

## “A Time to Wait”

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In the traditional Christian calendar,  
today marks the beginning of the Advent season.  
This is a time of waiting and getting ready for Christmas  
and all the light and beauty it signifies.  
It's a funny time for those of us who celebrate Christmas,  
because we're thinking so much about something that isn't here yet.  
It's a waiting time.  
And waiting isn't always easy.

Remember being little  
and waiting and waiting for your birthday to come?  
Or for Christmas presents?  
It's soooo tempting to snoop around in the closet  
and take just one little peek at those presents!  
I remember when I was a kid,  
one of my favorite things was Pepperidge Farm apple turnovers.  
We only had them once or twice a year, so they were very special.  
You had to preheat the oven,  
and then you had to bake them for 45 minutes,  
which felt like *forever*,  
and then you had to wait for them to cool down enough to eat.  
I would always burn my tongue on that first bite  
because I was so impatient!

Waiting for good things is hard enough.  
It's worse when you're just plain waiting.  
Imagine waiting at a bus stop for the bus to come.  
Imagine you've been waiting for a few minutes already,  
and the bus is late.

Actually you know quite well it's been at least 13 minutes,  
because you've checked your watch several times already!  
And if this bus doesn't come soon,  
*you're* going to be late!  
How do you feel?  
You might feel irritated, angry, frustrated—physically tense—  
mad at the world, enraged, even!

Imagine waiting for the results of a medical test.  
Imagine you found a lump last week and today you had a biopsy,  
and now you're waiting to find out if you have cancer.  
How do you feel?  
Scared, panicky, in denial—breathing fast and shallow—  
you can't settle down to anything.  
You jump every time the phone rings.  
In a way, it would almost be a relief to get the bad news  
because then you wouldn't have to *worry* about it any more.

It's strange—  
whether you're waiting for something good  
or something you're afraid is going to be bad,  
the experience in your body is much the same.  
As we talked over this service, Heather Hartman-Jansen reminded me  
that the tension and the lack of control you feel while you're waiting is  
the same no matter what you're waiting for.  
Waiting is so hard.

But like many difficult things,  
it's also an invitation to grow.  
Waiting is an opportunity to learn trust in the world,  
and in the source of all things,  
which is so much bigger than our understanding can ever grasp.  
When we're forced to wait,  
we just might discover that all our plans for ourselves,  
all our most cherished dreams and hopes,

are not nearly so good as what the universe wants to give us—  
though it can be very, very hard to let go of *our* plans  
and wait for what we're actually going to get.

Years ago, when I was trying very hard to become a professional singer, a kind voice teacher, whom I met briefly, suggested that I read the poet Rainer Maria Rilke's book *Letters to a Young Poet*. At the turn of the last century, a brave young amateur poet sent a sample of his work to the great poet Rilke, begging him to write back and tell him if his work was any good. Rilke answered, and they corresponded for five years. *Letters to a Young Poet* is a collection of those letters. This voice teacher thought they might help me decide if I was really cut out to be a professional musician. But for a long time I was too scared to read them. I was afraid they would tell me I wasn't really any good and I might as well quit now since I was bound to give it up eventually.

I turned my back on those fears and got myself into a conservatory for my master's degree in voice. I was proud of that then, and I'm proud of it now. But it turned out to be a very difficult time for me. My doubts about my talent and ability to succeed grew in the hyper-competitive environment of the conservatory. I began to realize that the life of a professional singer was not going to be my life. But I didn't know what would replace that dream. I found it very frightening to try to give up one vision without having found a new one yet. It was like there was an empty space, a vacuum, inside of my heart. And it was scary. I questioned the meaning of my life; I doubted whether I would ever find a real path.

During this time, I remembered the advice of that voice teacher, and one day I dared to pick up Rainer Maria Rilke's book. Here is what I read—the words of the poet to a scared and confused young man:

I want to beg you . . . to be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to love the *questions themselves* like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue.

Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them.<sup>1</sup>

For me, those words were lifesaving. I hadn't realized how badly I was craving permission not to have everything figured out, not to be completely put together, in fact not to have any idea what I was meant to be doing with my life.

Rilke's advice to be patient and "try to love the *questions themselves*" was the reminder I needed that waiting, simply waiting, is just fine. In fact, it's a necessary part of the sacred journey of our lives. When we remember that we are always changing and evolving, we can embrace times of waiting and expectancy, even times of emptiness, as part of a cycle, because we know that what is unclear and unrevealed will eventually become clear. Maria Harris, in a wonderful book on spirituality, encourages us to "say to our souls, regularly, 'Be still,' and 'Wait as long as you need,'" and to believe that we truly will "hear our personal call when it is spoken."<sup>2</sup>

That's what happened to me. It turned out that I needed that time of emptiness to make room for something new, which for me was a very surprising and life-changing call to ministry. Yet before that became clear, I struggled so hard with the emptiness. I researched career after career; I was determined that I was going to figure it out and achieve career nirvana on my own timetable!

But that's not how it works. Sometimes you really just have to sit still and wait. Listen to the words of T. S. Eliot:

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope  
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love,  
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith  
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.

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<sup>1</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, trans. M. D. Herter Norton (New York: Norton, 1954), p. 35.

<sup>2</sup> Maria Harris, *Dance of the Spirit: The Seven Steps of Women's Spirituality* (New York: Bantam, 1989), p. 47.

Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:  
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.<sup>3</sup>

To wait without hope  
because hoping would be hoping for the wrong thing.  
To be at a point where you're just at the end of the road  
of everything *you* can plan and hope for—  
having tried and tried to force something to work  
and be what *you* want,  
and all that trying and trying just hasn't worked.  
When you get to that point  
you just have to throw up your hands  
and stop  
and wait  
without hope  
because you just don't know what to hope for any more.

I have a theory about life,  
and my theory is,  
what I plan for myself  
is not nearly as good as what the universe is going to give me  
if I can just let go and wait for it to reveal itself.  
Waiting is trusting that.  
I have experienced this over and over in my own life.  
For me it is empirically true: life can be trusted.  
Life itself is trustworthy.  
I hope and trust that this will continue to be true  
even in the dark places we all journey through.  
Even in the hardest times,  
I believe we are held.  
Eventually the pain changes—  
maybe over many, many days—  
it stretches us and, after many days,  
it transforms itself into a deeper joy.

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<sup>3</sup> T. S. Eliot, from "East Coker," *Four Quartets*.

Don't forget "Advent" means "Coming."  
It means something *is* coming.  
It may feel like all we're doing is waiting.  
But something is happening inside,  
under the surface.

In my ministry with you so far,  
I've been challenging myself to be patient  
and hold back on offering too much advice  
because I think it's so important for me to wait  
and take the time to know you  
and let you get to know me  
until we start to see what is revealing itself.  
It's kind of like baking a loaf of bread.  
You can't just stick it in the oven right after you knead it.  
You have to let it rise, in its own time.  
And you can only put it in the oven after it's risen.  
Bread takes time.  
Life takes time.  
I'm imagining our work together here at church  
kind of like baking, and right now I'm looking forward to seeing  
what will come out of the oven!  
I suspect it will be as tasty as an apple turnover  
and much more nutritious!

I have a great trust that our best future is revealing itself little by little  
and that we will figure it out together  
if we take the time to pay attention and do a lot of listening.

But there's really no substitute for just taking the time.  
I'm discovering this afresh in a funny little way  
as I get used to being a Californian.  
I grew up in Minneapolis,  
lived for a few years in Boston,

then in Chicago—  
northern cities all, with much the same weather.  
I'm used to Decembers with freezing temperatures  
and snow flurries if not snow *storms*.  
In the places I come from,  
the trees would all have lost their leaves many days ago.  
Fall was definitely *not* the time when things started to look green again!

Now that I'm living here in California,  
I'm discovering it's a very curious experience,  
not knowing what to expect from the natural world.  
You all have done a great job describing it to me—  
I hear we have a lot of fog coming up,  
and maybe a few nighttime freezes.  
So intellectually I have an idea of what to expect.  
But I haven't *seen* it yet with my own eyes.  
My body hasn't felt it.  
It's really my body that's a little confused.  
I've noticed myself feeling a little disoriented  
now that it's getting dark so early.  
The temperatures still feel so warm to me.  
It's like my body still thinks it's, oh, early October or so.  
And it surprises me when I look out my window at 5:00  
and find it's already dark!  
It's going to take time for me to get used to this.  
By the same token, I know it's going to happen—  
just on its *own* timetable, not mine.

For now, in this place which is still new to me,  
I'm finding I have to let go of the wish to know what to expect.  
At least for now, with the weather,  
and also with you all as we begin to build our ministry together.  
One thing that helps me is a Japanese saying:  
Expect nothing. Be ready for anything.

Expect nothing. Be ready for anything.  
This is what the samurai learned  
to keep themselves alive in a battle.  
It also applies to life in any new situation.  
The idea is that if you give up your expectations about what's supposed  
to happen, you free yourself to notice what actually *is* happening.  
By letting go of expectations  
and simply waiting with awareness,  
you free yourself to respond to what *is*.

In the days ahead,  
may we support each other in waiting,  
in awareness,  
in paying attention to what is happening.  
Little by little our waiting will turn into being and doing something  
quite marvelous and new.  
I can hardly wait!

May it be so.  
Amen and blessed be.