
 And then I was dying for my children to grow old enough for school, so I could return to work.

And then I was dying to retire.
 And now, I am dying ... and suddenly I realize I forgot to live.

There is a kind of waiting that is death. And there is a kind of waiting that is life. Anyone who knows Lee well knows she has always remembered to live.

There is the clue for us. As we wait in between the first coming and the second, let us not forget to live, and to love, and to serve. The kind of waiting a Christian does between the two comings of Christ is by no means passive or dead. Our waiting is active and alive. Jesus tells us be awake, not go to sleep. The right way to wait, for the first coming, for the second coming, for anything in between, is ACTIVE waiting. We are waiting for the salvation of the world, and in the meantime we do not wait like bumps on a log, we work while we wait, we find something that God would have us do in the meantime, and we do it. For we do not wait idly. We do not stand on the sidelines and condemn the world. We work together with God to save the world.

So we wait, as we work in God’s kingdom. And we work as we wait for God’s kingdom. So much of life is a matter of waiting. If we learn how to wait well, then we will learn how to live well.

We wait, not with fear but with assurance. The signs of tribulation, quakes, wars and rumors of wars --- those signs have been with every generation. Those signs can make us tremble with fear at the unknown. We devise religious charts and timetables to conjure more information and thus allay our fears. But when we take to heart the assurance that Jesus will come, and that Jesus will gather us together safely at the end, then we can wait securely. We will not need to know exactly when. We will be content just to know that the Lord will take care of us.

Every Advent, we practice waiting for the Second Coming. In fact, every Sunday, we practice for the Second Coming. Philippians (2:10-11) tells us that on the Day of His Coming, every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. So every Sunday, we practice bowing, and every Sunday we practice confessing, so on that great gettin' up morning, we will know exactly what to do -- it will be second nature to us. That is what we're waiting for.

-- Douglas E. Murray