

"Patience and the Blue Screen in the Back of the Mini-van"

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The United Church of Gainesville

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SCRIPTURE – Isaiah 2:4; 40:28-31 – *"Those who wait upon the Lord, shall renew their strength"*

One of the sights I love to see while driving at night is the blue screen in the mini-van, the screen of a DVD playing a video for the children in the back of the van. Sometimes I can actually tell what movie is playing, but my better nature reminds me that trying to figure this out is way too distracting while driving. I say I love these blue screens to let you know that this sermon is not going to be a Christmas slam at technology. That's way too easy.

Both of our sons Matt and Chris have DVD players in their mini-vans. It is a great way to take children on trips. Our older grandchildren know how to operate the DVD player should we happen to be driving their parents' car. Our biggest challenge comes when we're babysitting our youngest, Carissa, who just turned three. As soon as we get in the car she wants "Dora the Explorer" and Sandy and I push buttons frantically until we find it and manage to get it on the screen with sound.

The second biggest challenge is the age range in her family between her and her brothers who are six and ten, and who aren't so crazy about "Dora". So just when I think a TV in the car solves everything, I realize that every discovery carries with it a certain loss.

As I said, the purpose of this sermon is not to knock the technology that makes our world so convenient. I love my cell phone, my e-mail, the TV in my grandchildren's cars, my DVD at home, and of course my computer, which I am typing this sermon on.

I do, however, have my own Luddite family history which I have to overcome. On the one hand, my family was one of the first in our apartment house in Brooklyn to buy a TV, and when we did it my dad remarkably bought a top of the line Magnavox console with 12 inch TV screen, AM/FM radio, and record player.

I say it was remarkable, because he was not given to extravagances, especially in the field of electronics. We kept that same TV throughout my entire growing up. When hi fidelity came along, I asked him if we had hi-fi. He said, "We don't have high fidelity, but we have very good fidelity." When stereo came along, I asked if we could get a stereo. He found an old speaker in the dump, hooked it on to the back of the Magnavox, pumped up the bass on it and the treble on the console and said, "Now we have stereo."

He didn't buy a color TV until I was twenty-three, a portable Sony, but that Magnavox black and white 12" console was still sitting in the living room when my mother died fourteen years ago. It had been there 46 years!

So that's what I'm overcoming in welcoming new technology when old technology still works.

As I said earlier, every new discovery has within it a certain loss. While no one bemoans losing the back seat chorus of "Are we there yet?" when the DVD is playing, there is nevertheless something to be said for waiting without electronic assistance.

I recently went to the performance of the musical "The City of Angels" at Constans Theater at the University of Florida. It was a Wednesday night, and a lot of the audience was students who were evidently required to be there for a class. The typical pre show announcement to silence cell phones continued, "Anyone texting during the play will be extracted from the theater." I imagined a giant extraction arm descending on students wherever their cell phones' blue lights blinked on, plucking them from their seats and carrying them out over the heads of the rest of the audience to be flung into Lake Alice. After the play was over these students were grabbing for their cell phones like I remember folks grabbing for cigarettes after a performance in the sixties. It's pretty clear that there's a certain addiction to having all our connections and contacts now.

The loss I speak of today is the loss of the art of waiting, and waiting is what the beginning of Advent is all about.

Advent is four weeks of waiting for Christmas birth. It is a difficult wait for especially children, but it cannot be shortened.

A few years ago I attended a workshop with bible scholar Walter Wink who spoke on angels as personifications of a spiritual presence in our lives, our homes, and the institutions where we work.

Wink said the angel of our home will not reveal itself until we have lived in that home at least four seasons. It is only after the second round of birthdays, Christmases, school starting, and other such rituals that we lose that sense of unease and loneliness that exists with any move to a new community. Then our angel appears. Until then we have to wait.

Grieving, whether over a death or a divorce, traditionally is cast ritually as a year long process and cannot be short circuited.

Today's scripture from Isaiah is one of my favorites. The last line speaks of waiting with these words: "Those who wait upon the Lord will renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint."

Through Isaiah, God reminds me that when I am in the prime of life, soaring like an eagle, God is with me. When I am in the midst of life's struggles racing like a distance runner, God is with me. And when I have lost all my strength and can barely walk, God is with me.

Isaiah says, "Those who wait upon the Lord will renew their strength." Some translations substitute "trust" or "hope" for "wait" as in "Those who trust in the

Lord", or "Those who hope in the Lord..." The basic Hebrew word translated into all these verbs means to "Wait with patience and hope." Evidently waiting, patience and hope all fold together.

In the time of Isaiah the people of God are weary of waiting for God. They have been invaded. They have been sent into exile. Their holy city, Jerusalem, is destroyed. How long will it be until their lives are restored to peace? When will God bring the promised blessing? God promises that in waiting they are and will be renewed.

Advent is a reminder of the virtue of waiting in a world where most of our technology and most of our cultural mores' are designed to eliminate as much waiting as possible.

It's worth waiting for the special meal where everyone eats together. It's worth waiting until we can afford the next big ticket item before we buy it. It's worth waiting to grow up. And as Diana Ross's mama so famously said, "You can't hurry love, no you just have to wait."

And here's where I want to add something crucial about waiting. It's not just sitting around. Waiting is gaining a larger perspective. It's looking beyond what seems so critical and crucial about the present moment to a larger picture of the world and its future. Waiting is part of the Hebrew word for hope and patience. Take waiting time this Advent. Read the Advent Reflection book.

It's easy to be discouraged in our waiting this season. It does not seem that the world is moving toward love and kindness. North and South Korea rage in lunatic threats of war. The Alachua County School board starts out with a spitting contest. The notion that we have a social contract to build a community where those who have been blessed with abundance care for the wounded and unlucky is surely under threat. It seems that the world is moving toward greater greed rather than a higher good.

That's the same kind of world Isaiah lived in. That's the same kind of world that Jesus was born into. This is the world where God reminds me that waiting is part of hoping. Advent reminds me of God's promise that hopes happen.

Advent reminds me that God works in ways other than the results of whatever the last election brought us. Isaiah reminds me that the next chapter of peace will happen, just like it happened with the abolition of slavery, the recognition of civil rights for people of color, for women, and just emerging today, for people of different sexual orientations.

Advent also reminds me that progress is not an unbroken line. We slip backwards. Love and justice do not have tenure.

Every year we have to wait for the gifts of Christmas all over again. Jesus will be born again into our world, in ways we can see, hear, feel, touch, and taste. It will happen as we pause here on Christmas Eve again perhaps most truly as we circle the courtyard, hold our candles and sing "Silent Night" once more.

Belief in God is waiting and patiently hoping yet again in the Christmas Eve benediction "God, help us in our celebration, to bend our strength, day by day,

toward a Christmas yet to come: When all people, of every stock and branch, of every color and nation, will sit down together and join hands in peace.”

That’s where Advent ends. To arrive there we begin here. Wait upon the Lord.