

**“The Waiting Place”**

**I Thessalonians 3:9-13**

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**First Sunday in Advent: Hope**

All of them have common characteristics. You will find very durable, all-purpose furniture, magazines covering a wide variety of subjects and lovely music programmed by the same people who manage the elevators. Waiting rooms are not our favorite places, are they? I don't believe I've met anyone who looked forward to spending time in one.

Biblically speaking, we find ourselves today in a waiting room, a very appropriate place to be this time of the year. Today is the first Sunday in Advent, a season of anticipation and preparation for the celebration of Christ's birth.

One common trait of our texts on this first of four Sundays in Advent is this concept of waiting. The ancient Jews are waiting for the day they can return home from exile and live in peace and safety (Jeremiah 33:14-16). The Psalmist is waiting for God to rescue him from his enemies, which are bearing down on him (Psalm 25:1-10). Luke's readers are waiting for Jesus to return and rescue them from all their struggles (Luke 21:25-36).

In our text for this sermon, Paul is waiting for God to make it possible for him to visit his friends in Thessalonica. He wants to see firsthand how the work is going in that strategic location and encourage them to remain faithful. Because of threats on Paul's life and the high risk of danger, he cannot go. You can tell from his writings this is hard for him, but he has no choice. He must wait and pray until God opens that door of opportunity.

Advent and waiting go together. As a matter of fact, life and waiting go together. The great Lutheran theologian, Dr. Seuss, reminded us of this.

Dr. Seuss, whose real name was Theodor Seuss Geisel, was an American writer and cartoonist most widely known for his children's books. He published over 60 books, characterized by imaginative characters and rhyme. Perhaps you are familiar with his most popular works, *The Cat in the Hat* and *Green Eggs and Ham*.

The last book published before his death was *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* The main character decides to leave town and this book chronicles the challenges he faces along his journey. One of those challenges is “The Waiting Place.”

“You can get so confused that you'll start in to race down long wiggled roads at a break-necking pace and grind on for miles across weirdish wild space, headed, I fear, toward a most useless place... The Waiting Place... for people just waiting.

Waiting for a train to go  
Or a bus to come, or a plane to go  
Or the mail to come, or the rain to go  
Or the phone to ring, or the snow to snow  
Or the waiting around for a Yes or No  
Or waiting for their hair to grow.  
Everyone is just waiting.  
Waiting for the fish to bite  
Or waiting for wind to fly a kite  
Or waiting around for Friday night  
Or waiting, perhaps, for their Uncle Jake  
Or a pot to boil, or a Better break  
Or a string of pearls, or a pair of pants  
Or a wig with curls, or Another Chance.

Everyone is just waiting.”

Dr. Seuss was right, wasn't he? Everyone is just waiting.

**For what are you waiting?** Are you waiting to hear from that interview to see if you got the job? Are you waiting for the economy to recover so your business will improve? Are you waiting for your health to return so you can resume your normal activities? Are you waiting for a family member to work with you on repairing a broken relationship? Are you waiting on someone to grow up and become responsible? Like Mary and Joseph in the Christmas story, are you waiting for a baby to be born?

**Waiting is not easy, is it?** You can tell from Paul's writings that he was struggling with his inability to go to Thessalonica and see the people he grew to love in a short amount of time. "Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face." It was on his mind constantly.

The longer we wait, the harder it gets. We can grow restless and weary. We can get despondent and give up hope.

**So, what are we to do while we wait?** What did Paul do? He prayed and asked God to make it possible for him to travel to Thessalonica.

He continued with the work that he could do, which was writing to encourage them in his absence. He also prayed for them, asking God to help them love each other even more than they already did. He asked God to help them be good role models by loving all men, even their enemies, and living holy and blameless lives.

He formed a support group that would wait with him and be encouragers. It appears that Paul turned to Timothy and Silas to help him. They stayed close to Paul and went places he could not and did things he was forbidden to do.

Most of all, Paul did not lose hope. He did not let the wait weigh him down. He counted his blessings rather than his losses and trusted God to do what was best.

**I want to encourage you to do the same things.** Pray about that for which your heart longs. Ask God not only to open doors of opportunity, but to give you wisdom, guidance, understanding, patience, stamina and hope. Pray without ceasing, as Paul did. Trust God to hear and respond to your prayers as a loving and responsible parent.

Remain active and do what you can, even if you cannot do everything you want. Don't become paralyzed or so distracted that you fail to see what you can do. As much as possible, maintain balance physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. How important this is.

Surround yourself with encouragers. Like Paul, find people who will pray with you and travel with you along this journey. Form your own support group and open your life to them.

Do you recall what Mary did after hearing that she was going to have a baby? She went immediately to Elizabeth's home in the hill country of Judea and stayed with Zechariah and Elizabeth for three months. Why do you think she did this? I am confident she needed their support and encouragement. She needed someone who would listen to her as she expressed her confusion and fears and help her deal with the challenges she was facing. Is this what you need at this point in your life?

Above all, do not lose hope. "Hopelessness is to deny God," someone has written. It's true. God is always working behind the scenes on our behalf and He will have the final word in our life, which will be good, because there is no situation that God cannot change for the better. Keep the faith and remain faithful.

In 1960, John Claypool began pastoring the Crescent Hill Baptist Church in Louisville. He became friends with a Jewish rabbi that was forty years his senior as they worked together in the civil rights movement. After a tense and unproductive meeting one day, Claypool looked at his Jewish friend and said, "I think it is hopeless. This problem is so deep, so many-faceted, there is simply no way out of it."

This rabbi asked Claypool to stay a few minutes after the meeting and said, "Humanely speaking, despair is presumptuous. It is saying something about the future we have no right to say

because we have not been there yet and do not know enough. Think of the times you have been surprised in the past as you looked at a certain situation and deemed it hopeless. Then, lo and behold, forces that you did not even realize existed broke in and changed everything. We do not know enough to embrace the absolutism of despair. If God can create the things that are from the things that are not and even make dead things come back to life, who are we to set limits on what that kind of potency may yet do?"

**Which of these suggestions do you struggle with the most?** Focus upon this during Advent and ask God to help you work through it.

**Who is struggling around you and needs your help?** In the Christmas story, what would Mary have done without Joseph? What if he had abandoned her in her time of greatest need? What if he had not waited with her and been so kind and understanding? The Christmas story would have had a different ending, wouldn't it?

Who needs you to enter into their struggle and wait with them? What could you do during Advent that would lighten their load or lift their spirit?

Just as Advent invites us to think about a God who comes to us, as distinct from a God who is unapproachable, so it encourages us to be accessible, or better yet, go to those who need our help. Who would that be? With God's guidance and help, reach out to them this week. Go sit with them in "The Waiting Place."

Before you go, however, I need to ask you another question. **Is this the day you need to move beyond your own "Waiting Place?"** Is it time for you to make some decisions and move in new directions?

This morning, do you need to make a profession of faith in Christ as Lord and join this loving church? Do you need to move your membership into our church and become a part of a Sunday school class or Bible study group? Do you need to work with our children or go on a mission trip? Do you need to forgive someone and bury the hatchet? Do you need to make an appointment with a counselor? Do you need to go back to school or develop better study habits? Do you need to take the first steps toward becoming a better mate or parent? Do you need to confront a debilitating addiction? Do you need to...you fill in the blank. Then ask God to help you. I assure you He will.