What our culture refers to as “the Christmas season” the Church has historically called ADVENT. The word **advent** means “coming” or “arrival,” and this season points to Jesus, our **Immanuel—God with us.** During Advent we celebrate Jesus’ coming as a baby in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago and we look ahead to Jesus’ 2nd coming—his promised return for his Church. Advent is a season of waiting expectantly, but it’s not the kind of waiting we’re used to at Christmas. It’s not the impatience children experience while waiting to receive their gifts on Christmas morning. It’s not the waiting we do as we drive in circles looking for a parking spot at the mall amidst all of the other holiday shoppers. And it’s not impatiently waiting in the check-out line at the grocery store where it seems everyone is picking up that last item for their Christmas meal. No, the waiting associated with Advent has the connotation of a watchman gazing into the distance looking eagerly for someone to arrive.

Last year a friend pointed me to a book written by Paula Gooder titled, **The Meaning is in the Waiting.** As I looked at the book, I thought it’d be an excellent resource for us to use this Advent. The title highlights our tendency to focus so much on our destination and what lies ahead that we miss what God is currently doing all around us. The importance of waiting observantly is captured in the lines of this Elizabeth Barrett Browning poem.

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Earth’s crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes—
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.
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There is so much going on around us that we routinely miss because we’re preoccupied with other things. My hope is that during this season, which always ranks right up there as one of the busiest times of the year, that we’ll be able to pause, quiet our hearts and minds in the midst of all the frenzy and wait.

I love the summary Paula Gooder gives in explaining Advent waiting...

Advent, then, calls us into a state of active waiting: a state that recognizes and embraces the glimmers of God’s presence in the world, that recalls and celebrates
God’s historic yet ever present actions, that speaks the truth about the almost-but-not-quite nature of our Christian living, that yearns for but cannot quite achieve divine perfection. P. 21

When I talk about waiting expectantly and eagerly anticipating, those of you who are mothers probably think about pregnancy. Pregnancy is the quintessential example of the kind of waiting we’re talking about in Advent—at least that what Paula Gooder says—as a guy I can’t really speak to that. One of the frameworks that some church traditions use for Advent—and which is used in The Meaning is in the Waiting—connects the 4 weeks of Advent with 4 people from Scripture: Abraham & Sarah, Isaiah & the prophets, John the Baptist and Mary, Jesus’ mother. Each of these characters was waiting for a child to be born. Advent is set against the backdrop of 4 significant births. This morning we’ll be focusing on Abraham and Sarah’s wait for an heir.

Many of us are at least vaguely familiar with the story of Abraham and Sarah and the birth of their son, Isaac, so, I’ll just give an overview of their story and then lead us in reflecting on what we can learn from their waiting. The slice of Abraham and Sarah’s story that we’ll be looking at today is found in Genesis chapters 12 through 21.

For simplicity’s sake I’m going to refer to Abraham and Sarah by their most common names, even though initially they were known as Abram and Sarai. God changed their names to reflect the fact that they were going to be the parents of nations. We meet this couple in Genesis chapter 12 when God appears to Abraham and calls him to take everything he has and leave all that he knows to follow God to a place God would show him. This calling is especially remarkable when we consider that Abraham and his family were pagan idol worshipers who worshipped a pantheon of gods and goddesses, and as far as we can tell, Abraham had never encountered God before that time.

Abraham was 75 years old and his wife, Sarah, was 65 when God called them. God told this couple that He would bless them and that they would be the parents of nations. He went on to say that all people on the earth would be blessed through them. Genesis chapter 12 verse 4 records Abraham’s response to God’s call with 3 simple words: “So Abraham left.” God directed them to the land of Canaan—the area where eventually the people of Israel would settle in what became known as the Promised Land. Over the next twenty-five years Abraham
and Sarah travelled on a roller coaster ride waiting for the fulfillment of God’s promise. Genesis tells us, “Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness” (Genesis 15:6). But trusting in God wasn’t easy for Abraham and Sarah. On two separate occasions when Abraham and Sarah were traveling through foreign countries Abraham convinced Sarah to tell anyone they met that he was her brother, because he was afraid people would be attracted to Sarah and would kill him if they knew he was her husband so they could take her for their wife. Abraham put his wife Sarah in grave danger so that he could protect himself.

After 10 years of waiting Abraham and Sarah decided that God needed some help with his plan to make them parents and so they agreed that Abraham would sleep with Sarah’s servant Hagar. Hagar gave birth to a son and they named him Ishmael. So Abraham became a father at 86 years of age, but God insisted that while He would bless Ishmael, Sarah herself was going to have a son. Thirteen more years of waiting passed; Abraham was now 99 and Sarah was 89 years of age. One day Abraham and Sarah were visited by some heavenly guests and as the guests waited for their meal, they told Abraham that one year from that time Sarah was going to give birth to a son. When Sarah, who was in the tent preparing their meal, heard this she couldn’t help but laugh as she thought to herself, “After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure” (Genesis 17:12)?

A year later God’s promise to Abraham and Sarah was fulfilled and they had a baby boy named Isaac. In Genesis chapter 21 verses 1-5 we read,

Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised. Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him. When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. Genesis 21:1-5

There is much we can learn from Abraham and Sarah about waiting and about the God who calls us to wait on Him and with Him. At the beginning of Abraham and Sarah’s story we read these words,

The Lord had said to Abram, “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. “I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” So Abram left, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran. He took his wife Sarai, his
nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there. Genesis 12:1-5

God called Abraham to leave what was familiar and comfortable to follow God to the place where He would lead them. It’s important that we understand what this leaving meant for Abraham. It would have been viewed as extremely dangerous and foolish by his family members. Abraham and Sarah were leaving the security and the protection of their extended family to set out on a journey to...they didn’t know where. They were leaving all that they knew to follow a God they had apparently just met. God’s call to Abraham and Sarah was to leave what was familiar and comfortable to them and to trust God by going with Him.

In the same way, waiting teaches us to trust in God and to go with Him as we leave what is familiar and comfortable to us. Our circumstances probably won’t mirror Abraham and Sarah’s, but God wants to teach us to grow in our trust of Him and He often does that by pulling us away from what is familiar and comfortable so that we need to rely on Him. God’s calling for us is often a dual calling—to go with Him and to leave other things—maybe even other people—behind. How many of us have put our hope and our dreams in something only to see it not work out the way we had hoped it would? Times like that are painful, because we’ve invested energy in that reality and then when it isn’t realized we don’t know how to respond and what to do. At those moments we can push forward in trying to make something else happen or in lashing out about the unfairness of what didn’t occur—and those are both natural responses—or, we can wait. We can wait on God and see what He’ll do and what He has for us. Waiting teaches us to trust God.

Another lesson we learn from Abraham and Sarah’s story comes up repeatedly, but I’ll just point to 3 scriptures.

After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield your very great reward.” But Abram said, “O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?” And Abram said, “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.” Genesis 15:1-3

God also said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.” Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, “Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?” Genesis 17:15-17
Then the Lord said, “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.” Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. Abraham and Sarah were already old and well advanced in years, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, “After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?” Then the LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Will I really have a child, now that I am old?’ Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son.” Genesis 18:10-14

Throughout their lives Abraham and Sarah struggled to believe that God was able to accomplish what He said He was going to do. They limited God to what they could conceive of as possible. They couldn’t envision a 100 year old man and a 90 year old woman having a child, so they assumed that this was impossible for God. **Waiting on God reminds us not to limit God to what we think is possible.** Again, our circumstances differ from Abraham and Sarah’s, but the lesson is the same. One of the biggest reasons why waiting on God is so hard for us is that we limit what God can do to what we can envision. When our preferred result doesn’t occur we become sad or frustrated or angry, because we can’t envision something better. Frequently we’re not able to lock into what God is doing, because we’re stuck thinking about what we were sure was best. An obvious example of this is in the arena of young romances. Don’t raise your hands, but how many of us prayed for God to give us someone as our husband or wife who we were in a relationship with or who we hoped to be in a relationship with and then we were devastated when that didn’t come to pass. We were sure they were THE ONE, and we couldn’t imagine someone better. If God had answered “yes” to all those prayers, many of us would be in a world of hurt right now.

Our struggle to trust in God and take the long view in spite of what we see in the immediate reminds me of advice parents often give to their kids. As parents, we’ve lived much longer and experienced more and we have a much broader perspective than our kids do. We’re able to view our kids’ lives and see that God probably has something much better than what they were hoping for. But when it comes to our lives, we as adults fall into the same trap; we’re not able to accept that God has something better, because we limit God to what we can see.

I remind you often that I don’t preach these messages because I have a great handle on all of this stuff. If my preaching were limited to what I’ve mastered we’d cycle back to the same couple of topics all the time. These lessons are as convicting for me as they are for you. And this
third lesson may be the one I struggle with the most. Follow along as I read Genesis chapter 16 verses 1-4:

Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar; so she said to Abram, “The LORD has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her.” Abram agreed to what Sarai said. So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian maidservant Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. He slept with Hagar, and she conceived. Genesis 16:1-4

Uh oh! You don’t need a doctorate in psychology to figure out that this isn’t going to end well. Abraham and Sarah have been waiting for God to fulfill his promise of a son for 10 years. And they’re not getting any younger—Abraham is 85 and Sarah is 75...not exactly prime child-bearing, let alone child-rearing, years. Like us, they don’t like waiting and they can’t help but wonder if there isn’t something they can do to help God out. So Sarah says, “Abraham, darling, I know you probably haven’t noticed, but I’m not getting any younger. Maybe we should have a child through my young servant girl Hagar?” This sounds strange to us, but it was a common practice in that culture. This wasn’t God’s plan for Abraham and Sarah. He had been very clear that Sarah would bear a son, but Abraham and Sarah carried out their plan and Hagar gave birth to a son.

Waiting on God teaches us the foolishness of trying to accomplish God’s ends through our means. I’m an active person. I don’t like to wait. If feels so...unproductive. After all the Scripture does say, “God helps those who help themselves.” Actually the Bible doesn’t say that anywhere. That’s one of those phantom verses that we try to attribute to the Bible. When it comes to waiting on God to do what He says He will do, God doesn’t need my help, and He doesn’t need your help. Abraham and Sarah now had a surrogate son named Ishmael, but this wasn’t God’s plan. And Abraham and Sarah’s rash decision created problems for their immediate household and problems for their family for the rest of their lives. When we try to help God out, instead of waiting on Him, it always turns out badly. Taking matters into our own hands rather than waiting on God is like my family having a problem with our washing machine not working and me deciding that rather than waiting for the repairman, I’ll just take the machine apart and see what I can do to fix it. If you know me at all, you know that’s a terrible idea. Not only won’t I be able to fix it. I’ll probably mess it up so badly that the repairman will
struggle to fix it. And yet that’s what we often do when we get tired of waiting on God. We take matters into our hands and try to help God out, with the result that our problem that we were waiting on God to solve gets a whole lot worse.

Abraham and Sarah have so much to teach us about waiting on God. Through their example we learn that trusting in God means that we often have to leave what is familiar and comfortable. We learn not to limit God to what we think is possible. And we’re reminded of the foolishness of trying to accomplish God’s ends through our means. Much of what we learn about waiting from Abraham and Sarah is what not to do, but don’t forget that when it was all over God gave them a son, they became the parents of nations and they’re remembered by God as the father and mother of faith. I take great encouragement in that. In spite of all of their slips and falls as they sought to wait on God, Abraham and Sarah are held up for us as positive examples who God blessed because of their faith. So, even though I’m bad at waiting on God, there is hope for me and there is hope for you.

As we walk through the hustle and bustle and craziness of the Christmas season, don’t forget that this is also Advent—a season of waiting expectantly for God to reveal Himself to us. God has things He wants to teach each of us about ourselves, about Him and about our journey with Him as we wait expectantly on Him this Advent season. I’d like to close with these words from The Meaning is in the Waiting,

“Abraham and Sarah become symbols for us not only of faith but also of waiting: of waiting as an essential part of our journey with God, of waiting being vital for the proper unfolding of God’s plan, and of waiting being as important as that for which we wait. God summons us to go out, but does not always tell us where to, or why...for that we must wait, but we can, sometimes, discover a meaning.” p. 51