

Advent is a great time for preachers. There's lots of rich themes that can be explored, but there's one Advent theme in particular that stands out this year as being relevant to Advent 2020, this time of pandemic. It's the theme of waiting. Today's epistle from 1 Peter in one paragraph has three references to waiting. He writes, "We wait for the coming day. We wait for new heavens and a new earth, and we're waiting for these things, striving to be found at peace," Peter writes. We're also waiting for this wretched pandemic to be over. However, Advent waiting and pandemic waiting are completely different things. And let me just explore for a few moments what those differences are.

Firstly, pandemic waiting is passive. It's the kind of waiting that you have to do at airports. Do you remember in those good old days, when we used to fly, you'd go through the security gate, and then you'd arrive at the departure lounge, and there's nothing else to do there but wait till the plane leaves. You're killing time there. We're all passively waiting for a vaccine. It can't come soon enough. We're waiting for life to get going again, for life to get back to normal. For many of us, to a greater or lesser extent, life is simply on hold.

I read this quote from Alex Stone a few years ago, and it seems more relevant than ever at the moment. He writes, "The dominant cost of waiting is an emotional one. Stress, boredom, that nagging sensation that one's life is slipping away." I can relate to all three of those things. Advent waiting, by contrast, is very different. For one thing, the end for which we wait in Advent is final and absolute. I'm not sure it's going to be that way with this pandemic. I'm not sure it's going to be clear when it's over. There's not going to be a day which officially marks the end of the pandemic. I fear it's going to drag on. It's going to take time. It's going to be a gradual process, this getting back to normal.

I watched a recording this week of last year's Christmas Eve service, and it felt like it came from a different era. There we all were packed inside the church, big choir, leading singing with gusto, a brass band playing, everyone packed into the pews. And I couldn't believe that this was less than a year ago. It felt as it was a generation ago, so much has changed

since then. And we're not going to just snap back and have things as they were. I'll tell you an important date in my head. It's the completion of our fabulous new organ, which should be finished, which will be finished, I think, at Easter 2022. That's, I think, the next time we'll be able to have a packed full-throttled celebration in church. In contrast to the uncertainties around pandemic waiting, there will be no doubt when our Advent waiting is over.

This may come as a surprise to a certain Englishman called Ernest Digweed. He died in 1976, and Mr. Digweed left an estate of 26,107 pounds in trust to be paid to Jesus Christ on His second coming, the deed wrote. And the whole estate was to be invested for 80 years. "If," and I quote, "during those 80 years, the Lord Jesus Christ shall come to reign on the earth, then the public trustees upon obtaining proof which should satisfy them of His identity, shall pay to the Lord Jesus Christ all the property which they hold on His behalf. Contrary to what Mr. Digweed thought, I don't think there will be any need to obtain proof of Jesus' identity when He returns in glory. As our epistle says, "On that day, the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire." There will be no doubt that the great day long promised in the Bible has come, that Jesus has returned. And I'm sure, too, that He'll have no need for Mr. Digweed's money.

Another way that Advent waiting is different to pandemic waiting is that Advent waiting is active. Pandemic waiting is passive. As I said, we can't do anything to make the vaccine come any quicker. In fact, we're constantly told that the best that we can do to be helpful is to do nothing. Stay home. Don't go out, don't see anyone. In contrast, Advent waiting is active. It's not like waiting at the airport. It's more like the kind of waiting the firefighters are doing here now. When the Santa Ana wind is blowing, as it does now, the firefighters go on high alert. They're waiting for a fire, which they fear might break out. And as the winds blow and the alert, the red alert, goes out, the fire department waits for the fires to come. That doesn't mean they're all in their fire stations, playing cards. It means they're out. They're out paying attention to the weather forecast, seeing which way the wind is blowing, checking that no small fires, which might get bigger, have started.

The fire department are waiting as we're called to wait, knowing that something big is brewing on the horizon, knowing that something is coming, but not being sure when and where. Advent waiting is about paying attention, looking for signs and being prepared. In Advent, especially, we're called to pay attention to where God is at work in our lives and in our world. For me, that means paying attention to my daily Bible readings. That's where I normally sense God speaking to me. And if I take time to read a passage slowly, to savor it, to pay attention to it, I can sometimes sense where God is prompting me and addressing me. We pay attention to God in Advent and what He might be saying to us. We also in Advent pay attention to ourselves as we wait.

I've read a story recently about a speedboat racer, and he was mid-race going flat out, top speed. And he hit a rather... well, a wave that was slightly bigger than he thought it was, at an odd angle. And it sent him flying up into the air, and the boat, when it came back, crashed, and he went under the water. And he went so high and going at such a speed, and he went so deep into the water that he realized he didn't know which way he was facing. So he waited. He didn't start swimming straight away. He waited for his life vest to right itself and point him in the direction of the surface of the water. When he knew he was heading for the surface, he started to swim. And what saved the man was that he waited. He waited to see which way he was facing, which way to put his energies and swim.

When this pandemic is over, will we be satisfied with going back to normal? Is that normal how we want things to be going forward? The dark times of pandemic do give us an opportunity to reflect on our lives. As things are stripped away, we can see more clearly what things are really truly of significance. We can see perhaps which way we are facing and which way we would like to face, where we would like to put our energies. Advent begins in the dark, and Advent reminds us that necessary things, things worth waiting for, often happen in soft, fertile, dark places. Next spring's seeds break open in dark winter soil. The child we yearn for grows in the deep darkness of the womb.

I wonder if years from now, we might look back on these bleak months of the pandemic, when we will recognize these days of waiting, waiting for a vaccine, waiting for a cure, waiting for return to our normal lives, we might see them as a paradoxical treasure. Learning to wait for God is akin to learning a new form of physical exercise. Waiting is a muscle that needs to be worked toned, sculpted, and shaped over a period of time. To sit and wait for God, not in bitterness, not with cynicism, not in fake and frozen piety, is serious spiritual work, but it is the invitation of Advent to wait. Let's see if we can use this very Adventy Advent to wait well. Amen.