

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

December 13, 2020 – ADVENT 3, YR. B

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Slow Down and Rest—in Jesus*”

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11	(A vision of God’s peace, justice, and renewal)
Psalms 126	(The Lord will restore the fortunes of Zion)
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24	(Rejoice always; pray without ceasing)
St. John 1:6-8, 19-28	(John baptized with water; Jesus gives the Holy Spirit)

When we were kids, the hardest thing about Christmas was waiting for it to come. From Thanksgiving to December 25th seemed more like eternity than one month. Time appeared to stand still. Even as adults, we find ourselves impatient; waiting is foreign to our culture. It’s considered unnatural. We hunger for immediate satisfaction, and delayed gratification is not in our vocabulary.

The symbols of our unwillingness to wait are all around us. Fast food chains boom because we don’t have time to cook. We stand in crowded lines, yell out our order, gulp it down in five minutes, then return to the rat race. We don’t have time to sit down and read a book any more. We settle for glancing at headlines on the Internet and i-phones, or listen to sound bytes on our car radios.¹ When we get sick, we want to be made well now, because we’re too busy to rest. A sure sign of the times is that there now exists a *condensed version* of the Bible. *I’m serious!* The first 31 verses of Genesis take up one short paragraph.² Like most of you, I’ve come to accept and participate in our no-wait approach to life—with the exception of instant potatoes and instant coffee, both of which I find intolerable.

The truth is, although we don’t like waiting, waiting is a part of living. Those of us who work have to wait for payday or quitting time; if you go to school, you have to wait for your lunch break or recess; and if you’re retired, you have to wait for your Social Security check and the daily mail. When you do your Christmas shopping, you’d better be prepared to wait in a line to check out, wait for a decent parking place, and wait through at least four red lights before exiting malls at Park City or King of Prussia.

But there are more serious matters for which we must also wait. All of us find ourselves waiting for the coronavirus to diminish, and to be gone; for safe and effective vaccines that can be widely distributed; and for a return to some semblance of normal life—whatever that is, after the craziness of 2020.

There are many we don’t see, who are waiting for unemployment compensation, for their food stamps to arrive, and much-needed medical care. Others are waiting for a loved-one in the military to come home safely from a dangerous deployment. Some wait for a long-dreamed-of marriage, or for a union gone terribly wrong to be dissolved. A frightened child waits for morning to dawn, and a fearful adult awaits death. An expectant mother waits for her child to be delivered, and grieving widower awaits his wife’s funeral service that had to be postponed because of COVID.

Waiting can be pure agony.³ Yet Scripture tells us time and time again that God’s clock is wound a different way. To God, time is different. *We* look at seconds; *God* looks at the ages. Waiting, not hurrying is one of God’s attributes. And it is what God often tells His people we, too, must do.

Of course, we are now in the season of Advent, and we have this paradox set before us, as we are caught between waiting and action—for God calls us to both. Even in this time of quiet waiting and prayerful anticipation, a needy world is waiting for us. Just as John the Baptizer carried out his ministry while he waited for Jesus to arrive on the scene, he reminds us that waiting does not necessarily preclude action.

Often, we think we must either be contemplative, or active and busy, doing, doing, doing. Yet, as noted Quaker author Parker J. Palmer points out in his book, *The Active Life*, we need both. We may be naturally inclined more to pondering things than acting on them, but there is room in our lives and in our faith-journeys, for both.

The irony is, this season in which we are called to await patiently the coming of Christ, comes at such a busy, stressful time for most of us as we go about our Christmas holiday preparations. But perhaps therein lies the greatest lesson of Advent, and the greatest challenge. In the northern hemisphere, this is the time of year when nature slows down. The light wanes; the days grow shorter; lakes and streams come to a frozen halt; the Welsh Mountains retreat into snowy quiet; plants and animals hibernate, awaiting spring.

In earlier centuries, winter was the time to mend the fishing nets and farm tools, a time for weaving and sewing, and telling stories around the fire, for snuggling in and going to bed early. Life slowed down. Human life was part of the natural cycle. We know that in the present day, our Amish neighbors use this season as “down time” from farming and keeping herds. But with all our modern conveniences, we now pay little heed to the rhythms of nature—besides, it’s the Christmas season, and we have *way too much to do!*⁴

Even so, the approaching winter and this holy season of Advent invite us to slow down in spite of our overburdened calendars, to sleep more, to rest more deeply ... and to enter prayerfully into the very heart of God, allowing ourselves to be held there closely by Our Lord Jesus, that we may be warmed and comforted by His Holy Spirit.

The slow pace of Advent is one of the reasons we don’t begin to decorate the church until the third Sunday, and we don’t sing Christmas carols until Christmas Eve. It is a way of entering into a waiting that is shaped by quiet contemplation, a way of taking time out to stop and rest, to *breathe*, and to re-focus our minds and hearts on the reason for the season: Jesus Christ. Another way is to help focus our minds and hearts in a prayerful way is to say the Daily Office—Morning Prayer or Evening Prayer—which you can find in your Prayer Book. Or, reflect on the daily Bible lessons with our Good News Daily inserts, the Forward Day-by-Day and Our Daily Bread devotionals, or the Trinity School for Ministry booklet. There are copies of all of these in the literature rack, if you have a key to the church while we are closed.

Just as babies are not born without a period of gestation in the darkness and quiet of the womb, and just as bulbs do not blossom in spring without having waited in the dark soil, we do not bloom and flourish spiritually without times of quiet prayer and healing rest. This would be the contemplative dimension of Advent.

However, as I mentioned before, we are also called to action—not the kind that involves *shopping, wrapping, mailing, cooking, baking, cleaning, decorating, and more shopping*—but to the ministries of the One whom we are expecting: Emmanuel, God-with-us. If we truly believe that Jesus embodied God in the world, then as those who love and follow Christ, we are called to embody God to others, through sharing with them His kindness, compassion, forgiveness, and generosity. Just as in Jesus’ time, the hungry still need food, the naked still need clothing, the sick and imprisoned need our visits, and the poor and downtrodden still need justice.

So, for Christ’s sake, add to your already crowded list of “things to do” at least one action you can take to make another person’s life better, this Christmas. And take advantage of God’s gift of time, in the two weeks left until Christmas. Rather than getting caught up in all the holiday craziness, find some time to reflect on St. John’s call to repentance—which is not just about sin and forgiveness, but about turning around, going a different way, returning to God.⁵

If you can set aside some quiet time to truly listen to God, you will hear more clearly the promptings of the Spirit, and receive a clearer vision of how you are called to live out the vision of the prophet Isaiah to bring freedom to the captives, sight to the blind, and good news to the poor. Captivity could include addiction or depression; blindness might be spiritual or relational; and a person’s poverty might consist in being deprived of love and acceptance, or their not knowing Jesus Christ.

May God give us grace, during this Advent season to find and keep the essential balance between *being* and *doing*, between contemplative prayer and Christ-like action, so that each may inform and nourish the other, as we await the coming of Our Lord. Amen.

⁴ Adapted from “Sermon: Advent 2, Year B” (Sermon.com), via <illustrations@MINISTERSMAIL.COM> 13 Dec. 2002.
⁵ Cited in “Bible” (http://www.bible.com/pages/sermons/10-December-2011).
⁶ Adapted from “Sermon: Advent 2, Year B” (Sermon.com), via <illustrations@MINISTERSMAIL.COM> 13 Dec. 2002.
⁷ Adapted from Kathleen L. Wakefield, “Testifying to the Light,” *Synthesis – Advent 1, Year B*, p. 2.
⁸ Adapted from Wakefield, *op. cit.*