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Dear Friends,

As the tension mounts, someone, usually the sidekick, says “Yeah, the waiting is the hardest part.” It can be a cop show, an old war movie, a crime caper comedy, or an action thriller. The preparation has been done, and then there’s the waiting—will they take the bait, when will the attack come—the message or package has been sent, the squad has disappeared into the dark or the fog, and now we wait.

One of the ironies of a film or a TV program is that the waiting never lasts very long. No sooner does a character remark on how difficult the waiting is than it comes to a dramatic end with a flurry of activity, often involving a variety of loud, multi-colored special effects.

What are you waiting for? In real, rather than reel, life, the waiting is rarely so brief. It goes on and on. Maybe it’s recovery from surgery or an accident, maybe it’s waiting for a response about a job possibility, maybe it’s a pregnancy, or test results, or something as mundane as being in stopped traffic or waiting for the bus, the train, or the plane first to arrive and then to leave. The captain comes on the intercom and announces that there are twenty planes ahead of you for takeoff, so it will be awhile.

Waiting is tedious and boring.

Unless it’s for something good.

You have a wonderful trip planned, and each day you do a little more to prepare and imagine what you will be doing. You count down the days until someone comes to visit whom you haven’t seen in much too long. You are engaged, you have signed the contract for the new house, you have been accepted at the school, you have finally placed the order, you are five years old and Christmas is just a week away.

How many days to Christmas? Waiting for Christmas is a primal experience for us. And the waiting is not just for children; we have a whole season dedicated entirely to helping us to explore what it means to wait for Jesus—as he came first at Christmas and as he will come again [“Lo! he

comes in clouds descending” will be our closing hymn on the First Sunday of Advent.]. The paradox is that what we will never experience, the first Christmas, seems more real to us than what we will all experience, a future standing before the Lord. In Advent we think about waiting, and preparing, for both. Maybe one reason adults tend to think that Christmas is really about children is that they (we...) would rather make this season about someone else (which is fairly safe) or about our past (which offers the bittersweet experience of nostalgia) than to claim it for ourselves (which is a little scary) and about the time when all that is familiar passes away (which is more than a little scary).

In Advent, the season of the Church year which consists of the four weeks before Christmas, we focus on waiting and the combination of hope, anxiety, and, to be honest, sometimes just the boredom we associate with that activity.

Equal time for Old Guys Imagination brings into the present what experience may not offer until the future. Developing an ability imaginatively to enter into that which has not yet occurred extends to the period of waiting the delight which would otherwise be available only in the experience. We see this valuable skill developed highly in Simeon, the old man who holds the baby Jesus in his arms 40 days after his birth [February 2 on our calendar] and declares the poem we chant each time we do Morning Prayer. The poem is traditionally known by its Latin title (from the first two words of the Latin text), the *Nunc Dimittis*. This is what Simeon says:

*Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, **
according to thy word;
*For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, **
which thou hast prepared before the face of all people,
*To be a light to lighten the Gentiles, **
and to be the glory of thy people Israel.

(Luke 2:29-32, *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 51)

Of course, Simeon has only seen a little baby, but in his imagination he has foreseen all that Jesus will do—he will be the glory of the Jews because he will fulfill their destiny—the whole reason they were Chosen in the first place—to show to the whole world the true nature of God and the way to the life of peace and security which God means for all to have. Simeon’s imagination has leapt decades, and even centuries, to see the beginnings of peace. He needs to see no more and says that he is ready to leave this life in peace, now knowing that all will be well. It is a poem of remarkable joy, relief, satisfaction, and celebration. Even though he will not have the actual experience of that new life, he has seen it clearly enough for it to be completely real and present to him. The event has not happened, but the wait is over. (Regrettably, most musical settings, including those of our hymnal, tend to treat this poem as a mournful leave-taking rather than a celebration of being able to move on. Both context and text suggest that the poem is more like a thanksgiving at the end of a long day’s work: “You assured me that I would not have to leave until it was clear that everything would work out. Now that I have seen that, may I please go?”).

Remembering the Future In the prologue to Luke’s version of the Christmas story, the Angel Gabriel appears to Mary to announce to her that she will be a mother, and her child will be known forever as the Son of God. For herself, Mary looks into the future: “All generations shall call me blessed,” she says. Or, in terms more familiar to us, perhaps something like “in years to come, everyone will wish that they could have had the experience that I am about to have.”

And she sees that the trajectory of her life will follow the pattern that God has shown through the ages. So much of what she says as she looks to her own *future* is about God, and is presented in the *past* tense: He hath showed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud...he hath put down the mighty...and hath exalted the humble. He hath filled the hungry. He has not added wealth to those who already have it, and, remembering his ancient promise to his people, and God has helped them (Luke 1:51-54). It is unclear whether Mary is talking about the immediate past—her own experience—or the long history of her people. I think Luke invites us more to think of those two categories as somehow overlapping than being distinctly separate. We see more clearly what God does now, we know more surely what God will do, because we re-tell the story of what we know that God has done. Consistency is one of God's virtues—it one of the things that makes faith in God reasonable—so the more clearly we see what God has done, the more clearly we recognize what God is doing, and the more certain we may be about what God will do.

Meanwhile, in Bethlehem...If we imagine the future while we wait, and thereby blur the boundaries between the past, the present, and the future, then waiting might be an opportunity to enter into the way God experiences time. In the stories of Advent, the promise, disappointment, and humiliation of the past, the uncertainty and anxiety of the present, and the unlikely sense of joy and glory in the future, all crowd into the same small timeframe. As Phillips Brooks put it in his hymn to Bethlehem, “the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”

Can't wait? If waiting is not your favorite thing [“Oh boy, do you think we might get to wait today???”], come to church in Advent actively primed to engage the interlocking subjects of expectation, anxiety, hope, maybe a little dread and fear, boredom and dissatisfaction with the immediate, which are all components of waiting. Think of Advent as a special course in developing your skills for waiting, so that it becomes a time of growth and discovery—and even deep peace—and not just tedium until the next thing happens.

High profile experiences often pass too quickly—good things are over too soon. Brides sometimes find the end of the reception the hardest thing about the wedding; Christmas morning after everything is open can be difficult for children.

The early gift Anticipation is something like the mirror image of memory and, like memory, is a way to extend the delight of a fleeting experience so that it is not too slow to arrive, too fast to leave, and too ephemeral to remain. Because we are so oriented, and maybe even addicted, to experience, I wonder if we have starved ourselves of the substantial, but more subtle, delights offered by anticipation as well as by memory.

I invite you to use this Advent as the opportunity to develop your ability to enter into this season for adults. So whether you are a young mother, like Mary, or an old guy, like Simeon, or anywhere in between, may you not only hear, but also hold, the tidings of comfort and joy that will be proclaimed when Advent comes to its inevitable end. For at the end of Advent and of all things is comfort and joy, and, while we are in a season of waiting, perhaps, like Mary, we might ponder that in our hearts and thereby find that some gifts in this season are indeed given early.

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