

“While We Wait”

Reading: Isaiah 40:1-11, Revelation 1:5b-18

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

There is a sense in which we can say that the story of Christmas begins after Christmas. The story of the arrival of the Messiah truly begins with the story of the Messiah's forerunner, because you can't know that the king is coming unless you first hear the king's herald shouting, "Make way for the king!" Two of the four gospels, Mark and John, begin Jesus' story by telling about John the Baptist. (Matthew and Luke's gospels, of course, tell the various parts of our Christmas story.) This bizarrely confrontational figure striding through the desert and dunking people in the river to call them to repentance, this man who was Jesus' cousin but was the sort of person most of us would deny being related to, this voice of one calling in the wilderness begins our journey toward Christmas.

He's not a very Christmassy sort of fellow, this John. I have a hard time picturing him in a warm, fuzzy Christmas sweater singing carols by a crackling fire while drinking eggnog. He ate locusts and honey; maybe we should hang locust ornaments on our Christmas trees to give us a reminder of his startling and confrontational nature. He was the sort of man who would look you in the eye, regardless of who you were, and call you out if you were involved in something sinful. Not a lot of people can get away with that, but he could, at least for a while, and people came out to the desert in droves to hear his message and be baptized for repentance. Because that was his message: repent. Turn from your sin and head in a new direction. There is a kingdom coming, and you need to get ready for it.

He filled the role of one who had been foretold many centuries earlier by the prophet Isaiah. "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God" quickly shifts to "A voice of one calling: 'In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord...All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field.'" The promise of hope and comfort in God's kingdom involves making things ready. The ones who are comforted are the ones who have gotten rid of the sources of their discomfort, provided they have the proper perspective on true discomfort: John's message was to repent, because what drives you out into the wilderness on your discomforting quest for comfort is your persistent rebellion against God. Deal with that, and the kingdom comes, and with it comes the comfort. John was this burr under the saddle making people itch for the kingdom. Isaiah foretold not only the completion of God's great story of redemption, he also foretold a messenger who would act as its herald.

But this year in our Advent season we are really on two parallel journeys. *Advent* is a word that means "coming" or "arrival," and it's the season leading up to Christmas in which we prepare ourselves for our celebration. Fasting comes before feasting; making the way ready comes before comfort; cleaning comes before decorating. It's a season of preparation for our celebration of Christmas, in which we tell the story of Jesus' birth, but more than that it is a time of expectation for His return. In His first Advent He came as a baby and eventually died for our sins, but then He ascended into heaven to be with His Father and continue the ages-long work of interceding for us and sending the Spirit to us. He promised to return, and we've been waiting on Him ever since. We celebrate the Advent season not only to remember the first Advent, but also to look forward to the Second Advent.

So there is Christmas and there is Second Coming, the parallel hopes of the Advent season. We read the Christmas stories in the gospels, the stories related to Jesus' birth that point us to that first, miraculous coming. We also often read the even more ancient promises from Isaiah and the other prophets, promises that in many cases tell of both Advents at once, ignoring time to combine both arrivals into one grand action of God's salvation. But this year we're doing something a little different and a little more challenging, something that doesn't seem very Christmassy. We're also focusing our attention on the book of Revelation, the book that focuses more than any other on the Second Advent. As we look forward to our Christmas feast, we're also looking forward to the eternal feast that will take place in the new heaven and new earth.

The story of the second coming begins with another voice in another wilderness, also belonging to a man named John. John the Revelator was not in his wilderness by choice, however, and he was not surrounded by droves of people listening to his message. He was there in exile, effectively cut off from his congregations in modern-day Turkey. But while he was there he, like the other John, received a message about the coming of the kingdom of God and raised his voice for those who would listen. He didn't wear camel skins and eat locusts and honey, but his message was every bit as challenging as John the Baptist's. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near," preached John the Baptist. "Blessed are the ones who hear this prophecy and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near," writes John the Revelator.

This second John is visited in his exile by a prophetic vision of the risen and glorified Christ. The message begins in earnest with a series of letters to seven churches that were presumably under John's care. Each one of these churches faces the threat of persecution from outside and the threat of faithlessness inside. The church at Ephesus is called to repent and remember their first love; to do the things they used to do when they were passionately committed to following Christ. The church at Smyrna is warned that persecution is coming and that they must be faithful even to the point of death. The church at Pergamum is called to repent, to turn away from the heretical teachings of certain teachers among them. Likewise to Thyatira: repent from the immoral teachings and hold fast to faithfulness. The church at Sardis is dead inside and is called to "remember what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent." The church at Philadelphia is told to hold on to what they have, and continue to endure patiently. And finally, the church at Laodicea is neither hot nor cold in their faith, and so they are rebuked and disciplined and called to be earnest and repent.

Notice a theme? Seven churches in seven different situations, all in different places, spiritually speaking. Some are doing better than others, but they are all facing a trial of some sort, and the message to each one is to repent from the evil things and hold fast to the good faith of Christ. The circumstances and the struggles are different, but the instructions are basically the same. And there is no question about whether they are suffering: in chapter 6, as the vision progresses, we hear the voice of those martyred for their faith cry out from under the altar in heaven, asking, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" There is anticipation here, not because they're impatient but because they are enduring the sort of trials that prove that God's kingdom has not yet fully arrived. Their cry has been the cry of Christ's church ever since, and we wait, living in between Advents.

And so while we are waiting on the arrival of our Messiah, while we are suffering and wondering and crying out to God, there is this persistent command from our Lord to be faithful.

We're in different times and different circumstances, and the details of His call to us might have variations, but the basic message of faithfulness to our first love remains. Those who are victorious, who follow the call to repent and hold fast, are given a variety of promises of entering into the presence of Christ and participating in His victorious work. He promises to make them a pillar in the temple of God, to give them a seat with Him on His throne, to dress them in the garments of purity and righteousness, to give them heavenly food, and so on, with images of living in the intimate eternal presence of Christ in His glory.

And so this vision of the Second Advent begins with the call to God's people to continue waiting, which was also true of the First Advent. Even though the Christmas story doesn't *really* begin with John the Baptist, it does begin with God's people waiting in expectation for the arrival of their Messiah, and John was certainly a part of that. He was the last in a long line of prophets stretching back centuries, prophets whose role was to speak God's word into the times and circumstances of the people, to call them to repent and remain faithful. The prophets reminded the people of their covenant with God: God has promised to be your God, and you have promised to be His people, so hold up your end of the bargain. Those prophets spoke in circumstances every bit as varied as those of the seven churches of John's Revelation: sometimes things were going well and the people only needed to be reminded to keep up the good work, sometimes they were straying and needed to repent, and sometimes they were faced with trial and needed to remember to wait on God's salvation. For hundreds and hundreds of years, God's people waited in anticipation of that first arrival of their Messiah.

And yet in God's kingdom, waiting is never *just* waiting. Persevering and holding fast to the faith is not simply waiting. They waited, and we wait. But they did not only wait, and neither do we, because even when God does not appear to be moving and we seem to be waiting a long time, God does not waste time. We do not cause the Advent of the Messiah through our actions, but our small acts of repentance and faithfulness do work to make the soil receptive to the seed of His kingdom. Our persistent claim that Christ will return, and our insistence on living in His kingdom in the meantime, is a powerful witness to the world. Faith is not opposed to evidence, but our demonstration of our patience while we wait shows our continued trust that God will be faithful to His promises.

And at the same time, our faithful waiting does a work in us. God does not waste time; He calls us to use this time between Advents for repentance and healing and learning and loving. Christ's tarrying is an invitation to use the time to grow closer to Him by practicing the disciplines of our faith. As He promised to the churches mentioned in Revelation, waiting faithfully leads us to the presence of Christ. Listening to the voice in the wilderness leads to the comfort. Repentance ushers us into the kingdom. That discipline of learning to wait for God, of struggling with our questions and doubts, of hearing His voice and listening in the times of His silence, of sifting God's truth from the world's lies, of humbling ourselves in our failures and casting ourselves upon Him, this is all part of the character of God's people in their seasons of Advent.

We prepare our houses to celebrate Christmas by dusting off the mantelpiece and getting out the nativity set, by clearing a space for the Christmas tree, by making our lists and gathering our recipes. Our time of waiting is not merely killing time, as though we're waiting in a doctor's waiting room and have nothing better to do than read an uninteresting magazine. No, we wait with purpose

and preparation. We repent and hold fast, we expect and anticipate and continue to tell the story, because this is how God's people wait for Him. John the Baptist and John the Revelator and generations of other voices call to us today: how will you use this time of waiting?



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