

# Waiting To Be Surprised

Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13: 24-37

## First Sunday in Advent

27 November 2011

Do you remember last Sunday, at the end of the service, when there was a long silence? I thought we were finished and that I had done all I had to do. So I was waiting for Bruce to pipe up or Douglas to chime in. Meanwhile you knew that I had not pronounced the Benediction and were waiting for that to happen. Wasn't that an uncomfortable moment when you thought Rev. Turner had gone to sleep or had a "retrieval failure" or maybe, some were thinking, he's actually watching a soccer game on that iPad of his?

Don't you hate an awkward pause like that? When you don't know what's happening or what's going to happen? Maybe it's when someone's giving a speech and they seem to have forgotten what they are going to say? Or, a child stumbles over his lines in the nativity play and has a look of panic on his face? Or, when your doctor is reviewing your test results with you and, suddenly, she stops and says, "Oh, no!" and starts leafing through a medical reference book? Or, when you are on the phone to someone and they suddenly stop talking and your mind is a million miles away. And you can't think what to say?

Do you remember these awkward pauses on your first date? These long periods of painful silence when you were going somewhere together in the car? Or, when you were sitting looking at each other across the table in the restaurant and couldn't think of anything to say? Or, that time when you inadvertently mentioned a former boyfriend or girl-friend and a certain coolness descended over proceedings? Or, you made a joke about something you thought was funny and it was met with a stony silence? Yes, we all hate awkward pauses in times such as these or whenever they happen.

The great pianist Rachmaninoff once told of performing in a small recital hall when he was quite young. He began with a Beethoven sonata that had several long rests in it. During one of these, a motherly lady leaned forward from the front seats, patted him on the shoulder, and said kindly: "My dear, why don't you play us something you know."<sup>1</sup>

We hate awkward pauses because they are confusing and embarrassing and upsetting. But we hate them also because awkward pauses are about waiting and we hate to have to wait. Whether in awkward situations or in any other situations, we humans just don't do waiting well.

A man was in a restaurant one day. A waiter was passing by. "Excuse me, how long have you been working here?" asked the man "Oh, about a year," replied the waiter. "Ah," said the man wearily, "in that case it couldn't have been you that took my order. You haven't worked here long enough."<sup>2</sup>

Waiting is hard to do and this is especially so in today's instant society where our expectations has been raised to such a level that if things don't happen lickety-split and in double-time then we get most upset. We hate being kept standing in line when the store has only one checkout open and the customer in front needs a price check ... or, waiting for the electrician who promised faithfully to come in the morning but who never does show ... or, waiting for these interminable traffic lights to change at the corner of Weller and the new hospital access road, or at the corner of McDonnel and Monaghan, or at other intersections in the city where the traffic engineers have evidently got the balance wrong. Yes, waiting is so hard to do.

I read recently about a man who just couldn't handle society's contemporary culture of urgency. He so hated having to wait for anything that he called his therapist and asked if he could recommend any lessons he could take. "Do you know anywhere," he asked, "that offers a course in patience? And, no don't tell me about a course that begins tomorrow or next week. I need it now. Today or even yesterday!"

Waiting is a pain. And not just in our western society either. I kept wondering over the last few days as I heard or watched the news from Tahrir Square in Cairo. Why are Egyptians rising up in protest again after their successful Arab Spring that got rid of Mubarak and when they are only days away from an election? Then I heard a young woman being interviewed and being asked something of the same question. "But," she said, "the oppression and the violence, and the torture has been so bad, we have to get rid of military rule immediately. We just can't wait."

Waiting is a pain. Whether it's in the western world or in Arab societies. But it's far from being a new pain. It's a pain that has been shared by all generations from time immemorial. Just consider the waiting the Israelites had to endure throughout the long years of exile in Babylon in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. "Why don't you tear the sky open and come down?" pleaded the prophet during this time, "Come and reveal your power to your enemies, and make the nations tremble at your presence!"<sup>3</sup> "Don't just sit there in your heavens, God," he seemed to be saying, "Come down here and do something! We're so tired of waiting!"

Can't we all today relate to these words as we cry out to Jesus? "Lord, why don't you come again? At this Advent time, we celebrate your first coming into the world. We marvel at how you came as a little child, treasured by Mary and Joseph. We wonder at your

appearance to Shepherds and Wise Men. We marvel at the profound impact your birth has had upon this world in so many ways. But, Jesus, why don't you come again? Why don't you tear the sky open and come to stop all this violence in the world ... and put an end to all these natural disasters ... and heal this cancer in my body ... and save my mother from the ravages of Alzheimer's? Why don't you come and put everything right? Come on, Lord, we're so tired of waiting for you to return!"

But we have to keep on waiting, says Jesus, because the end is not yet. The time has not yet arrived. "No-one knows when the day or the hour will come ... it might be in the evening or at midnight or before dawn or at sunrise."<sup>4</sup> So he urges us to wait just a little longer.

Of course, the waiting to which Jesus calls us is not passive waiting where we just sit with our feet up on the coffee table and shoot the breeze, pondering the theological intricacies of the Doctrine of the End Times. Far from it! We are called to an active and expectant waiting, ready to jump into action at a moment's notice. "Be on watch, be on alert," says Jesus, "for you do not know when the time will come."<sup>5</sup>

And the best way to wait for Jesus is by living and working faithfully as Christians. Being kind and patient, tolerant and forgiving. Going the second mile. Refusing to pay back evil for evil. Living sacrificially. Working to bring in God's kingdom by stretching out our hands to those in need. In our own community and around the world. Doing all these kinds of things are our ways of waiting. Our ways of watching. Our ways of being alert. The very things we would want Jesus to find us doing if he came back right now.

The ancient city of Pompeii in Italy was completely buried when Mount Vesuvius erupted in 79 AD. For 1700 years, Pompeii lay beneath tons of cinders and ashes until archaeologists began to uncover its many buildings and artefacts. When Evelyn and I were there a couple of years back, we were amazed to find that there is, in one corner of this vast historic site, a collection of bodies encased by the volcanic material, frozen in time in sad and pathetic positions as they cowered in the buildings and on the streets, trying to escape the volcano's wrath. A mother lying on top of her little boy, trying to protect him. An old man with his arm around his wife. A young woman covering her head with her arms. Perhaps the most poignant is the guard who was discovered at the gate of the city with his weapon firmly in his hands. He had probably been told by his captain to stay at his post until he came back to give further orders. And this he did right to the end.<sup>6</sup>

And this is exactly what we 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians are called to do. To be at our posts. Ready and waiting, faithfully, for our Master's return.

Of course, we don't want to have to wait for Jesus, just like we don't want to wait for so many other things in this life. Of course, we don't want to wait for our Lord

because it's just as frustrating and as wearying as the waiting we do in so many other areas of our existence. Of course, we don't like waiting for divine action. Of course, we wish God would just tear the sky open, as Isaiah says, and come down to establish his kingdom and put this world right once and for all. Like everything else, we want action and we want it now. But the time is not yet. So, like the guard at the city gates, we have to keep waiting and watching just as we have been commanded to do.

Of course, when we say that time of Christ's return is not yet, we also have to remember that maybe that time has already come, that Christ's Second Coming has already taken place. Maybe those who believe in Realised Eschatology are right.<sup>7</sup> That Christ has already returned, albeit disguised and not immediately recognisable. Maybe he's there in front of us. In the form of someone we meet in our everyday lives, at our work, in our social circles. Or maybe he's there in the person of that homeless woman or that panhandler we pass every day on George Street. Maybe he's there in the form of that Occupy protester in downtown Toronto. Maybe, as we encounter the most unlikely people in life, we are actually entertaining Christ unawares.

Of course, if the first coming of Christ at Bethlehem is anything to go by, whether he is already here or whether he is yet to come again, we can be sure of one thing: that when our Lord comes – or when we become aware of his coming – he will make himself known in the most unexpected manner. He will astonish us in ways that will leave us filled with awe and wonder.

So come Lord Jesus! We are at the ready. We are on the alert. We are watching. And we are just waiting to be surprised. Yes, come, Lord Jesus!

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<sup>1</sup> King Duncan, "In The Waiting Room", *Dynamic Preaching*, Sermons Fourth Quarter 2009, ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 64:1-2

<sup>4</sup> Mark 13:32

<sup>5</sup> Mark 13:37

<sup>6</sup> Also, King Duncan, "Keeping Alert For Christmas", *Collected Sermons*, 2005

<sup>7</sup> "Realised eschatology is a Christian eschatological theory popularized by C. H. Dodd (1884–1973) that holds that the eschatological passages in the New Testament do not refer to the future, but instead refer to the ministry of Jesus and his lasting legacy. Eschatology is therefore, not the end of the world but its rebirth instituted by Jesus and continued by his disciples, a historical (rather than transhistorical) phenomenon. Those holding this view generally dismiss 'end times' theories, believing them to be irrelevant. They hold that what Jesus said and did, and told his disciples to do likewise, are of greater significance than any messianic expectations." (Source: Wikipedia)