

the work of waiting

The Third Sunday of Advent 2015

When my grandmother was dying my then three-year-old daughter was deeply fascinated – perhaps even a bit enchanted – by the idea of hospice. She wanted to hear from my wife, again and again, the story of what Nana was going through. My wife would tell the story, several times a day: Nana is in a place where no one is rushing, where she is surrounded by people who she loves, where she is kept clean and comfortable, and where she will soon go to be with God.

Many of you know what I mean when I speak of the sacred time and space that we encounter when someone we love is dying. Some of you have experienced the holiness of being with your parents, or your spouse in the last days of their life in a setting like Beacon Place, where they are made comfortable and treated with great care and dignity. We have people at St. Andrew's whose life's work – whose very vocation – is the work of hospice care, of creating a place for presence, prayer and dignity.

Hospice creates an environment in which people who love one another can be fully present to each other, and aware of God's presence, at the very moment when *presence* is what is most needed, and most treasured. It is a time – and unless you've experienced it you might think this sounds a little odd – of sacred waiting, of passing time in a way that honors that something very holy is happening. We would call this sacramental: a time in which the presence of God is made profoundly manifest. And it is by its very nature a time of active waiting. We don't just sit back and let the health care professionals do their work: we gather, we pray, we hold hands, we anoint and say the litany for the dying, we simply spend time together. It is a time of heightened expectation.

When someone is dying: we pray, we share time, we break bread if the person is able, we remember, we dream, and we sit in vigil. This is the work of waiting.

I've been a part of this a number of times with you and with others, but it wasn't until we went through this with my own grandmother that I caught on to a vital parallel. In hospice we find ourselves in a place that is clearly a healthcare facility but one in which great effort has been made to make it comfortable and warm, rather than sterile and clinical. There is a

steady but usually not overwhelming flow of caregivers coming into the room. There are – hopefully - members of the family present. But the overarching feeling is one of waiting and expectation, of something that we know is going to happen, is going to happen at its own pace, and we ultimately have no control over it.

There was something about that time with my grandmother that took me right back to the birth of each of my children. Do you see the parallels? Hospital wings made to feel as earthy and human as possible. Heightened attention to the pace and strength of breath. The presence of loved ones. Great expectation. A sense of the immanence of the holy. The awareness that something is unfolding at its own pace, and we can only wait expectantly.

When a child is born, we pray, we share time, we remember, we dream, we (and I know that *we* only goes so far here) make our hearts ready for the new reality. This, too, is the work of waiting.

There's a difference between the waiting that happens in labor or vigils, and the kind of waiting that happens in Advent. And that's a difference that I'd like to see go away, because to me they are the same, because when we spend our time quote-unquote "waiting" for something that we really know is going to happen (on December 25th, same as every year), rather than learning how to wait for something that is unfolding on its own time, that is as deeply sacred as it is mysterious, and is every bit as immanent and real as the birth of a child, then we might just miss some of the important work that we are called to do.

Waiting is not simply a time to build anticipation for the day of Christmas. Waiting is the very work of *thy-kingdom come*, it is *what we do* when we see the injustice and tribalism and brokenness of our world, it is what we do when we finally realize that we must choose between the kingdom of God, of sacred presence and the dignity of each and every human being, and the inhumane of gods of anger and greed and fear. We must choose.

And so we wait, but we do so with acute attention to the brokenness of this world, and with intention to make ourselves and the

space around us ready. The work before is real, and it is, without question, hard work.

But what exactly, is the work of waiting?

John the Baptist has strong words for the “crowd” of people following him (and remember that the crowd is always us), and the way that they pass their time, when he says, “you brood of vipers! Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say that Abraham is your ancestor, for I tell you that God can make any of these stones to be children of Abraham.” *You are not bearing the fruit that you think you are!*

This is a challenging Advent message. If each of us doesn’t shuffle a little in our seats, then we aren’t hearing it right. I think this is a statement of deep provocation and conviction. I don’t mean conviction in the “strong opinion and integrity” way. I mean “the walk from the courthouse to the police car” kind of conviction: we have been called out by the prophet. We are not bearing the fruit that we think we are. We are not as ready for the coming of the Kingdom of God as we think.

How not-ready are we? Well, if we aren’t even ready to talk about poverty, or race, or gun violence in a meaningful and truthful way, unencumbered by talking-point tribes, then we aren’t much ready for the kingdom of God either. Because wherever we situate our little ol’ selves on the right to left spectrum, the coming of Christ is going to disrupt our lives far more than we expect.

And of course, we’re working through the aftermath of another shooting, aren’t we? Our typical fear-based responses betray a lived belief that the Kingdom of God is more of a pious fairy tale than immanent reality. None of us – or at least not enough us – are challenged to do the real work. If we just all grieved together, we might be making a start. But the powers and the principalities do not want us to grieve together. I wonder why that might be.

But this is not the work of politics. Ending the epidemic of gun violence is now the work of reconciliation. We must now add it to our growing portfolio of problems that can only be healed by the work of many faithful and self-sacrificing people, over the course not of 24-hour news cycles, or of 4-year election cycles but of lifetimes, and not by human hands alone but by the grace and mercy of God.

It is now among the problems that cannot be solved today, not in the world that we resign ourselves to accept as normal.

But the Advent of Christ means that there is another way, another world that we really believe is possible, a world filled with the presence and action of God, a world that is as immanent to us now as the newborn is in the delivery room. The work of waiting, then, means asking the question: do our lives today bear fruit worthy of that Kingdom?

Let's go down a painful path for a moment, and look at the terrible shootings of the past few weeks and months. Each one is different and adds a superficial layer for the cable-news talking heads to parse (for a fee, of course), but each shooting to me confirms that that they are the same. Whatever their religion, whatever their nationality, it is only people who are deeply angry and tragically alienated from the human family who can end lives so willfully and violently.

What we don't talk about when we approach these at the level of talking-points and tribe is that these outbursts of violence are symptoms of deeper systemic anger and alienation. This is the fruit that our world bears today. This is what happens when communities fall apart, when sources of balance and ballast disintegrate, when visions of mutual responsibility *and* hope and indeed love are cast aside as fantasy.

For some reason, we've let the angry triumph. We've let the angry tell us what to talk about and how to do so. Why is that? I have a member of my extended family who let's just say has an active social media presence. That presence involves lots of defiant pictures of guns, of images that shame people of color and, really anyone who would challenge his world view. He is an angry republican. His father, though, was a democrat. But *he* was an angry democrat, and that anger came largely from his hurt from being abandoned by his mother, who legend has it was the angriest of them all.

Do you see the pattern here? We're having surface skirmishes around personal opinions, when in fact the deeper issue is one of pain, of anger and selfishness passed from generation to generation, of alienation as an increasingly normative state of being in the world. We don't need *fixing*, we need healing. Oh, I'll take fixing over nothing, any day. But unless we heal, the problem will surface elsewhere.

What, then is the work of waiting? To me, it is increasingly apparent that the work of waiting and the hard, lifelong work of reconciliation is the same work.

But Advent is only four weeks! Are we supposed to solve the problems of the world in 4 weeks? If that's the case, let's just give up and go buy presents.

Well, first of all, the work of waiting is not the work of solving. It may be a time of preparation, of praying, of building, of confessing, and of healing, but it is not a time of solving. These wounds, these pains, are so deep that they cannot be solved. Not in this world.

But in the kingdom of God, through the Advent, the coming of God, they will be reconciled. The work of waiting means that this reconciliation can, and must begin now. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done. If we mean that, let's get to work.

This is the work of today. This begins with seeing the brokenness of the world and asking ourselves, do we help? Or how are we not helping? As John the Baptist asks, are we bearing fruit worthy of repentance? Do we bear the fruit that we think we do?

Advent is but four weeks, but it is the beginning and the touchstone of a lifetime of work. Labor is but a few hours (easy for me to say, right?) but will change the life of the family. Death can come to us over years, over days or in an instant, but it, too, is a part of our lifelong process of becoming whole.

What is the work of waiting? After we've asked those questions, and we need to ask those questions, the greater work is very much the same as what we do in childbirth, in the hospice room, in those moments when something holy is about to happen, on its own time, in its own way, beyond our ability to control it, and thank God, beyond our ability to limit it. We gather, we pray, we share time, we break bread, we remember, we dream, we sit in vigil, we sit in expectation, we hope, and we love.

The world is changing. Love, the holy guest, is on the way. We have work to do.

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The Third Sunday of Advent, Year C

*December 13, 2015
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Greensboro, North Carolina*