

"What To Do While We Wait"
Sermon for the Third Sunday of Advent
Lectionary Year C
December 13, 2009
Text: Philippians 4:4-7
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In the passage you heard read a few moments ago, the Apostle Paul is speaking of Jesus' eschatological coming, his second coming that the early church expected soon and that we still await. In that passage Paul gives three pieces of instruction to Christians who are awaiting Christ's coming.

Waiting for something is not a lot of fun. I told the choir on Wednesday night that I am not sure the title of our seasonal introit, "Like a Child, I Wait," is an accurate or appropriate metaphor. I don't know what child the writer of the piece of music is thinking of, but no child I have known very well is exactly a model of patient anticipation. No child I have known very well is thrilled about waiting for anything.

And I really am no different, so I find these pieces of instruction from the Apostle Paul particularly helpful to me, since waiting is not very easy for me and since I desperately need something to do to occupy myself while I am waiting, be it in a doctor's office, the checkout line in a grocery store, or at the drive-through window at a supposedly fast food restaurant. Paul provides that for me and for us.

He helps us learn how we are to wait by suggesting us what we are to do with ourselves while we are waiting.

The first piece of instruction Paul gives us has to do with anxiety and how to deal with it. The second has to do with what we are to spend our time thinking about while we wait for the second coming of Christ. The third has to do with how we should live following what we have learned. If we wanted to put these three pieces of instruction together in an easy-to-remember form, we might say that while we are waiting for Christ's coming, Paul suggests that we *pray, ponder, and practice*.

First he says that **we should pray**. While we are waiting for Jesus' coming, we should occupy ourselves in prayer. Why? Paul suggests that prayer is related to anxiety, so let's look at anxiety. I sometimes get anxious whenever I am waiting for something, and while we live in anticipation of Christ's coming, there are plenty of things to become anxious about. Anxiety is that feeling of being pulled apart or of going to pieces. Being anxious is being worried to the degree that it keeps us from functioning well. The anxious person is almost immobilized and incapable of dealing with life. What are you anxious about? What are you so worried about that it is hard to function?

I spent some time a few years back with a college freshman who was suffering from an eating disorder. She confessed to me that she

had been anxious for years over her appearance. She wanted to look perfect and that meant thin. So in order to be thin, thus perfect, she purged her system of everything she had eaten. This pattern of behavior had been going on for years, but it was not until she got into college that she got out of control to the point that she could no longer keep her life together. Fortunately she got the help she needed with her problem. The curious thing is that in pledging a sorority at school, she discovered a number of girls with the same problem who had not gotten help.

What are you anxious about? Your appearance? Your grades? Pleasing your parents? Your social life? If you are in middle school or high school or even college, you know what it means to be anxious about these things. What are we adults anxious about? Our jobs? Money? Our health? The future? Getting everything done before Christmas? Being a husband, a wife, and a parent or grandparent? Other family situations? Family conflicts of one kind or another?

Some time back I was at a two-day seminar that the bishop put on. In one of the sessions, he described how we all live between guilt and anxiety. The bishop defined guilt as our feeling that we have not lived up to the image of who we should be in the future. Is that how we feel? Are you anxious that you will somehow not quite measure up,

that you will fail, that you will not meet someone's expectations for you?

Paul has an answer to the problem of anxiety, and it is peace. However he doesn't just give a simplistic answer. Look at what he says and tell me how he suggests we obtain the peace that will be the antidote to anxiety. *Prayer is how we get to the point of peace.* We take our worries, concerns, and problems to God *before* we get to the place where we are overly anxious about them. With thanksgiving we take our requests to God, and when we do a peace that goes beyond anything we can understand will be ours.

God wants us to lay our burdens on him. He doesn't want us to bear them alone. God wants us to lighten our loads by communicating to him what worries us, what keeps us awake at night, and what we are concerned about. This is how we keep from being anxious. For some of you, this may be something you are hearing for the first time. For those of us who have grown up in the church, we should know this well. After all, from childhood we learned to sing

What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear
 What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer
 O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear
 All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer

We know what to do with our anxiety. We just need to do it.

So one of the instructions Paul gives to the first Christians and to us is to await Christ's coming by not being anxious but by sharing our concerns with God in prayer. As we have said, the second bit of instruction Paul gives in this passage has to do with pondering. Not only are we to pray as we wait for Christ's return, **we also are to ponder**. Paul says that we are to let our minds dwell on certain things, namely things that are true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, of good repute, excellent, and worthy of praise. The Apostle isn't suggesting that we simply think about these things every once in a while. No. *Our minds are to dwell on these things*, to camp out in their midst, to take up residence with respect to them, to set up shop when it comes to thinking about them. It's where our minds are to live. It's an extended mental exercise.

What is Paul suggesting? I think he is saying that as we wait for Christ's return, that is, as we live our lives in this in-between time, we are to occupy ourselves with thoughts of good and virtuous things as much as possible. It is on things that are true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, of good repute, excellent, and worthy of praise that we are to let our minds fixate. We are to ponder these things.

Now I realize that I may be running the risk of meddling instead of preaching, but I suspect that if we are really going to ponder the kinds of things on this list, it may mean we have to be a little more

selective about what we watch on television, about what books or magazines we read, about the kind of movies we see, and maybe even the kind of people we choose to spend our time with.

If we are going to ponder the kinds of things Paul suggests, we are going to have to exercise a little more control over what impulses and influences flood our minds. I believe that there is a direct correlation between what goes in our minds from external stimulation and what either stays in our minds in the form of thoughts or comes out our minds in the form of words or deeds. If while we are waiting we are going to have healthy mental attitudes, we are going to have to select mostly wholesome and healthy things in which to participate.

As I said in the beginning, Paul urges the Philippian Christians and us to pray, ponder, and practice. Prayer helps us combat the anxieties of life. Pondering good and virtuous things and having the kind of wholesome and healthy mental attitude that results from that activity helps us wait appropriately as well. But in addition to praying and pondering, Paul maintains that as we await Christ's coming **we are to be practicing**. Let me say just a word about our practice as Christians.

Paul tells these Christians at Philippi that they should put into practice what? They should put into practice what they have learned from him, received from him, heard from him, or seen in him. I would say the same thing to you this morning. The only way any of what I say

on any given Sunday can make sense or can be validated is if you try it. Put it into practice. Take action on it. Make it a part of your daily living.

You see, the Bible has a tremendous amount of wisdom to it, but if we don't use it, it doesn't do us any good whatsoever. Try "speaking the truth in love." Try to "be angry but sin not." Try loving your neighbor as you do yourself. Try not passing judgment on the mote you see in someone else's eye while ignoring completely the log protruding from your own eye. Try putting nothing else in the world ahead of your commitment to God. Try mutual submission in all your relationships. Try not coveting when it comes to material things. Try practicing moderation in all things. Don't just take my word for any of this; check it out for yourselves by putting it into practice!

All of us are waiting together for Christ's coming, and I suspect that I am not the only one who does not like to wait for things. But there is something to do, no, there is *plenty* to do while we wait. There is more than enough to keep us occupied. We can pray, we can ponder, and we can practice. Doing these things not only will make the time we wait go faster; it will greatly facilitate our growth and development in becoming authentic human beings. It will make us more Christlike, and it will make us more ready to receive our Lord when he comes.