

“Waiting for *Kairos*”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
I Advent – 30 November & 1 December
Romans 13:8-14

Nobody likes to wait. Whether it’s a long line at a store, congested traffic on the highway, or sitting in a doctor’s office, waiting can drive us crazy. So we do whatever we can to avoid it or reduce the amount of waiting, or at least find distractions to make the time seem to pass faster, an area where the much-maligned cell phone helps a lot. But no matter what we do, some waiting is inevitable, part of the human condition, necessary.

A pregnancy, for instance, takes about nine months to mature. Then when the baby’s born, it takes many more years to grow up, demanding constant vigilance and patience from parents. Wisdom takes even longer to form, a lifetime of experience and patient, careful reflection. There are things, often the most important things in life, which just take time. And though we don’t like how it feels, waiting’s not inherently bad, nor does it mean that we can do nothing while we wait.

A good wait can slow down our fast lives and help us notice something or savor a moment that might otherwise have been lost. And while we wait, we can get ready for what’s about to happen. Pregnant parents can prepare a nursery, choose names, schedule a baptism. Waiting also offers the chance to anticipate, and imagine how dreadful life would be without anticipation. Where would hope fit in, and what is joy if not hope fulfilled? So we wait and anticipate. We practice vigilant patience.

Since ancient times, people seeking the Holy, those abiding in covenant with God, have waited and anticipated the arrival of a chosen one, an anointed one, a Messiah, promised by God

through the prophets. And now as we the Church begin a new year in the season of Advent, we anticipate both the birth of Jesus and Christ's glorious return.

However, since we observe Advent every year, it can be difficult to muster much excitement or sense of anticipation. We already know how the story ends on Christmas Day, so Advent can feel like waiting for the punch line to a joke you've already heard a hundred times. You try to chuckle, but you're not really feeling it.

Same thing with the second coming. We've been waiting for almost 2,000 years, and based on what we have in the Bible, nobody expected it to take this long. Paul and the other New Testament authors thought Jesus would be back pretty soon, probably before the last original disciple died. But here we still are, no end in sight, despite all the predictions of self-proclaimed prophets, who say they see the signs and know the time, until the set moment passes, and nothing happens and suddenly an error's uncovered in their complex calculations, and a new end time is announced.

It's hard to wait, to be vigilant, when there's no clue how long it might be. Planning life a few years ahead is plenty tough, but this lifetime-and-possibly-beyond horizon of Jesus' return; that's like trying to climb a mountain when you can't see the peak. And living in a culture of immediate gratification, magnified by technology that nearly makes us slaves to speed, it's much harder to be patient. And patience has to be practiced. It's a cultivated habit, but despite me knowing that, when I get home, I'm going to take off my collar, pick up my iPad, and check the football scores to see how Notre Dame did last night and how the Packers are doing today. And if those scores take more than a few seconds to appear on my screen, my sense of unjust deprivation will start to soar.

But impatience is most unbecoming of a faithful person, and it's harmful, because impatience indicates a dangerous desire to be God, to dwell in God's eternity, unfettered by time, a realm where there is no waiting. There's a kind of ugly insolence in impatience, a dissatisfaction with who we are and how God made us that just stinks of ingratitude. It's like saying, "Thanks, God, for bringing me into existence. I really appreciate that, but I'm afraid to say that you've made a big mess of it, what with this intolerable waiting." So from time to time, we need to intentionally pause and allow our perspective to shift, so we can relearn the value of anticipation and waiting, and that is what Advent is for.

Advent involves regaining a sense of suspense, of eagerness, for what is to come. But to enter that reality, we need to recalibrate our sense of time, because that's the context of our waiting – time. When we think of time as something scarce, when we think of time as something that's "ours," we get too antsy and Scrooge-like to embrace the promise of Advent.

Paul once encouraged the Romans, "You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near." When Paul wrote of time, he had two primary Greek nouns at his disposal: *chronos* and *Kairos*.

We recognize the first one as the root of our modern English word "chronological," a time that consists of a linear sequence of divisible increments, like seconds, minutes, hours, days, months, years. We describe those various increments in relation to celestial events. A year is about one revolution of the Earth around the sun. Or to get really precise, we use atomic clocks that mark time based on the decay of a radioactive element. Chronological time is always relative to something else. But in this little piece from Romans, Paul didn't use the word *chronos*.

No, when Paul wrote, “You know what time it is,” he used the Greek *Kairos* instead, and that word has a much different meaning. *Kairos* is God’s time. It signifies a chosen time, the right time, and it is not measured relative to anything else. *Kairos* is akin to Sabbath in that *Kairos* introduces into historical time – our day to day time – a shred of God’s eternity. Not the suspension of earthly time, but the transformation of it.

Sometimes, we experience *Kairos* as a moment that seems to last forever, in a good sort of way. Think of a time when you lost track of time, so captured by a moment that when you snapped out of it, you couldn’t believe how much time had gone by. That “missing” time is usually a pretty good sign that God’s brought the blessing of *Kairos* into your life.

It might arrive as a mystical moment of ecstasy, or an especially lucid period of peace, or *Kairos* might reveal itself through a powerful experience of healing – physical, emotional, or spiritual – or in the act of simple ministry. Whatever the case, *Kairos* introduces us to a radically different type of time, God’s time, an endless and inexhaustible presence of being that never feels rushed or urgent or scarce, but always abundant and full of anticipation and calm, collected purpose.

Sometimes, we remember every detail of those precious moments. Occasionally, we’re even consciously aware of them as they happen. But *Kairos* usually surprises us, and while there are things we can do, spiritual practices, that might make those moments more likely, they are a pure gift, not something we can manufacture.

What we seek in Advent is *Kairos* coming into our *chronos*, and we will be found by *Kairos*, but only if we wait. And so we come full circle, back to waiting again, but with faith we know that *Kairos* may arrive soon, and it can return again and again and again, providing a kind of vehicle through which we are transported to God’s Kingdom and through which Christ comes

to us, perhaps not with the finality we hope for, but with enough of what we need to keep us awake and vigilant and hopeful. Amen.