

Sermon – Matthew 11:2-11; James 5:7-10
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Grace Lutheran Church
3 Advent – Year A
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“Are We to Wait?”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Time moves strangely during Advent. For some, the hands on the clock slow to a snail's pace. The presents begin to appear under the tree, but Christmas morning remains forever away. Will it ever get here? For children especially, perhaps, the days of Advent pass *soooooo* slowly. For others, time passes with surprising swiftness. Where will the time be found to shop for all those presents, never mind all the baking, cooking, and cleaning that needs to happen between now and Christmas morning? The season becomes a whirlwind of events and obligations, so many of them joyful but still, so many. How will we get it all done? Everything will come together in the end, or maybe it won't. Either way, Christmas will come when it comes, regardless of how we feel about. Fast or slow, there's fourteen days to go.
2. Jumping ahead in the story from last Sunday, time seems to have played its tricks on John the Baptist. In the Judean wilderness, John spoke with apocalyptic urgency and fiery fervor. He prepares the way for the One who will come after him, and it certainly seems that John thinks this other One is coming, you know, soon. Eight chapters later, time has slowed to a standstill. Not only has the Kingdom *not* arrived in the way John expects, but now he finds himself whiling away hour after slow hour in a prison cell, his brutal death just around the corner. If anything, things seem to have gotten worse since his heyday at the Jordan. The oppressive Roman regime is far from

being toppled, and Herod, that childish tyrant, is having his way with the people. Maybe, John thinks, he was mistaken. Not about his mission to prepare the way for Messiah, but about Jesus. Perhaps his cousin wasn't the One after all. He sends his disciples to Jesus, who ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Just when things seemed to be speeding up, everything has slowed to a standstill. Will we have to wait any longer?

3. Who among us does not know the challenge of waiting? Our self-imposed busyness, our hustling and bustling, may mask the struggle at times, but still we wait. Sometimes, the waiting is anticipatory. We wait for a phone call from a friend, our child to return home from college, the curtain to go up on a show we've longed to see. Other times, the hours are filled with anxiety. Will the phone ever ring? Will we get the promotion, or a good diagnosis, or have our love requited? Will our physical health continue to deteriorate? Our mental health ever improve? All these little waitings occur in the larger world in which we find ourselves, a world in which things are not as they should be. In which missiles fall from the sky, refugees wander in search of safety and dignity, and economies prop up the wealthy while those with little are left with less. We wait for the world to become what it should be, a place of justice and peace. How long must we wait, imprisoned in our own little cells of sin and suffering? Is there hope in our waiting? The preacher Mark Yurs poses the question: "Is Jesus the real thing? Is there anything to our religion? Has the church really gotten hold of something that matters, or is this business of Christmas and its Christ only a fanciful tale, charming, but ultimately worthless and powerless against forces that dampen hopes and deaden dreams?" Is Jesus the One, or are we to wait for another?
4. Jesus, as he so often does, answers this question obliquely. Instead of saying yes or no, he asks John's disciples to simply report on what they can see and hear with their own eyes and ears. Yes, the desert of sin and suffering

stretches out as far as the eye can see, but new shoots of life are bursting through the arid ground. The blind see and the deaf hear; the lame walk and the lepers are cleansed; even the dead are being brought back to life. In fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecies, Jesus is bringing forth the Kingdom of God, here and now. Not yet in eclipse of this world, but in the midst of it. Yes, John suffers. The world suffers. *We* suffer. But new life is blooming, even while we wait. Do you see it? The waters run through dry sand, and life and hope bloom by God's grace. In North Lawndale, where many of you partner with the people of Harmony, not only is food given freely to the hungry, but community is created as hope puts down its roots. On Chicago's West Side, the Leaders Network's dream of a community credit union, to which Grace has committed benevolence funds, is sending forth shoots of new growth that will break cycles of poverty and advance the cause of equity. Our refugee ministry continues to bear witness to God's promise of life, with a third family, from Rwanda, transplanted now to new soil in Chicago. And later today, songs of hope will fill this space as the musicians of Grace put on not simply a concert; they will sing Mary's song, pointing to the day when God will overturn this world's order and replace it with God's reign of love. We are not to that new world yet. We still wait. But the songs of that world echo into our own, amplified by our singing and by our serving.

5. With John, we wait, knowing this world is not yet as it should be. But we need not wonder, not about this Jesus. Look around; listen! The One who was born, the One who will return in glory, is also the One who is here today, giving himself to us in bread and wine, strengthening us for our journey along the Holy Way. God will not tarry in coming to us, nor will God let us get lost along the way. Even in our foolishness, the prophet proclaims, we will not fall out or get left behind. In that promise, we can take to heart the words of James: "Be patient." Like farmers waiting for the crop, we cannot rush things. But neither do we do nothing. While we wait for God to work, we do God's work. We show up on our Lord's behalf, bearing Christ anew into this world as God

prepares us for Christ's return. As Matt Skinner of Luther Seminary writes, "Christianity is, at root, an Advent religion. That is, our theology situates us in a cleft where promise and fulfillment don't quite meet." "And yet," he continues, "we stick to a different narrative, a hopeful narrative. We don't believe God leaves the world to its own pernicious and violent devices. We never stop expecting new life to break onto the scene. We have work to do, but we simultaneously recognize it as God's work done on God's terms. We try to live in a peculiar combination of patience and urgency."

6. So, dear people of God, be patient. Jesus is the One for whom we have waited. He will come when he comes. And, dear people of God, get busy. New life is blooming in the desert. New life is blooming in *you*. Christ will strengthen your weak hands and steady your feeble knees. As Jesus comes to you again this day, go and prepare his way into the wider world, that all would come to know the hope we share. Time moves strangely this time of year, but then again so does Jesus. How strange and mysterious that he would come as helpless child; how strange and wonderful that he will come as the king of glory; how strange and hopeful that he waits within us and works through us even now. Come, Lord Jesus. Go, prepare his way. What are you waiting for? Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.