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# While We Wait

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A Sermon By  
Ms. Anna Broadbent

December 11, 2016

Grace Episcopal Church  
Silver Spring, Maryland

*An audio version of this sermon can be found on the Grace Church website at:  
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/2016-12-11.m4a>.*

## While We Wait

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The Third Sunday of Advent  
December 11, 2016

Growing up, Advent was an extremely tumultuous time in my household. Year after year it included two of the most epic battles I have ever been a part of. First was the fight about whether gingerbread houses were meant to be eaten once they were assembled. I was rooted in the pro camp, while my mother was in the nay. I would sneak little bits here and there of the houses and my mom would yell at me... until she had enough and sprayed the gingerbread houses with hairspray... you'd think that would stop me! The second battle had to do with my favorite Christmas decoration... my mother's nativity set. Not only did it include action figures of Mary, Joseph and the three kings that ignited my imagination, but there was also a Baby Jesus. Here's where the battle comes in. My mother was a purist; Baby Jesus was not allowed to be placed into the manger until Christmas morning. She would get extremely upset if she found Jesus in the manger prematurely. Her anger posed a challenge for my brother and I... find Baby Jesus, place him in the manger and see how long it takes mom to notice his presence. Repeat. I'm not sure if my mom submitted to the "game" or if she was just terrible at hiding Baby Jesus, but this quickly became our Advent tradition. When I think back, there's something beautiful about my brother's and my passion to ensure Jesus found his place in the manger; it didn't seem quite right without him. But there was something even more beautiful about the lesson my mother taught us... Advent is about patience and expectation. I'd like to say that my ability to be patient and manage my own expectation has improved in my adulthood, but it's simply not true. As a church and nation whose expectations have been challenged in recent months, Advent is a beautiful time to check ourselves, and I believe our scriptures today have a pretty powerful message for us.

In our gospel today from Matthew, we have an interesting question from John the Baptist. "When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing he sent word by his disciples and said to him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?'" Some translations offer a different perspective of what prompted John to ask Jesus that question, "John, having heard of the works of the Messiah..." This suggests that John has heard of the specific miracles that Jesus has done that are referenced in earlier chapters (cleansing of the leper, healing a centurion, calming the storm, healing paralytic, healing the blind men and giving voice to the mute). These miracles link directly to our passage from Isaiah "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy." John would have known these words of prophesy of the coming Messiah. Hearing of these miracles had to be affirming and encouraging to John... yet there were also prophesies such as Isaiah 61 which read "He has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted,

to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners.” This had to lead John to doubt as he was sitting in prison. We will never know exactly why John asked his disciples to approach Jesus with this question, but I wonder two things. One, I wonder if John’s expectations of who and what the Messiah was were getting in the way of who Jesus actually was. John and many others assumed that the Messiah would come like a military commander overthrowing all the earthly powers and while Jesus did that in a sense, he did so through love and compassion, not might. John is also on a tight timeline: he’s in prison and may have a sense his death is near; his question may be out of impatience. John may truly believe that Jesus is the Messiah, but he doesn’t understand Jesus’ timeline. Some people give John a hard time for asking this question, suggesting that it expresses doubt that John believed Jesus was the Messiah, but I identify with him immensely.

I can’t count the number of times that I have thought, Jesus, it’d be a really great time for you to come back.... Sometimes I say this for silly reasons like when I have a big paper due and think, if Jesus came back right now I wouldn’t have to finish this... but other times I say it when I’m at a loss. When I feel like we as humans are falling apart and we will not be able to make it right. It’s usually a prayer of pure desperation. The last time I truly prayed for Jesus to return was this past summer after the string of shootings in Orlando taking 49 lives, Alton Sterling’s death in Baton Rouge, the Dallas shooting killing 5 officers, Philando Castile’s death in Minnesota (where I was living at the time) followed by the riots in Milwaukee... I thought this is it. Jesus you need to come back, make your presence known... I couldn’t fathom how we would continue, and here we are 6 months later. Jesus has not come back and we are still here.

Right now we are in the liturgical season of advent. You can tell this because of the beautiful blue vestments the clergy wear, the wreaths we made a few weeks ago, and the candles you hopefully light as a family. Advent is a liturgical season, but I also think we are always living in advent. In fact I think all we’ve ever known as Christians in this day and age is advent. Jesus died, rose from the dead and ascended 2,000 years ago. We are anxiously awaiting Christ’s return. This is nothing new. The disciples and early Christians thought they would see Jesus’ return in their lifetime. They were eagerly waiting. Our passage from James today says, “Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord.”

So, we are to be patient and wait. While we find ourselves in this advent season and the extended advent of waiting for Jesus to return, what do we do? As followers of Christ what do we do while we wait?

Jesus gives us a hint in his response to John. Jesus highlights the presence of God active in the world in the form of justice.... He points out that the “blind received their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor have good news brought to them.” Jesus did not offer John an intellectual answer, he did not convince John he was the Messiah through knowledge and wisdom, but rather spoke of the loving, redemptive and restorative work God was doing then and now.

There is a lot of evil and pain in this world, which is no different than in Jesus' time, remember John was never released from prison and lost his life there. Jesus died a criminal's death for loving, healing and eating with the "wrong" people. We turn on the news and are bombarded with pain, evil and suffering... Jesus does not deny this and nor do we. BUT the larger question is where do we, as Christians, fit with the reality of this world, the lessons Jesus taught us, the hope of Christ's return all in the reality of advent, of waiting.

We are called to be the seekers of beauty and the agents of justice. Jesus is not here on Earth, but we are. With our hands, feet, hearts and minds coupled with the power of the Holy Spirit, who is very much present, we can continue the work that Jesus started. No, we may not be healing lepers or giving sight to the blind, but we are able to do amazing things and right now... in our world and our nation... we have a powerful opportunity before us. We have the capacity to feed the hungry, welcome the immigrant, house the homeless, fight for equal education opportunities, help our neighbors find jobs, stand up for the kid who's being bullied, work to cut down on lives lost to gun violence, support and protect our brothers and sisters of different faiths for the right to worship in safety and so on. Every single person in this room has a gift and a passion to offer to God. The way you can enter into God's active Justice in this world is probably extremely different than the person sitting next to you... and isn't that beautiful! I don't know about you but I'm tired of hearing all the negative stuff and I'm tired of relying on someone else or the government to establish Justice. Not long ago a friend sent me a Facebook message that said, "Sometimes I want to ask God why he allows poverty, famine and injustice in the world... but I'm afraid he may ask me the same question."

We often have expectations of how God's vision for justice will be fulfilled and what are readings today all lead to is that we need to adjust our expectations of how God works in the world. We also need to accept that if we want to see that justice we need to be a part of what God is doing. We are the agents. The path has been paved for us. We have the support of the Holy Spirit. We have the lessons Christ has given us in scripture and we have the saints that have gone before us. We are not in this battle alone.

I cannot run up to my mother's sock drawer, pull out a baby Jesus and delicately place him back in our lives and back in the manger. Christ's return is not based upon our timeline so we wait patiently, or not so patiently at times, we remain in this season of advent and while we do this, I challenge you to discern what God is doing in and around you and where the Holy Spirit may be inviting you into the merciful work of Justice.