

Advent Wreath and Call to Worship

Leader: If Christmas is about the joyous celebration of Jesus' birth, then Advent is about the uncomfortable waiting of labor. We join with all of creation in its groaning, asking...

How long, O Lord? How long until you free us from the pain of our waiting?

If Christmas is the dawn of the light of the world, then Advent is a time to name the darkness that needs to be illuminated.

Lord, we are people walking in darkness. We are those living in a land of darkness. We need your light.

Advent offers the opportunity to imaginatively enter into the confusion and sense of dreams deferred that the Messiah-waiting people of Israel felt generation after generation.

God, your chosen people were desperate for rescue. Show us today where we are in need of your rescue. You are our rock and refuge.

Emmanuel is coming soon, but for now, we wait. We do not wait alone, though. God is with us in the darkness. In the pain. In the waiting.

Lord, be gracious to us! Be our strength every morning and our salvation in times of trouble. We wait for you.

Amen.

We light this candle now as a sign that even while we wait in the dark, Christ is with us.

Who here enjoys waiting? Whether it's a line of cars at a traffic signal, a row of people in the grocery store check-out line, or the twisting and turning mob of people at a popular amusement park ride, we have little patience for waiting. While frustrating, the kind of waiting I just mentioned is a minor annoyance compared to the important things in our lives that we're waiting on God to make right. Long-term relationship heartaches, chronic pain or illness, financial pressures and job stresses that never seem to go away, unfulfilled hopes, dreams and longings, and loved ones we've diligently prayed for over many years who don't know Jesus.

Waiting takes up a significant portion of our lives, so it's not surprising that from cover to cover, the Bible unfolds the story of God's people waiting. In Genesis we're introduced to 75-year-old Abraham and his 65-year-old wife, Sarah, who waited 25 years for God to fulfill his promise that He would give them a son.

Later due to a famine in the land where Abraham and his descendants settled, God's people migrated south to Egypt, where God supplied them with grain and land to farm and sheep to herd. For a time, God's people thrived, but their sojourn in Egypt resulted in slavery to Pharaoh. For 400 years, the Israelites cried out to God in their misery, and they waited and waited for God to act until finally God heard their cry and sent Moses to deliver them.

Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt from Pharaoh's iron grip to God's Promised Land in Canaan, but due to their sin, God's people walked and walked and walked, and a journey that should have taken 11 days took 40 years.

Despite the warnings of God's prophets and their calls to remain true to Him, Israel's time in the Promised Land was anything but the hoped for utopia. During the time of the judges, which lasted over four centuries, Israel was caught in an endless cycle of occupation and oppression by their neighbors and God hearing their cries and temporarily delivering them. Eventually, as they waited for deliverance, the people demanded that God give them a king.

In response to their insistence, God gave his people a king, but He warned them through his prophet Samuel that having a king would lead to undesirable consequences. After King Saul's disastrous reign, David came to the throne. God blessed David's leadership and promised he would always have a descendent on the throne, which would eventually culminate in the arrival of the Messiah. David led well for a time and Israel tasted success, but in his humanity,

David fell, and Israel's wait for God's promised Messiah began. The kings after David were a mixed bag—a few were good, but most were bad—and the intensity of the Israelite's wait for their true king grew stronger.

700 years before Jesus' arrival, the prophet Isaiah prophesied extensively about the coming Messiah, and after Isaiah, other prophets who were sent by God prophesied, but things only got worse. After the prophet Malachi, there were 400 years of silence. Over 3,000 years had lapsed from the time God first made Himself known to Abraham, and still God's people waited.

And our wait continues. Since Jesus' arrival in Bethlehem as a baby and his subsequent life, death, and resurrection, Jesus' followers await his return when He has promised everything will be made right and all will be reconciled to Him.

The word "advent" means coming. For the Church, the season of Advent consists of three comings. First, we remember and celebrate Jesus' coming as a baby. Immanuel, God with us, came to earth so that our relationship with God might be restored. Next, we await Jesus' second coming when the Bible promises He will make all things new. Finally, as we celebrate Jesus' birth and await his second coming, we wait for Jesus to enter the places in our lives where we need healing and restoration. The words of the popular Christmas hymn poignantly capture our waiting: "O Come, O Come, Immanuel, and rescue captive Israel."

I invite you to follow along as I read the first part of the Christmas story—the prelude to Jesus' birth from Luke 1:1–25. As I read this story, I encourage you to note all the places where waiting occurs.

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, ² just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. ³ With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

⁵ In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. ⁶ Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. ⁷ But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

⁸ Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, ⁹ he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰ And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

¹¹ Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. ¹³ But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. ¹⁴ He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. ¹⁶ He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

¹⁸ Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

¹⁹ The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. ²⁰ And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time."

²¹ Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. ²² When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

²³ When his time of service was completed, he returned home. ²⁴ After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. ²⁵ “The Lord has done this for me,” she said. “In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.” – Luke 1:1-25

How many instances of waiting did you come up with? The theme of waiting is a thread that runs through these verses. Luke, the author, begins by explaining that, “Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us.” The words “have been fulfilled” indicate that the events surrounding Jesus’ birth had been prophesied and faithful Jews were awaiting their fulfillment. Luke begins his account by declaring, “This is it, the fulfillment of all you’ve been waiting for!”

In verse 5, we’re introduced to Zechariah and Elizabeth, the couple soon to become the parents of John the Baptist and relatives of Jesus’ mother, Mary. We’re told that Zechariah and Elizabeth had been waiting for a child, but Elizabeth was unable to conceive, and they were both very old.

One year when Zechariah, a priest, was chosen by the drawing of lots to go into the temple to burn incense, an angel appeared to him. The angel said, “Do not be afraid, your prayer has been heard. Your wife will bear you a son.” Understandably, Zechariah was stunned, and when in his unbelief he questioned the angel’s word, he was told he’d be unable to speak until the baby was born. So, not only were the elderly couple now waiting in anticipation of John’s birth, but they also awaited the return of Zechariah’s voice. Meanwhile, verse 21 tells us, “The people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple.” Everyone mentioned in this account was waiting.

In the Bible, waiting is often accompanied by silence, yet our tendency is to fill the space we wait in with noise. Noise and activity help us avoid having to think; they fill the empty space with something, anything. Some of us even sleep with the radio or TV on in the background to fill the silence.

The season of Advent for the Church coincides with our culture’s celebration of the Christmas season. Isn’t it ironic that our season of waiting for Jesus to come is the loudest and

busiest season of the year? Actually, I don't think it's a coincidence. It's perfectly logical. We're uncomfortable with waiting, so rather than wait in silence, we do all we can to fill the void by substituting activity for waiting. So, Advent, the season of waiting for Jesus to come, has devolved into the most hectic season of the year.

During this season of Advent, our staff's hope is that we can create windows of time each Sunday morning for us to wait and to embrace silence, and that—and this is really ambitious—those small moments of waiting silence we create here will permeate the busyness of our lives during the week between Sundays. In a few moments, we'll provide a brief time of silence for us to focus on what we're waiting for and to invite Jesus to come into our lives in a fresh way.

As I noted earlier, Luke begins his gospel by stating that many have attempted to give an account of the things that were fulfilled among them by Jesus' birth and life. Luke is alluding to the many Old Testament prophecies that were made about Jesus centuries prior to his birth. Matthew's gospel introduces John the Baptist by referring to Isaiah's prophecy in Isaiah 40:3. Listen to the words of Isaiah.

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."
– Isaiah 40:1-5

Isaiah's prophecy, later realized as foretelling the arrival of John the Baptist, provides a natural platform for us to consider some important questions on this first Sunday of Advent. In the words of the prophet, "The hard service [of God's people] has been completed, their sin has been paid for." What is hard in your life this morning? Where do you feel defeated or where are

you lacking hope? I encourage you to sit in silence with that question, asking the Holy Spirit to speak his truth to your heart.

Waiting is a shared human experience, and sometimes the waiting of others taps into our own season of waiting. I'll read two testimonies of people from McBIC who wait with hope for God to bring his restoration and healing...

From someone diagnosed with an incurable disease: As the first symptoms appear, the darkness descends subtly, like lengthening shadows at the end of the day. Soon, more symptoms develop, more systems malfunction, the night is upon us. Then a ray of light, a glimmer of hope appears; at last we have some clarity - a diagnosis. Treatment brings relief, for now, though a cure is elusive, a dream for some distant future. How long will treatment remain effective? How does this alter our future together? We wait, and in the waiting we pray like the psalmist: "I pray to God - my life a prayer - and wait for what he'll say and do. My life is on the line before God, my Lord, waiting and watching til morning." – Psalms 130:5-6 (The Message)

From a couple mourning their children turning away from God: We raised our three kids to follow Jesus from a young age. After having served Jesus faithfully into their twenties, two have chosen to turn away from Jesus which has caused pain, tension, and anger. Each family gathering or special event brings a fresh reminder of lives that have been deceived by the evil one. In those times we had expected to share joys and stories of God's blessing, but instead we walk on eggshells and keep conversations limited to daily routines. As we wait and pray for the truth of God's word to intervene, we mourn for the lost time and strained relationships within our own family.

Isaiah's words don't end with our difficulty and our sin. He said the voice who would come would declare, "Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed." The question I'd like us to sit with for a bit in silence this morning is this: What might

God want to do in your life during this season of difficulty? What does it look like for you to pray with hope in this situation?