

Pastor Kory's Page

Faith Lutheran Church, Sioux Falls, SD

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What are we waiting for?

The meaning of Advent

Pop musician John Mayer sings, "So we keep on waiting, waiting on the world to change." Mayer's song is a social commentary. It cites problems such as world leaders, war, and the media. What hope does the song offer? "One day our generation is gonna rule the population." That's it. According to the song, our hope for the world is that younger generations will handle things differently someday.

Putting the song aside, in some ways all of us are waiting on the world to change. I'm guessing you're not a fan of waiting. We're waiting and hoping for brighter tomorrows. Waiting for relationships to be reconciled. Waiting for something in our lives to begin or conclude.

Long ago, Israel was waiting on the world to change, waiting many centuries for the Messiah to arrive and set things right. They prayed that God would "rend the heavens and come down" (Is. 64:1). But God didn't come right away. He left His people with His promise that a shoot would sprout from the dead stump of King David's dynasty, "and a branch from his roots would bear fruit" (Is. 11:1).

After the era of the prophets, Israel waited some 400 years for the promised Messiah. They kept waiting on the world to change, but the Lord didn't seem to be following their timetable. Waiting is never easy, especially in today's impatient culture. We want God to respond to us as fast as microwaves zap our food and smartphones answer our queries. But He doesn't operate on our timetable anymore than He did on Israel's.

German Lutheran pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was also waiting on the world to change, particularly because he ministered during Nazi times. Bonhoeffer waited for the war and evil dictatorship of Hitler to end. He waited to be released from prison (like many faithful pastors in his time). He waited to be united in marriage with his fiancé, Maria. Bonhoeffer spent the last two Advents of his life in a Gestapo prison, waiting for release. As he continued to write from prison, Bonhoeffer paralleled his experience with Advent.

He wrote, "Life in a prison cell may well be compared to Advent ... One waits, hopes, and does this, that, or the other – things that are really of no consequence – the door is shut, and can only be opened from the outside."

For Bonhoeffer, the door to freedom never reopened in this world. He was killed in a concentration camp, just before war's end. Yet his words still remind us that we are waiting on God to take the initiative and act in His time. We are waiting for Him to open the door and come to our rescue. And that's what Advent means, "coming." Bonhoeffer knew that God's Advent came unexpectedly at the manger. But as earlier Christians celebrated Advent, they especially looked ahead toward Christ's second coming.

Bonhoeffer also wrote, "Through all the Advents of our life that we celebrate runs the longing for the last Advent." In other words, for believers in Christ, the final Advent of Christ will be *better* than any Christmas, for on that great day, Christ will make all things new (Rev. 21:5). Each experience of waiting for something in this life is really part of our greater waiting for that day when waiting will cease and we will be with the Lord. For this reason Bonhoeffer said that not only is Advent "a season of waiting, but our whole life is an Advent season."

Bonhoeffer understood, that just as Israel had to wait for the Branch to finally sprout and bear fruit, "for the greatest, most profound, tenderest things in the world, we must wait." (Quotations from the book, God Is In the Manger: Reflections on Advent and Christmas.)

This weekend marks the beginning of the Church's waiting for the great celebration of Christmas. And it's easy to get impatient – especially for the kiddos! But in some ways, our waiting is just as important as our celebrating. We light our Advent wreaths one candle at a time and mark one day at a time on our Advent calendars because we're waiting. We gather for midweek Advent services because we're waiting and preparing for the celebration of the coming of the Word made flesh (John 1:14). And always, we're waiting on the world to change. But the Good News is, it *did* change in Christ's first Advent at Bethlehem, and this dark and broken world will change for good at His second Advent!