

ISAIAH 7:10-14
MARK 13:33-37

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THERE'S WAITING... AND... THERE'S WAITING

Don't you just HATE waiting? I don't think there's ANYTHING in this world that drives me more CRAZY than WAITING! When I'm sitting in "stop and go" traffic, or waiting in a long check-out line in the GROCERY store (which I'm constantly choosing), I just can't HELP it: I get SO impatient! I guess it just seems like such a huge WASTE of valuable TIME! And reading *The National Enquirer* just doesn't DO it for me!

However, I HAVE to keep TELLING myself that there are DIFFERENT kinds of waiting. Did you ever wait for a special LETTER or PACKAGE to arrive? It's sort of an EXPECTANT waiting, isn't it? In fact, it's almost an EXCITED waiting! When I was a KID, this STRETCH between Thanksgiving and Christmas always seemed like THAT kind of waiting: an EXPECTANT waiting. But it ALWAYS seemed like such an ETERNITY! OR, what about when someone you LOVE is out in a terrible SNOW storm and running LATE, and you're WAITING for them to get HOME? It's a NERVOUS kind of waiting as you listen for the DOOR to open, or at least the PHONE to ring. OR, I have had MANY occasions to be with families who have been told by a DOCTOR that a LOVED one has only a few DAYS, or maybe even HOURS, to LIVE. Well, every MINUTE of THAT kind of waiting feels like a WEEK.

Well, whether it's EASY or difficult, PAINFUL or pleasurable, EACH of us spends an INORDINANT amount of time WAITING. In fact, I'd HATE to calculate the PERCENTAGE of our lives that we spend WAITING for someone or something. I'll bet we'd be SHOCKED at how HIGH the percentage IS.

Well, TODAY we begin the church season of ADVENT. And ADVENT is all about WAITING. Our Scripture Lesson today from Isaiah REMINDS us of God's PROMISE to the people of Israel, the PROMISE of a MESSIAH. But it ALSO reminds us of their WAIT for that Messiah. Indeed, for CENTURIES, the people of Israel WAITED and WAITED and waited, YEARNING for the COMING of God's ANOINTED One, God's PROMISED Messiah.

And our Scripture Lesson from MARK'S gospel today reminds us of our OWN waiting, a waiting SYMBOLIZED in this holy SEASON of Advent. And what are WE waiting for? Well, the answer SEEMS simple enough. We're waiting for the CHRIST. We're waiting for CHRISTMAS! We're WAITING for the BIRTH! We're waiting for EMMANUEL, a word that simply means, GOD-WITH-US. In OTHER words, we're waiting for a RELATIONSHIP, a personal RELATIONSHIP. We're waiting the CHRIST to be born ANEW in OUR hearts, so that WE might have hearts that are FULLY devoted to Christ. And therefore, we WAIT for ALL of the joy, and ALL of the pain, that the Christ brings into our lives, the JOY and the PAIN of BOTH the MANGER and the CROSS. And BEYOND that, of course, We're WAITING for the Christ to come AGAIN, AS promised, to usher IN God's GLORIOUS kingdom of harmony and peace, LOVE and JUSTICE and joy! Yes friends, WE are WAITING, waiting for the CHRIST.

HOWEVER, as I said: there is WAITING... and then again... there's WAITING! SO, the QUESTION is not WHETHER we are waiting, but HOW we are waiting. For the people of Israel, waiting for their MESSIAH, the wait was TOUGH! OCCASIONALLY it was creative, life-giving and joy-filled, but more OFTEN than not, they grew IMPATIENT. And IN their impatience, they would OFTEN succumb to the temptation to BREAK their covenant with God, and be UNFAITHFUL. They would make gods of things that were NOT God, and they would

end up getting HURT and disillusioned, ALIENATING themselves from God, and from each other. AND, they FINALLY wound up being EXILED and ENSLAVED. In other words, the people of Israel WASTED so MUCH of their time of waiting, and WOUND up making their wait MUCH more DIFFICULT than it NEEDED to be.

And I can't HELP but wonder whether WE are doing any better with OUR waiting time than THEY did with THEIRS? I think we need to ask ourselves that question, and ask it OFTEN. And THAT'S because there's WAITING... and then again.... there's WAITING. You see: WHAT we DO with our WAITING time MATTERS immensely. The QUALITY of our waiting time makes a WORLD of difference in the quality of our OWN lives, in the quality of the lives of OTHERS, and indeed, even in the quality of the LIFE of our WORLD.

I'll tell you: Advent took on a whole new MEANING for me about 30 years ago, when my wife, Diane, was PREGNANT. Our son, RYAN, was actually BORN on Christmas DAY. And our daughter, Lyndsey, was BORN on January 2nd. SO, on BOTH of those occasions, ADVENT occurred during the 9th MONTH of pregnancy. And THAT meant that our time of WAITING was a time of PREPARATION and EXPECTANCY. It was a time for HOPES and DREAMS and EXPECTATIONS! It was a CREATIVE waiting, a waiting very DIFFERENT from OTHER kinds of waiting in our lives. Yes, OUR waiting was an ADVENT kind of waiting, a waiting like JESUS describes in our Scripture Lesson from MARK'S gospel today, when He says: **Keep AWAKE! Be ALERT!**

Well, AS we enter this ADVENT season of 2008, we might ASK ourselves: *WHAT do those words, **KEEP awake and BE alert**, MEAN for us TODAY, and for our everyday LIVING?* Well, maybe PART of what it means for US to **keep awake and be alert** is to CONTINUE doing ALL those SIMPLE things, all those seemingly MUNDANE things, that we have ALWAYS done (like taking out the trash and walking the dog, changing diapers and reading the Bible) KNOWING that EVEN in the ORDINARY, everyday moments and events of our lives, WE are able to MEET and KNOW God. Yes, it's KNOWING that God REACHES IN to even our ORDINARINESS, and TOUCHES us with DIVINE love and grace, which gives NEW meaning to those MUNDANE moments and events that fill our days -- IF we are AWAKE and ALERT enough to SEE it. Yes friends: those WORDS of Jesus, **keep awake and be alert**, are APPROPRIATE words for our ADVENT waiting, because they will HELP us to make our WAITING time more CREATIVE, more EXPECTANT and more LIFE-GIVING, just as it SHOULD be.

Now, to SOME of you, all this may sound very STRANGE, but I HAVE to TELL you that I have MET God in the EVERYDAY. I remember one day at our pond, as I sat in our rowboat, noticing a BEE at work in POND lily. And I don't know how LONG I sat there watching that BEE, but suddenly I was FILLED with this very STRANGE sensation that I and the LILY, the BEE and the POND and GOD were all ONE. And it was a POWERFUL sensation with an ORDINARY bee doing ORDINARY bee work in an ORDINARY flower on an ORDINARY pond. ANOTHER example was the day that we visited PLIMOUTH Plantation. I was talking with the woman who was portraying my ANCESTOR, Susanna Winslow, and suddenly I FELT, in a WHOLE new WAY, the PASSAGE of time, and God's ACTIVITY in the lives of PEOPLE and families, generation after generation after generation. OR, sometimes when I look at my KIDS, or my granddaughter; or HOLD a baby; or watch a SUNSET; or mow a LAWN; or play guitar; or WALK on a country road; or sit on a ROCK by the ocean, or read a good book; or talk to a FRIEND; or even preach a SERMON – almost ANY time in the very

ORDINARY, everyday moments and events of my life, I MIGHT just FEEL the presence and the GRACE of God WITH me, of EMMANUEL.

But I ONLY feel it when I can *keep AWAKE and be ALERT*, when I am WATCHING and WAITING. On the OTHER hand, when I take it all for GRANTED, day after day after day can PASS me by, ONE running into the next, USUALLY until some sort of CRISIS hits, and I somehow get SLAPPED in the FACE by God's POWER and presence. But ON those days when I WATCH and WAIT, even though they are just ORDINARY days, God somehow reaches INTO the ordinariness and TOUCHES my life as only God CAN, thereby making the ordinary EXTRAORDINARY and MEANINGFUL and LIFE-GIVING.

Yes, friends: the WONDERFUL, life-giving message of ADVENT is that OUR God comes INTO our lives in things as ORDINARY and as EVERYDAY as a smelly STABLE and a BABY'S cry. And WE just need to *KEEP awake and BE alert*. WE just need to WAIT and watch with an ADVENT kind of waiting and watching, an EXPECTANT and CREATIVE kind of waiting and watching -- for the JOY, the MEANING and the FULLNESS of life that we can ONLY receive from EMMANUEL, that we can ONLY receive from GOD-WITH-US, because there is NO greater GIFT in ALL the world than the GOD'S gift of EMMANUEL. SO, *KEEP awake and BE alert*, my friends. And KEEP always on our lips the ADVENT prayer of LONGING and HOPE that we all KNOW so well: *O come, O come, EMMANUEL. O Come, O Come, GOD-WITH-US*. Let's SING it together.

Hymn: #92 *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*