

**SERMON TITLE:** “The Gift of Waiting”  
**TEXT:** 1 Corinthians 1:3-9  
**PREACHED AT:** Lethbridge Mennonite Church  
**BY:** Ryan Dueck  
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Happy New Year!

It is good to be together on this First Sunday of Advent to focus our hearts and minds upon the God who comes to us in unexpected ways, as we’ve already seen this morning.

The English word “advent” comes from the Latin word *adventus*, which simply means “coming.”

This is the season where Christians around the world do two things:

1. We celebrate that Jesus *has* come and we enter into the waiting season that accompanied his first coming.
2. We acknowledge that Jesus will come *again*.

We live **in between advents**, and each year during this season we intentionally locate ourselves in the posture of waiting, longing, hoping, expecting the coming of the God who rescues.

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I’m going to begin this First Advent sermon in an unusual place: the bathroom.

The bathroom of The Penny Coffee House, in particular.

For those who don’t know, this is a great little coffee shop here in Lethbridge. I don’t know if you’ve been to this fine establishment or not, but if you have you may have noticed that their washrooms have an interesting feature in them.

A chalkboard.

I’m not sure if this is their way of fighting back against the inevitable graffiti that tends to pop up in public washrooms or not, but they have turned an entire wall into a giant message board. There is chalk provided along with an open invitation, it seems, to write whatever you want on the wall before or after the business at hand.

Here’s what I read on the chalkboard on Tuesday:

EXPECTATIONS HAVE A FUNNY WAY OF LETTING YOU DOWN.

I sat and looked at this statement for a long time. I wondered about the person who had written it. I wondered what expectations had gone unmet in his or her life. I wondered who or what had let them down. I wondered if they were OK.

I left the bathroom, but throughout the rest of the day I continued to think about this one little line on a bathroom chalkboard. I think it could stand as a summary of our culture's approach to Advent, to Christmas, to the Christian story in general.

We often hear that we live in postmodern times—times of cynicism, hopelessness, despair, hostility towards God and religion.

Gone are the days when the Christian understanding of God, the world, and human beings could be more or less assumed.

Gone are the days when most people were guided, however inconsistently or sporadically, by *some* notion that the world they lived in was made by a Creator God who had intentions for human life.

Gone are the days where *was* widespread understanding and expectation that history was going somewhere *good* and *hopeful*.

**Whatever else might be said about this postmodern world that we live in here in 2011, it is one where our horizons have radically shrunk.**

The “official” story of the world embraced by many of our friends, neighbours, colleagues and classmates, the official narrative taught in colleges and universities and written about in books and articles, is that the world we live in began from a purposeless singularity and will one day return to this in some kind of a big freeze or big crunch.

Modern science has given us a picture of just how enormous the universe is and how microscopic we are in comparison. We are just one tiny little creature on one tiny little planet in the middle of this vast uninhabitable galaxy.

Humans have no unique status in this world, nor do was the world designed with us in mind.

There is no meaning in our lives—whether as individuals or communities or nations or human history—that we do not create for ourselves. No inherent purpose to human existence, no coherent big story within which to participate.

All of the promises of salvation have, it is thought, proved bankrupt.

For centuries, we had high hopes in God but the endless wars and strife throughout Europe and beyond caused by conflicting religious views, the advent

of modern science, the Renaissance and political revolutions, and the discovery of different people groups with different beliefs around the world (among other things) gradually eroded the taken-for-granted nature of belief in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

“God is dead,” Friedrich Nietzsche famously declared in 1882, and unable to save. Many agreed.

We then turned our high hopes to ourselves. Perhaps human ingenuity and resourcefulness, reason and scientific progress would save us. We would create heaven on earth through our own efforts.

But while reason and progress and technology has led to innumerable benefits in our lives (e.g., medical treatments and all manner of creature comforts), it has also given us the weapons of modern warfare, internet pornography, etc, and virtually endless ways to damaging each other and ourselves.

The world in 2011 does not look very promising—regional factionalism, environmental degradation, religiously fueled conflict and war, political sniping, a staggering worldwide economy... the picture is not a pretty one.

EXPECTATIONS HAVE A FUNNY WAY OF LETTING YOU DOWN.

The postmodern ethos is one of despair and resignation to a bleak view of a world that is, at its core, unfriendly to human hopes and longings.

There is no expectation of a hopeful future. No expectation of a God who *comes*—a God who enters the story and changes the story.

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These are the waters we swim in as followers of Jesus in 2011. We live in a culture of lowered expectations.

What do we do? What can we say? What does it look like to give a reason for the hope we have (1 Peter 3:15) at this time and in this place?

Do the words from the apostle Paul to a church in first century have anything to say to us here at the First Sunday of Advent 2011?

I think they do.

Paul’s words are not complicated or difficult to understand.

They are a simple reminder that whatever things might look like at any given moment in the story of the cosmos or in the story of our own lives, God has equipped his people for the in-between time of waiting, and it is God who will

preserve and sustain us.

This is true, regardless of how things might look or feel.

The church to which Paul addressed these words was not full of perfect people whose faith was unshakeable and solid.

It was a church full of infighting, theological confusion, sexual immorality, greed, leadership squabbles, disagreement about how to live in the broader culture, worship wars, disregard for history, competition over spiritual gifts.... the list goes on.

In other words, it was a church not too unlike many of the other churches that have existed since then.

And despite this situation, Paul begins his letter with a powerful affirmation of who these people are because of what Jesus has done:

- You have been enriched *in every way* with all kinds of speech and knowledge (1:5)
- You do not lack *any* spiritual gifts (1:7)

In other words, even though it might not look and feel like it, you're already well equipped to wait. You have the Spirit to guide and sustain you. You have knowledge of the purposes of God and where God's story is going.

And then, the most important point:

- He—Jesus Christ—will keep you firm until the end (1:8).
- God is faithful (1:9).

The point for Paul is not the quality of the Corinthian church but the sufficiency of the promise of God.

Paul will go on to write some very strong words to this church. He will get angry with them. He will tell them that their behaviour and belief is not what it should be given what is already true about them due to the reality of Jesus Christ.

But here, at the outset of what will be a rather harsh letter, Paul reminds his hearers of these two foundational truths:

1) You are recipients of grace—you have what you need to live lives of faith, hope, and love while you wait

2) It is Jesus Christ, not your own efforts, who will keep you firm in between his comings.

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On this first Sunday of Advent we are called to pay attention to Christ.

So much of the Christian life is about living into realities that are not yet as real as they will one day be.

So much of the Christian life is about waiting properly.

We're not good waiters. In the online age, we are a culture that is suffering from attention deficit disorder. Our brains are being rewired by our use of the Internet. We digest information in bite-sized doses before moving on to the next link, the next story, the next joke, the next thing.

We are a people who are losing the ability to pay sustained attention.

And yet paying sustained attention—thoughtful, deliberate, hopeful attention—is our task in between Advents.

Our task is to embrace this time of waiting as a gift and to recognize that Christ has gifted us—with “all kinds of speech and with all knowledge... with every spiritual gift”—to wait well.

One of the metaphors that I have found helpful during the season of Advent, and for the Christian life in general is the metaphor of having **bifocal vision**.

Those of you who wear bifocals will have a good idea of what I might be talking about. Bifocals have two lenses—one for distant vision, one for near vision.

I think most of us find the near vision to come fairly naturally. We don't often have problems seeing what's right in front of us—the good things or the bad things.

What about the more distant vision?

It's keeping the big picture in mind and looking for the ways in which the bigger story breaks into and transforms the smaller stories of our lives. It's not letting the stuff in the “near vision” overwhelm the fundamental reality of who Jesus is, what he has done, what he is doing in and through us, and what he will do.

I got a (very limited) picture of this near/distant vision thing during my times spent at the rink and the pool for my kids' sports.

Nicky and Claire go to power skating lessons and swimming lessons where they have to do all kinds of drills, practicing stopping, crossovers, backwards skating, practicing different strokes, starting positions, etc. They sometimes find these

exercises quite tedious. They are looking through the top part of the bifocals—they see only the discomfort and repetition of the moment.

But as the dad, I see the bigger picture. I see Nicky's skating improving by leaps and bounds. I see the effect it has when he plays in real games. I see Claire's times improving because of the work she puts in practice. I know the skills they will develop if they keep practicing and the fun they will have when they can participate in sports without thinking about the details. Even if they don't see it, the big picture is a good one and it's worth working towards!

The same thing is true of your life and my life.

What we see in the near vision might look bleak or hopeless. It might look boring or confusing or tragic or painful. The near vision may lead us to think that expectations only exist to be frustrated.

But the big picture is that we are all part of a grand story that God is telling, where his creation is being reclaimed and redeemed, and where we are becoming more like him.

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Perhaps, at the dawn of this Advent season your faith is strong and you are filled with hope and expectation. Perhaps the reality of the joy and peace of Christ is alive in your heart and mind, and you are excited and attuned to ways in which Jesus has come and continues to come into your life.

If so, thank God.

But perhaps you don't feel very firm or blameless as this Advent season begins.

Perhaps your faith is flagging and your expectations are low. Perhaps you find it difficult to believe in the God who comes—that God has come or is coming to fix this broken world.

If so, I pray that you would take the words from our passage this morning to heart.

- You have already been gifted and graced to wait expectantly
- Jesus Christ is the one who will keep you firm until the end.

May we have ears to hear and eyes to see—in bifocal vision!—so that we recognize the time of God's coming to us and understand that he alone can bring us peace.

May we be challenged and disrupted and unsettled and watchful for the awesome deeds we do not expect—the God who comes to us as the Lord of history to transform us and to transform the world he loves and for which he died.

Amen.