

When I was in grade school in the 1960s, we all got plastic flutophones to learn to play in music class, remember? Now, I believe plastic recorders are the norm. Although we might think of recorders as an inexpensive child's instrument, they actually are an authentic flute developed in Europe during the late Middle Ages and available as finely crafted instruments in high end woods. I just purchased an alto recorder made in Germany from olive wood from a little house shop in St. Paul last weekend. It's beautiful to look at, responsive to play, and lovely to hear. You can imagine how excited I was to put in some solid time playing this new instrument! But the catch is---I can't! Turns out that a high end wood instrument of this sort has to be broken in slowly, gently, and over time because of the impact of the moisture of one's breath upon the wood. This last week, I could play it 5 minutes a day. This coming week I can play it 10 minutes a day. The following week I can play 15 minutes a day, and after a month, I can go for 30 minutes a day, not playing any of the higher notes of the range until closer to the end of this breaking in process. So, in 5 minutes a day, you can't really do a whole lot, and I found the waiting involved before I can really start to play my new instrument pretty irritating. The thing is there's no way to hurry it up; it takes as long as it takes. I was thinking that I haven't had that kind of experience of waiting very often, but then I remembered my two pregnancies. Pregnancy is around a 9 month process, you can't accelerate it, it takes as long as it takes. I found that reality of waiting during each pregnancy to *also* be pretty irritating. Waiting is not something at which I am very adept; are you? Certainly our culture does not teach us to wait well or encourage us to think of waiting as natural. Speed and convenience are primary virtues within our society, and we expect to get what we want, when we want it, which is pretty much right away. If we don't get our package delivered when expected, or the mail is delayed, or retail service is slow, we are quick to complain. Waiting seems wrong and unnatural, rather than a significant and natural part of our lives. Learning to wait well is not particularly valued within our culture at present.

This is a significant irony, though, isn't it? Because we *have* to wait all the time. Not only for our new recorders to get broken in or our pregnancies to reach full term, but for our medical test results to come back, or for the school year to come to an end, or for a mandated period of isolation after an illness to be over, or for

difficulties in a relationship to get resolved. We wait in lines in stores; we wait through long traffic lights to change; we wait to get connected to a live person while on hold on the phone; we wait *all the time*. You'd think we'd be better at it than we are! And in recent weeks, I have been hearing a phrase repeatedly from all kinds of people---“wait and see”. Many are anxious about how our country will move forward after such a divisive political season. “Wait and see” is one of the most common attitudes I've heard. This phrase and attitude apply quite generally to many things. How will Julebyen go this year? We have to wait and see. How will 2025 play out? We'll have to wait and see. Will the truce between Israel and Hezbollah work? We'll have to wait and see. Will my 93 year old father's health continue to be good? We'll have to wait and see. None of these are matters that can be hurried up or learned through any kind of acceleration of the process involved; they take time, and they take as much time as they take. So, whether or not we wait very well, we do it often. Which means this season of Advent which we enter today is now our friend---Advent teaches us the importance of waiting well.

Here's where Advent is a friend to us. It's true that our culture may seem to be calling on us to be rather abruptly catch the “holiday spirit”, to be suddenly holly and jolly and merry and bright, the sooner the better. But the church is not asking that of you. Here, Advent is a season of waiting, longing, anticipating and preparation. You can be just as you are in this sacred space, and however you are, is just right. You don't have to leap into Christmas merriment and jollity; you can be overwhelmed or sad or frazzled or indifferent; all fit well into a time of waiting, reflecting, and preparation. I'm thinking *our attitude* towards this season of Advent is probably what makes the difference---Advent can be a time of waiting for Christmas that is a balm for our souls, rather than just a time of waiting for Christmas that is marked by irritability, overwork, and impatience. Advent can be our friend and teach us about waiting.

So, let's think a bit about this waiting of Advent. Recently, I heard a colleague of mine refer to Advent as the Waiting Room for Christmas. My imagination was stirred by that image. Many of us spend time in waiting rooms. I know I have a variety of memories about waiting rooms, particularly since my Dad was a dentist with a private practice in the Twin Cities. I used to play in his waiting room as a child when he'd be

putting in some extra time at his office on the occasional evening. The waiting room was a fun place for me as a child. There were chairs that were vinyl or wicker, very different from the stuffed furniture we had at home. There were magazines lying around on tables to look through that were magazines for adults, enticing to a child. And best of all—there was a treasure chest. This was a kind of small table where the top opened up to reveal an interior box, and in this box were little prizes for child patients to choose from, once they'd survived their visit to the dentist. That treasure chest drew me like a moth to flame. I didn't mind spending time in that waiting room as a child.

Sadly, all that has changed. As an adult, like most adults, I think, I'm not too big on waiting rooms. Time spent in waiting rooms tends to seem like wasted time, time that could have been put to better use elsewhere. It's even worse if you're waiting for a worrisome medical procedure to happen. The clinic is probably my least favorite waiting room area, just because I figure so many of my waiting room companions are there because they're sick! I always edge away from the ones who are sneezing and coughing, and I wonder who else has touched whatever magazine I dare to pick up. So, to summarize, waiting rooms tend to make us impatient, tend to force us into company with others whom we may not know or want to know, tend to put us into edgy moods, and sometimes may seem even perilous, in terms of what new illness we might catch there. Is this really a good image for the season of Advent?

Well, maybe it is, because how many of us will experience many of those same reactions over the next four weeks? We'll find ourselves feeling hurried and impatient. We'll feel like we're spinning our wheels, wasting our time, when there's so much to do. We'll find ourselves forced into the company of people with whom we don't normally spend time, as we attend gatherings of family and friends. Some of us will be checking our watches at those gatherings, just like we do in the waiting room, wondering when it will seem OK to leave the party. We may even encounter perils of all sorts over the next four weeks, ranging from getting run down and sick, to getting depressed over the holiday buzz, to putting at risk our financial security as we search for the perfect gifts to give to people who already have too much stuff. Our experience of Advent may be surprisingly similar to our experiences of waiting in waiting rooms. But, then how is Advent our friend?

Maybe we need to learn how to befriend Advent and how to make a friend of this time spent in the waiting room.

Both our Scripture lessons today address the reality of waiting. Our lesson from Jeremiah 33, written by the prophet to Hebrew people in the misery of Babylonian exile, assures them that the days are coming when God will restore their community, return them to their homeland, and guide them in creating a just and righteous society. “The days are surely coming” says the Lord”, we read in the opening verse. While we are hardly in exile with our homeland in ruins, I do believe many of us feel a longing for a more united, just, and compassionate nation than we are experiencing right now “The days are surely coming”, we read.but still, we wait. The Hebrew people were released from their exile, they did return to their homeland and rebuild their temple, and from the ashes of that time in exile, the faith we know as Judaism came to be. But all of this took time and involved waiting. As Christians, we see that “righteous branch of David” mentioned in Jeremiah as being fulfilled in Christ’s birth, and that was 500 years later.definitely took some time and involved some waiting.

Our lesson from 1st Thessalonians is about a much more personal waiting. This is a letter from the apostle Paul, written to a church he’d begun in Thessalonica, an area he’d been forced to abandon because of persecution and peril. He had waited from afar, wondering with trepidation what had become of this fragile start-up congregation. He’d sent his friend and colleague Timothy to find out. His joy, when Timothy reported that the congregation was, in fact, thriving and full of love, was incredible. Paul writes this letter to them, full of gratitude for their resilience and their loving ways, and he expresses his longing---he can’t wait to see them again. “Night and day we pray earnestly that we can find a way to see you again, face to face.” Paul prays that God will guide them back together. As best as we can piece together from 2000 years later, Paul was able eventually to make his way back to see them, but it was a matter of waiting for many years before the political situation was stable enough to allow for this. If you’ve ever longed for and waited to see someone again, you can understand what this waiting was like for Paul. Throughout the Scriptural witness and throughout time to

our present day, we have needed to wait, for things large and small, for things corporate or personal, even if we're not very good at it. What can Advent teach us about waiting?

I have to wonder if there aren't some blessings involved in waiting that we overlook in our haste and irritability. For example, since I can only play my new recorder 5 minutes a day, last week I spent time watching videos and doing reading about the instrument that were both educational and inspiring. I learned how to oil it and I did so---things I might have been tempted to skip over, if I wasn't in a period of waiting. Likewise, during the 9 months of pregnancy, any expectant parent knows that you are reading, talking to other parents, making preparations for this baby, and experiencing a wealth of anticipation---none of which would happen if it was just a month long process, right?

Waiting, then, gives us time to reflect, to slow down, to take a deep breath, to learn, to connect with other people---the others in the waiting room with us, perhaps. Within worship these weeks, we will ponder ancient prophecies, sing hymns in minor keys, think about what it meant to be Mary or Joseph, have time to build anticipation for the coming of Christ at Christmas. This time of waiting can be a *gift*, rather than a *burden*.

Pastor Nancy Hong, who is starting her interim ministry this very morning up at Our Savior's Lutheran in Castle Danger, shared a story at our Lectio group last week that I find insightful. She told of taking an art class in college, where frequently students would find that their work of art just wasn't quite right. Her professor said that while one waited to figure out their next artistic move, they could do one of three things: they could incubate; they could complicate; or they could simplicate---not that the latter is quite a word, but we get the idea! We can spend time these next weeks and in all our waitings attending to incubation---to letting ideas and actions germinate, blossom, and grow. *Or* we can spend time in complication---running around in a frenzy, trying to force things to happen too quickly, and generally making things harder than they need to be. *Or* we can spend time in simplification---recognizing what matters most and attending to that as primary. Incubate, complicate, or simplicate---I want to give that some thought as I head into Advent and in all of my times of waiting.

Advent can be our friend. It can teach us about waiting and about life in the waiting room. Best of all, Advent is a waiting room that includes a treasure chest. Because the grace of God is all over Advent! There are surprises in store, treasures to be opened. Don't burden your Advent with a lot of complications and stress and extra work and unrealistic expectations, just wait, hopefully and with the grace you are given, for the gifts God brings your way this Advent and for the treasure God has in store for you this Christmas. Amen.