

A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania
To be delivered on December 8, 2013	On the occasion of the Second Sunday of Advent, C

And that, Charlie Brown, is what Advent is all about.

About two weeks ago I went shopping for candles for our Advent wreath at home. I found all sorts of smelly candles, you know, scented candles in all sorts of scents: pumpkin spice, gingerbread, egg nog, but I had trouble finding tall, thin candles in any color, let alone purple or blue. In one of the stores where I was looking a salesperson asked me if I needed any help. So I asked her if they had any Advent candles. She looked at me like I had two heads. She had no idea what I was talking about. Finally, I described them, and we were able to communicate.

There are a lot of Christians these days that are trying to put Christ back into Christmas. Their premise is that the holiday has lost its meaning in the wider society, that over commercialization has distracted us from what Christmas is all about. And they argue that things like public displays of crèche scenes and store clerks wishing people “Merry Christmas” rather than “Happy Holidays” are really important in order for people to understand what Christmas is all about. Sarah Palin has even written a book on the subject. I certainly don’t disagree with the fact that in our popular culture Christmas has become about giving, or getting, the perfect gift, decorating with lots of lights, and getting together with family, and eating lots of yummy stuff, rather than being about the birth of Jesus. What I am say, though, is that if the world doesn’t get Christmas, the world *really* doesn’t get Advent. Lots of Christians don’t get Advent.

Of course, we know that Advent is a season of preparation before Christmas. In that way it is similar to Lent, which is the season of preparation for Easter. In fact, like Lent, Advent is also a penitential season. We heard John the Baptist this morning telling us to, “bear fruit

worthy of repentance.” Yet I always felt that Advent has a different tenor to its penitential nature. I love that we use blue for Advent, not the same purple that we use for Lent. It helps us to make plain that there is a difference.

During Advent we do repent of our sins, but we do so with a joyful expectation of the return of Christ in glory, even as we prepare to remember and celebrate his first coming as a babe in Bethlehem. We are joyful in our expectation because we are *in Christ*, and we expect that upon his return those who are in Christ will be raised in glory with him as he establishes his kingdom fully on earth. This hope and expectation makes Advent not just a season of penitence and preparation, but also a season of waiting... and who likes to wait?

Psalms 62 begins, “For God alone my soul in silence waits; from him comes my salvation.” There are dozens of references to waiting upon the Lord in the Psalms and throughout Scripture. Waiting on the Lord is presented as the height of faithfulness. “For God alone my soul in silence waits; truly, my hope is in him.” Ps. 62:6 But what does it mean to wait on the Lord?

When Moses was on Mount Sinai, and he had told the people of Israel not to touch, or even to come near the mountain, and for days they saw the smoke and fire, and they heard the thunder around the mountain top, they found it difficult to wait. They said to Aaron, Moses’ brother, “We don’t know when your brother is coming back. We don’t even know if he is still alive. Come, now, make gods for us, someone for us to bow down to.” And of course, Aaron made the golden calf, and told the people of Israel, “This is your god, who brought you up out of slavery in Egypt.”

They couldn’t even wait 40 days for Moses to return. While he was up on the mountain receiving the Ten Commandments from God, they were busy fashioning an idol to worship.

In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus asked Peter, James, and John to wait with him for one hour—one hour! He asked them to stay awake and wait while he went a little further to pray. They couldn't wait one hour for Jesus to return. They fell asleep.

The most difficult example of waiting for God in all of Scripture has got to be the three hours that Jesus hung on the cross. People were shouting at him, "If you are the Messiah, God's Son, then save yourself." They meant it as a taunt, but you know, if I was there, I would have been thinking the same thing. If I had followed Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem, if I had committed my life to him, if I was convinced that he was the Messiah, God's Son, then I would have been looking up at him writhing on the cross, and thinking, "Come on, save yourself!" In fact, I would have actually been thinking what the thief had said to him, "Save yourself, and US." Instead we are left with the image of God helpless on a cross, with his hands and feet nailed down, immovable, unwilling or unable to save himself. What does that mean for us?

It must have been excruciating for the disciples to wait for something to happen while Jesus was on the cross. And after his death, after nothing happened, they must have been completely devastated. We know that that wasn't the end. We know that on the third day Jesus was raised, and that he appeared to his disciples. And that must have been indescribably joyful. The risen Jesus told them that he would return, and he was then taken up into heaven. After the Holy Spirit was poured out on the Church on Pentecost, the waiting game began.

Since then we have been waiting on Jesus' return. We even have this whole season in the Church year devoted to waiting: Advent. But waiting isn't the same as just doing nothing. No, we are not just biding our time. We are not simply waiting for something to happen. We are not idly waiting for God to make his next move.

We wait faithfully, with hope and courage.

We wait expectantly, truly expecting the kingdom of God to burst forth any minute.

We wait actively, living today as if the kingdom had already come, living our lives according to the rules of God's kingdom, according to the ethics of love and self-sacrifice.

By the time I was old enough to notice that there was a country called South Africa, and understand that they had a system of government called Apartheid, Nelson Mandela had already been in prison for more than 20 years. On Friday we mourned his death at age 95. As we remember Nelson Mandela—his accomplishments, his leadership, and the example of his life—we cannot help but be inspired by a man who can wait in prison for 27 years, and then emerge with a smile on his face, not just for himself and his own freedom, but for his people, his country, and the triumph of justice. As president of South Africa, Mandela was uniquely qualified to lead them out of Apartheid without violence or recrimination, without retribution or ill will. No one else could have had the credibility to appoint the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, because no one else had more reason to be angry, bitter, and vengeful. He oversaw a peaceful transition from a system of repression to one of freedom.

So what do you suppose he did during his 27 years of imprisonment? Did he stew in his anger? Did he imagine how he might take his revenge one day? Did he hold a grudge against the people who put him in prison, or even the guards who kept him there? Or did he look inside himself and hold himself to a higher standard than what he had experienced? Did he imagine a day when his country realized a vision of freedom for everyone? Did he try to live as if the way he was and the way he treated people mattered, as if he could by his own simple example of humility and grace transform a nation?

I don't know if I could have done what he did. It's had to stare hatred in the face and not be infected by it. It's hard to turn the other cheek. It's hard to wait for a change that seems like it will never come. Of course, he didn't *just* wait. He worked, and he waited, and he believed that even if it didn't happen in his life time, change would come.

During this season of Advent, I urge you to take some time, in between all your preparations for Christmas, and wait upon the Lord. It takes time to wait. Find that time, and wait. Wait with your whole heart; wait with your whole being. Wait upon the Lord. And while you wait, hold in your heart that vision of God's kingdom where, "The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them."

Amen.