**Finding Joy in the Waiting**

This is my 40th year to experience the Christian Advent season and I have to be honest and tell you that it’s the first year that I’ve ever stopped to consider what Advent really means. When I was younger it was all about getting to Christmas and the presents. As I got older this time was always overshadowed by holiday stress and the rush to finish up work projects before taking vacation. So for most of my life I’ve viewed this time as a precursor to the main event rather than an event all its own. And that is how I have often perceived waiting for something to happen or for someone to arrive: as this thing to get through or to deal with before I can get to the party.

But can waiting also be a time of peace and happiness and joy?

When we are living in the difference between what currently is and what will be, can we find appreciation and celebration for this experience?

I distinctly recall three waiting periods in my life.

The first occurred around junior year of high school. From an early age I was bent on exploring the world and once freedom and adulthood was in sight, I couldn’t WAIT to graduate so I could move away and “start my life.” While I enjoyed high school and had friends and was involve in activities, I remember often feeling impatient and dissatisfied and disinterested in the present moment. I was bored. Of course I was in the throes of teenage angst and apathy but still. My mind was miles ahead on my imagined future, often it seemed like I was simply passing the time until I could get there. My first dream college was the American University in Paris if for no other reason that it was far, far away from southern Missouri and it sounded fancy and exotic. In actuality I settled on going to Mizzou, about a 3-hour drive from my hometown and just far enough to feel like the world away I was craving. The advent of my life then was Independence.

Around this time was the start of another long wait, waiting for the great love of my life. I am a diehard romantic, and I spent most of my dating years wondering when I would meet the guy of my dreams. Like high school, dating was fun and all and I enjoyed the few short relationships I had, but I was always looking ahead. Always looking for more. As I witnessed friend after friend after friend find their partners and settle down, I alternated between despair about ever finding the right guy and celebrating the independence of my singledom which I very much relished. Then one day I met Brian and well, let’s just say I was glad that the wait had been so long. That advent of my life was Companionship.

The third waiting period began about 5 years ago when Brian and I set out on our adoption journey. I didn’t know it then but it was to become the biggest, longest, hardest wait of my life. In fact, most adoptive families refer to the time between being matched to your child or children, and finally bringing them home as THE BIG WAIT. And ours was bigger than most. It took us nearly 3 years.

A lot of the time it sucked. I was prepared for some period of waiting because logistically getting all the paperwork organized between two governments just takes time. But as family after family at our agency and the adoption circles we were part of brought their children home and while friends and family members got pregnant and had babies while we remained childless, I often felt sad and resentful. There were many tears. There was so much anger about how messed up the adoption system is and the problems we had with our agency. So much fear about what we would end up with at the end of this BIG WAIT. What would life be like? How would we manage? Etc. So many expectations…

But like it was with high school and with dating, there were also moments of real fun and excitement. Brian and I took full advantage of our remaining child-free days and we went on all kinds of trips, had many mountain biking and snowboarding and skiing adventures. We lived it up. Now I look back on that time and cherish it for how precious it was. And of course once we had Kylan and Lotti, I knew I would have waited eons longer if it meant being a mother to these two children. The advent of my life at that moment was Parenthood.

That’s the thing about waiting. It is hard, and it’s scary, but it’s also exciting. It’s ugly, and it’s beautiful. Sometimes it’s full of sorrow and stress and other times it’s full of the wonder of possibilities. How often do we say “I can’t wait!” to express our eagerness for something to happen?

This Advent season seems particularly dark and frightening. I really struggle with anger and horror and fear about the state of our world. I know every generation fears for the kind of world they are raising their children in but truthfully, between how the human race is tearing itself asunder and destroying our natural world, it seems like a particularly violent and brutal time. I don’t know that I believe in a second coming of Christ, and Judgement Day and all that. But I kind of want to. I want to think that someone will come rescue the world from its annihilation.

I often catch myself holding my breath, waiting for this moment to come that will wake people up, knowing with great sadness that it’s going to take a catastrophe of epic proportions to do it. It will have to be something dramatic and explosive like an earthquake along the Cascadia Subduction Zone or World War III. So what do we do right now while we wait for the human race to get its act together and for the world to move into a time of peace and prosperity? For a get-er-done person, this kind of waiting can feel interminable, frustrating and soul-numbing.

But I look back now on those long waiting periods in my life to figure out what can I do during this one? What can I do to prepare for what is to come? But more importantly, how can I find joy during this time?

And there are a few things that come to mind…

**1. Be present in the moment.**
Ah, such a simple statement. Seems like it should be so easy. Well, I can say without a doubt, that for me this is the HARDEST thing to do. Being present in the moment is really difficult normally but especially when you’re anticipating something to happen or someone to arrive. But one of the graces of bearing witness to the death and destruction all around us is to recognize and honor how precious life is. All we have is this moment. I find taking deep breaths, being in nature and petting my dog are easy ways to bring myself back to the present. Same with being with my children. So that’s a second way to find joy in the waiting:

**2. Act like a child.**
Kids are awesome at being present in the moment and noticing details. Okay, yes the irony is that they are often terrible at waiting patiently for things. But man, they are there in the moment, especially little kids. Even if you don’t have kids of your own or in your home, most all of us have kids somewhere in our lives or can pretty readily find ways to be around them. Observe how they notice the little details, how excited they get over chocolate milk or a balloon. They delight in the seemingly insignificant and mundane. Their innocence and honesty is so utterly refreshing when everyone else around you seems jaded and cynical. Children give us perspective. And they say the funniest things! Kids are hilarious! And that’s my third way to find joy in the waiting:

**3. Laugh.**
When everything seems bleak and terrifying and grave, it’s probably most when we need a bit of humor. It seems like it should be shameful or disrespectful to laugh when there is sorrow and pain all around us, when things are far from where we want them to be. But as we know laughter helps form bonds and it’s physically good for us. Waiting is often quite stressful and laughter can be a perfect medicine. It improves our circulation and our immune system, relaxes our muscles and helps us sleep. And it’s free. Watch comedy. Get a joke book. Look up videos on Funny or Die. Hang around kids.

**4. Bless the preparation.**
The last way I’d like to share for finding joy in the waiting is to bless the preparation. Let me explain. I am part of a very close group of girlfriends that is awesome about holding each other up when one of us is feeling sad or going through a rough time. When I was in a particularly dark period during the Big Wait for my kids, my girlfriends sent me a big glass jar that they had filled full of little rolled up slips of paper on which they’d written all kinds of things like inspirational quotes, funny lines from movies, snippets from poems, and prayers. I was told to each day take out one roll of paper, read it and those would be my words of encouragement for the day. Let me tell you, this was incredibly powerful. We are not always going to feel like being optimistic and cheerful and joyful during our waiting. And we don’t have to be. **Others can be that for us.**

We are a church and when one of us is feeling like falling into a pit of despair, the rest of us can bring them back up. We don’t do this alone. We’re never alone in our waiting. Others can help us with the preparation. And though sometimes it seems that God is too ethereal, intangible and unknowable, really God is right here working through us. So it’s important that we be the encouragement and blessing for others when they cannot find that for themselves.

What I want us to do is to put this into action. Everyone has slips of paper they got when they came in this morning and there are more at the ends of the pews. What I’d for you to do is write on this slip of paper. Imagine what you would say to a friend or a family member who is having a hard time with their waiting and write whatever inspires you: words of encouragement, a joke, a quote. You can even draw something. If you have multiple things, great. Use as many slips of paper as you like. When you’re done, roll up your slip of paper. Then during the offertory, I’d like you to come to the front and put your paper in this jar. I call this the Jar of Joy. We’ll have this jar here throughout the rest of Advent. As you come to the next services, add to the jar. Or you can take from the jar as you need to. It’s here for everyone. Ok. Got it? Good.

Despite having experienced several major waiting periods in my life, I’ve not acquired a great deal of patience. I am not what you would consider a patient person. I still get frustrated and angry and cynical. But I am more aware now of how I can not only tolerate the waiting but experience moments of true pleasure and peace within it. And I know I am strongest when I stand with others in it. Finding joy in the waiting is not about bearing a torch of eternal hope despite everything around us. It’s about embracing the moment we are in. It’s about honoring the power of innocence and laughter and togetherness to transform the waiting into a blessing.