

# The Patience of Our Lord

2 Peter 3:8-15a

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Advent is a time of waiting.

There is a sense in which the entire Christian life is a time of waiting — waiting for God’s promises to be realized in fullness, to see in full what we now only see in part, for faith to become sight.

But in Advent we pay special attention to this theme. Waiting. For Christmas. For Jesus. For the coming of God to be among God’s people.

This week, I came across two quotes on “waiting” that I have been reflecting on throughout the week. Two quotes that, in some sense reveal something about the nature of our waiting.

The first is from a pastor named Jane Anderson Grizzle in an article she wrote for a magazine called Mockingbird. This quote comes in the context of a conversation about her least favourite holiday, New Year’s (I know I’m getting ahead of myself chronologically, but I hope you’ll see the relevance).

About New Year’s resolutions, she says:

I am supposed to have more energy and interest in self-improvement. Things are supposed to get better not worse. This year will be different because this is the year, after forty others just like it, that I will finally have more self-control. I will have learned from all my previous mistakes, errors, failures, flops and non-wins. Nothing will be left as it was. This year, I will have it all together...

[A]t the start of the New Year, we expect radical change, of ourselves and others.

Here’s what’s wild: the Church celebrates its New Year with the first Sunday of Advent. To say the liturgical New Year is not the same as Regular New Years is an

understatement. While January first marks the start of trying harder, achieving goals, setting expectations, committing to programs or plans, the first season of the Church year is about doing nothing. **Nothing but waiting, in hope, for someone else to arrive.**<sup>1</sup>

Now, I resonate with much of what she says here. I share her suspicion of New Year's resolutions (I've failed one too many of those over the years).

I don't think the Christian life is about just endlessly trying harder for Jesus. Indeed, I think this is a recipe for burnout, failure, and disillusionment. I agree that the church's New Year is of a radically different kind than the secular version.

But is our task literally do *nothing* but wait in hope for someone else to arrive?

The second quote comes from Richard Beck, a psychology professor from Abilene Christian University in Texas. It's actually a poem called "Exile":

Waiting cracks  
the glass,  
spiderweb fractures,  
spreading branches  
of inevitable, prospective failure,  
weakening promises  
no longer able to carry  
the heaviness of hope  
and the impatience of generations.

Trust is a fragile thing,  
hard to hold together  
with stories aging into legend.

Too much time has passed.<sup>2</sup>

This quote has a bit more pain attached to it, doesn't it? Waiting seems less hopeful, more strained and stretched. Here, the waiting seems heavy, even despairing.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://mbird.com/holidays/advent/a-different-kind-of-new-years/?utm\\_source=rss&utm\\_medium=rss&utm\\_campaign=a-different-kind-of-new-years](https://mbird.com/holidays/advent/a-different-kind-of-new-years/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=a-different-kind-of-new-years)

<sup>2</sup> <https://richardbeck.substack.com/p/first-sunday-of-advent-b04>

*Too much time has passed.* Will God ever come? Will the promises ever be fulfilled?

I sat with both passages this week as I was thinking about my sermon, about the season of Advent, and about the experience of “waiting.”

They both spoke to me of either the passivity or the resignation that can set in as we wait (during Advent or any other time of the year).

They both sat somewhat uneasily, even if I resonated with both in various ways. They both felt lacking, less hopeful, than Christian waiting should be.

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Our passage this week gives us a theology of waiting. It is also one that many would prefer to avoid.

There is fiery apocalyptic language about the elements being dissolved in fire, about the day of the Lord coming like a thief, and everything that has ever been done being laid bare!

It also includes a whole section about holiness, which for some people is perhaps an even more unpleasant topic than the end of the world!

It is a passage that comes across as bracing, confrontational, and not easy to swallow.

*The world is going to roast in flames and so you’d better make sure you’re behaving yourself when Jesus comes!* This is how some preachers have approached this passage, with what at times seems almost like zealous glee.

Yet I think that when properly understood, this passage drills down on the crucial Advent question of *how* we should wait.

I think there are three things that we ought to take away from this passage to aid us in our waiting.

## **1. GOD IS PATIENT**

2 Peter 3:8-9:

With the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.

If we back up a few verses, we see that these words are a response to scoffers asking, “So where is this Jesus whose coming you are so convinced about?”

The early church without question expected Jesus to return early, within their lifetime. The longer his coming was delayed, the more they had to wrestle with this theologically.

Peter anchors the delay in God’s patience and God’s goodness.

We human beings think of time in terms that are conditioned by our experience, which is profoundly limited. We grow impatient easily because we know *our* time is relatively short. We imagine that God doesn’t exist because he doesn’t conform to our expectations and demands.

But a lifetime for us is but a blip in cosmic time. God has all the time in the world. Literally.

And he waits because he wants all people to turn to him. He waits because he loves his people and does not want any to perish.

Contrary to those who imagine that God selects only a few special people to pluck out for salvation, this passage shows us that God’s deep desire is that all might be saved.

*Regard the patience of our Lord as salvation* (2 Pet. 3:15).

God’s patience is mercy, an expression of his devotion to all who bear his image.

## **2. WE ARE ACCOUNTABLE**

2 Peter 3:14-15:

Therefore, beloved, *while you are waiting for these things*, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.

For some at the time, the delay of Christ’s coming was an excuse for indulgence. Earlier in chapter 3, Peter says that those who scoff at those who claim that Christ will return use this as

an excuse to indulge their evil desires. Kind of like if the parents are away for the weekend, and the kids decide to party.

The response is understandable, on one level. If you think Christ's coming is imminent and it turns out not to be so, it's easy to think, "Well, he doesn't seem to be coming so who really cares what we do?"

Peter says the opposite. He reminds them that their behaviour in the present ought to reflect the future they are waiting for.

If you believe the new heaven and earth that is promised exist *because* of Christ and *for* Christ and will be patterned after the *life and example* of Christ...

Then *live* that way as you wait for its coming. Strive to become the sorts of people who are at peace with God, others, and creation.

If you are convinced that the coming kingdom will be a place where "righteousness is at home" (v. 13), then strive to be righteous and holy people now, as you wait.

Be a "colony of heaven in the country of death," as Eugene Peterson puts it.

Live anticipatory lives—lives that point like a road sign to the final destination.

### **3. CHRIST WILL COME AGAIN**

We don't know when, obviously. But Jesus told us that we wouldn't.

We don't even know how. This passage paints a fairly vivid picture of things, but we should probably be cautious in reading these descriptions in overly literal ways.

Whenever the NT talks about eschatology, it does so in highly symbolic and poetic language.

The NT writers were in general much more comfortable with speaking allegorically and metaphorically than we are.

So, when we hear about the elements being dissolved in fire and the heavens being set ablaze, we probably shouldn't be trying to envision literal scenes of meteorological and geological fireworks.

It seems likely that this was simply their way of saying that when Christ comes again, it will have cosmic consequences. **There is nothing that will remain unaffected.**

We don't know what the precise connection will be between the present configuration of things and what will be. And we would be foolish to speculate.

We would be even more foolish to imagine that because of a few poetic and symbolic passages in the Bible, we have license to disregard God's creation (as some use passages like this to justify)—particularly in light of other passages which exhort us to embrace our role as stewards of God's Garden.

What we *should* take from this passage is that when Christ comes, justice and righteousness will finally be a permanent reality.

It's hard for us to imagine this though, isn't it? Even if we don't over-literalize this passage, we have a hard time imagining something so foreign to our experience.

Yet it is a duty of faith for us to keep our minds open to being surprised by God.

It's so easy and natural to think that the way things are is the way things will always be.

The rich and the powerful get their way, while the poor suffer. Wars rage on.

Righteousness is not always rewarded. Injustice seems to flourish. Death lays waste to our ambitions.

We struggle along with our bad habits and our struggles and our doubts and our fears.

Ho hum. Business as usual. Nothing new under the sun.

The season of Advent, and passages like 2 Peter 3 call us to a bigger imagination — a theological imagination. An imagination that's not governed and limited by the world of our experience and observation but by the vision of God.

And it's not as though we just make all this up — as if we're saying, well the way things are isn't super great, so we'll just imagine a better world and console ourselves with that.

Our imagination as Christians and our hope for the future is *profoundly* rooted in memory, in the tradition and stories handed down to us from Jesus and the early church, where we see that God decisively did something new — something utterly unlike “business as usual.”

Christ’s first coming was an interjection of newness into centuries, millennia of oldness.

This is the seedbed of our hope. God has done it before. God did it decisively in Jesus. And God will do it again.

So, this is the theology of waiting that we are offered here, midway through Advent.

**God is patient.**

Regard the patience of the Lord as salvation, an expression of God’s mercy, his desire that all might turn to him.

**We are accountable.**

Our waiting is to be of a certain kind. Expectant. Active. Determined. Resilient.

We are to be pursuers of holiness and purity in a culture that so often rewards the crude, the ugly, the divisive, the inhuman.

**Christ will come again.**

We anticipate a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

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I realize that the language of holiness and purity can easily seem abstract and nonspecific.

So, I want to close by focusing on one area where I think that Christians are urgently called to represent Christ faithfully in our time and place, one way that we must “wait well.”

I feel like I say this in some form nearly every Sunday, but one of the main ways we wait well as Christians is by living lives of forgiveness and mercy.

(What's the saying? Most preachers only have one sermon, they just say it in a bunch of different ways. 😊)

On Thursday mornings, I sometimes attend a communion service at St. Augustine's Anglican church with a friend. It's a very traditional service using old language and liturgy from the Book of Common Prayer.

One of the prayers we say is called "The Prayer of Humble Access" which contains the following line:

but thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy.

*Whose property is always to have mercy.* This is our God. And so, this should be us as well.

Well, from the Book of Common Prayer to Nick Cave 😊.

I've referred to the Australian musician before, both his book (*Faith, Hope, and Carnage*) and his website (The Red Hand Files) where he answers questions from fans about life and faith and music and all kinds of other things, often with remarkable wisdom and spiritual insight.

This week, a fan wrote in to ask him how to deal with conflicts and differing views about Israel and Palestine that are tearing apart so many relationships these days:

Cave's response, in part:

[T]he fortifying agent in any relationship is forgiveness – the ability to expand one's heart in order to accommodate the infractions, perceived or otherwise, of the other. If you can do that in good faith... and listen to what your friend has to say, it may inspire them to do the same and your relationship will be all the better for it... so don't be afraid to disagree, but be ready to forgive and be forgiven, and let love and understanding reach audaciously across the divide.<sup>3</sup>

*Let love reach audaciously across the divide.* How desperately our world needs more people willing to do this. How desperately our *church* needs more people willing to do this.

This is how we wait for Jesus.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theredhandfiles.com/do-you-ever-argue-with-friends/>



A final quote. This is from an Anglican priest named Sean Davidson in Sudbury, ON (quoted by my friend and colleague in his homily during Thursday morning communion).

He, too, was responding to the divisions between people of faith that are hardening around questions of what it means to pursue justice around the issue of Israel and Palestine. But these words could be applied to any issue around which Christians differ:

The Christian stands up for truth and justice as one who's been swallowed up in mercy and kindness.

We pursue justice and peace not with bitterness and resentment and anger toward those who think differently than us, but as those who've been swallowed up in mercy and kindness.

This is how we wait for Jesus.

We do not wait passively, saying, "Well, nothing much to do until God comes back..." Nor do we wait despairingly, saying "It's been so long, who can even believe this anymore?"

We wait pursuing the priorities and examples and the very character of the God whose coming we anticipate.

May God help us in our waiting. May God meet us, inspire us, judge us, forgive us, liberate and heal us in our waiting.

Amen.

