

Covenant Word

The Long Wait

Isaiah 2:1-5, Romans 13:11-14, Matthew 24:36-44

A Message by
The Reverend Sarah
Jackson Shelton
Pastor
Sunday
December 2, 2007

**Dear Friends,
Thank you for wanting
to read and study these
thoughts more
carefully. Please know
that I do not take full
credit for anything that
may be contained
within, because I may
have read or heard
something at some point
during my pilgrimage
and do not remember
its source and thus,
cannot give the rightful
author his/her credit. I
pray that you will find
inspiration and
encouragement.
Sarah Shelton**



Baptist Church of the
Covenant

Where Faith Comes to Life.

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Worship with us each Sunday
morning at 9 a.m. and
for Bible study at 10:30 a.m.

Ironically, I was sitting in the orthodontist's waiting room when I picked up Dr. Seuss' book, Oh the Places You'll Go! It reads, in part, like this:

You can get so confused that you'll start in to race down long wiggled roads at a break-necking pace and grind on for miles across weirdish wild space, headed, I fear, toward a most useless place. The Waiting Place... for people just waiting. Waiting for a train to go or a bus to come, or the rain to go or the phone to ring, or the snow to snow or waiting around for a Yes or No or waiting for their hair to grow. Everyone is just waiting. Waiting for the fish to bite or waiting for the wind to fly a kite or waiting around for Friday night or waiting, perhaps, for their Uncle Jake or a pot to boil, or a Better Break or a string of pearls, or a pair of pants or a wig with curls, or Another chance. Everyone is just waiting.

Now Advent is a season of waiting. It is not, however, the useless waiting that Dr. Seuss references like being put on hold, or the carpool line, or when the workman is late coming to repair the washing machine. The waiting of Advent is full of energetic expectation and creativity.

When Jesus said that we must become like children, I wonder if part of what He meant was that we must learn to wait like children. (Frederick Buechner, "Waiting") I think of the ways my siblings and I waited for the coming of Christmas when we were children. I can still feel the excitement in the pit of my stomach as Christmas gets closer each year. I remember the decorating and baking of hundreds of sugar cookies. I remember the mystery associated with the packages that accumulated under the tree. I remember lying on the floor in front of the tree in

our robes and pajamas with all the lights off, music filling the room, and loosing ourselves in the wonder of the season. I remember standing at the top of our stairs early on Christmas morning and shouting "Merry Christmas" to awaken our parents who at least pretended to be asleep. After gathering our Grandmother (who always said, "What took you so long?" when we knocked on her bedroom door) and <after> sending our mildly protesting father to the living room, our mother would give us the nod. We would race down the stairs and enter into a room of unutterable magic...a whole Arabian Nights' worth of treasure with the lights of the tree glimmering and stockings stuffed to overflowing. And while I may have since forgotten many of the presents, I hold dear the memories of the dazzling light of it and the presence of all those people that in one way or another loved me and that I loved in return. The unbearable excitement of it taught me that life does not get much better than this. It was all worth vastly more than all the weeks we had spent waiting for it.

Our Advent waiting is akin to this type of waiting. It is quiet and receptive like a child waiting for a bed time story. It is full of anticipation, like the hush before the curtain goes up at the theatre. It is pregnant with possibility like the birth of a child. And in this case, not just any child, but the Child who brings forgiveness and redemption to any who will receive His gifts of love.

Advent teaches us to be still and to make ourselves quiet so that we can receive the truth. It is a season in which we make ourselves sober in a world of Christmas parties. It is a season of patience in a world that is frenzied and hurried. It is a season to reach out to the poor, needy and displaced when we

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are more likely to take our credit card to its limit for things we do not need or want. (Dr. William Self, "The Waiting Place," Day1.com, Nov. 28, 2004)

Advent is a long wait so that we may prepare to receive God's greatest event. It is not just a pious, prayerful, "churchie" thing. On the contrary, to wait for Christ to come in His fullness is above all else to act in Christ's stead as fully as we know how. To wait for Christ is to be Christ, to the best of our abilities, to those who need us to be Christ to them most and to bring them what we understand to be Christ's healing and hope. Knowing all the while that unless we bring it, it may never be brought at all. (Buechner)

Our wait at Advent prepares us for God's surprise and joy, or as Dr. Seuss says later in his delightful book, to a place where there will be "boom bands playing with banners flip-flapping!" Or to put it in the language of the theologian Paul Tillich, "Waiting anticipates that which is not yet real. ...yet if we wait in hope and patience, the power of that for which we wait is already effective within us. Those who wait in an ultimate sense are not that far from that for which they wait." (Dr. P.C. Enniss, "Waiting," Day1.com, Dec 2, 2007)

Pearl Buck's story "Christmas Day in the Morning," tells of a boy's long wait for and discovery of Christmas.

Rob was fifteen when he overheard his parents talking in the kitchen. It was one of those conversations that parents often have that they do not expect their children to hear. The family lived on a farm where hard physical work was required to keep the farm up and going. In particular, the cows needed to be milked every day, regardless of school, regardless of birthdays, regardless of Christmas. The cows had to be milked at 4:30 every morning. So the conversation that Rob overheard was his father lamenting to his wife about how he hated waking Rob up so early every morning when he knew that Rob needed that rest.

When Rob heard his father's voice talking about his concern for his son, something inside of him came to life. For the first time, he realized that his father loved him. *Do you remember the first time you realized your parent loved you?* Rob had never thought of it before. There was so much to take care of on the farm that the chores had always taken priority...not the feelings that were carried for those you worked beside.

So as Christmas drew near, at night, in his dark, still room, Rob wondered about what he might give his father for Christmas. He lay on his side; his head supported by his elbow, and looked out of his attic window. As he observed the bright stars, his mind wandered to that other night when the star of Bethlehem had filled the sky when Jesus was born. He thought of the shepherds and wise men that had brought Christmas gifts to the baby in the barn. Then a thought struck him like a silver dagger. He could give his father a special gift too...out there in the barn.

So at a quarter to three, Rob got up. He put on his clothes. He crept downstairs, careful of the boards that were prone to squeak, and let himself out. The cows were surprised to see Rob so early. He got the milking pail and the big milk cans and began to work. He was amazed at how easy his work seemed. It was easy because all he could think of was his father's surprise when he would find the two big milk cans filled to the brim and waiting in the milk house. For once, milking was not a chore. It was a gift to his father who loved him.

Finally he finished. He put everything back in its place and as he went out of the barn, he was careful to be sure that the latch fell into place.

Back in his room, he had only a minute to pull off his clothes in

the darkness and jump into bed before he heard his father moving around. He pulled the covers over his head so that his quick breathing would not be obvious. The door opened.

"Rob!" his father called. "We have to get up, son, even if it is Christmas. I'll go on out to get things started."

The door closed, and Rob lay perfectly still, laughing to himself. In just a few minutes his father would find his gift. Rob's dancing heart was ready to jump from his body. The waiting seemed to last an eternity. The minutes were endless. Five, ten, fifteen...he did not know how long he waited there in the darkness for his gift to be discovered.

Finally, he heard his father's footsteps. The door opened and his father came to the bed, feeling for Rob and pulling away the covers. It was so dark they could not see one another's faces, but they found each other in spite of the dark. Rob felt his father's arms go around him. His heart was busting with love. "Merry Christmas, Dad!"

And oh, what a Christmas! Rob's heart had nearly burst again with shyness and pride when his father told the rest of the family about how Rob had gotten up early all by himself. "The best Christmas gift I ever had, and I'll remember it every year on Christmas morning as long as I live," his father had said. And so they remembered it together...that blessed Christmas dawn when, alone with the cows in the barn, Rob had made his first gift of true love.

We gather around this table today to receive a gift of true love...visible, tangible reminders of the One who was not only born in Bethlehem's barn, but the One who died on Calvary's cross to gift us with eternal life. May we receive this gift with the awe and wonder and gratitude of those whose waiting is not in vain...but whose long waiting through the darkness is fulfilled by the love of Christ.

Communion table Scripture about bread Prayer: (adapted from Dr. Enniss' "Waiting")

We confess, O God, we are not very good at waiting. Yet Your eternal message to us is to wait and to watch and to hope with excited anticipation. Teach us anew this Advent the wisdom of waiting, of trusting that those who wait already possess in part that for which we wait. Even as we wait for Your

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appearance among us, O God, we pray that You would open our awareness to Your already active presence among us in the person of other people, in the poetry and the music of these days, in various Christmas stories and memories, and in the simple elements of bread and juice. In Your quiet, unseen Spirit that dwells constantly in our midst, break through our panic with Your peace. Convict us that the true joy of this season is found ultimately in our faith and in the lives of those with whom we share it. Inspire us, we pray, by Your Spirit this season to sense anew in the signs and the sounds of this Advent, Your special word of hope and anticipation for our world. We pray all of this and more through Jesus Christ our Lord, in whose memory we take of this meal, Amen.

The waiting of Advent provides us with the opportunity to examine our lives and make decisions of faith. Whether to become a believer in Jesus Christ, a member of this church or to give your life to a Christian vocation, we encourage these decisions both within the privacy of your pew and publicly with me at the front.