

Waiting For and Hastening

Sermon preached at Christ Church, Georgetown
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2 Peter 3:8-15a

In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This season that we are in, the season of Advent, it is the Christian life distilled and compressed. This is the season of waiting, of patience, of quiet expectation. That's something we should understand this year in particular, in which our whole lives have taken on the character of waiting and compulsory patience. At first, I think, all of this expectation can be exciting and invigorating. But after a little while, it becomes a bore, and then an agony.

Perhaps not incidentally, therefore, Advent is also a season of self-purification. In the second letter of St Peter, the author writes that "the day of the Lord will come like a thief," and then he asks, "what sort of persons ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God?"¹ The great Swiss Protestant theologian Karl Barth loved to quote this line in describing the character of Advent: "waiting for and hastening."² We are actually always doing this as Christians, "waiting for and hastening," and in Advent this is the particular focus of our attention.

But it is easy to be distracted.

A few years ago, around this time of year, the writer Kaleb Horton, tweeted something that caught my eye. He said: "The rise of the 'tailored for you' internet combined with how news is disseminated on social media has led to nothing but algorithmically-enforced tribalism and a million tiny little information bubbles." Then he said this: that all of this has "turned *online* into a drug that gets you anxious... instead of high."³

¹ 2 Peter 3:10a, 11b-12

² Karl Barth, *The Early Preaching of Karl Barth: Fourteen Sermons with Commentary by William H. Willimon* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 25ff.

³ @kalebhorton, December 13, 2017, <https://twitter.com/kalebhorton/status/941010460060524544>.

That very same week, a few years ago, a friend of mine who is a writer published a piece about the books that she had read during 2017; it was a kind of literary retrospective, her year in books. She began by saying, “I was pregnant with my second child for most of the year and I was also working from home, which meant I was very sedentary and slothful, and able to spend a lot of time reading articles that made me miserable.”⁴

I wonder whether any of that sounds familiar. It sounds familiar to me, and these two quotations have been stuck in my mind ever since I first read them. “A drug that gets you anxious instead of high.” “Reading articles that made me miserable.” The experience of these two writers describes the experience of a lot of people whom I know, and in fact my own experience as well. We are, many of us, in Advent fashion, trying to keep awake, to be aware, to be on top of things, to be informed. We are trying to do what seems like our moral duty to fight the good fight via nothing more than the force of our own attention.

The allure of the drug that all of this information provides is not the anxiety, of course, but the feeling of power. The news at our fingertips – all the time – holds out the promise that by knowing things we are changing things. And yet the more we read, the less it seems that we can do, especially outside the spheres of our expertise, and that sense of powerlessness is disquieting in the extreme, and the resulting anxiety can lead us to a kind of moral torpor. The problems facing our world – injustice, violence, extreme hypocrisy, heresy – are too much, they’re too great, and the sheer weight of it all can be overwhelming and defeating.

That sense can lead us to say, I can’t do everything, so I can’t do anything.

We are not asked, however, to do everything. We are not asked to fight evil in every far-flung part of the world, all the time. That’s not the question at all. As the second letter of Peter puts it this morning: the question is this, *what sort of persons ought we to be, in leading lives of holiness and godliness?*

That is an ultimate sort of question. It is customary during the four weeks of Advent, as we prepare for our Lord’s second coming, to spend some time thinking about such ultimate things. The tradition for preachers during these weeks – and I know how we love tradition at Christ Church – is to consider Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell... in that order. I can see some of you doing some quick mental math, and yes, we have come to judgment. But this should not scare us.

⁴ Lydia Kiesling, “A Year in Reading: Lydia Kiesling,” *The Millions*, December 16, 2017, <https://themillions.com/2017/12/year-reading-lydia-kiesling-2.html>.

It is impossible for us to answer the question posed by St Peter's letter without facing judgment, even if obliquely. That is because of the nature of judgment. We tend to think of judgment in terms of put-downs and condemnation. But that's not God's judgment at all. The judgment of God is very much akin to having a wart or a mole removed, speaking spiritually.

And it is the necessary waystation to leading "lives of holiness and godliness," not because "lives of holiness and godliness" are lives of navel gazing and self-censure. St Paul writes that all baptized Christians have "died to sin," and that the words "died to sin" refer to their experience of having ceased to live under the power of sin.⁵ What it is to live under the power of sin IS to live only to ourselves, for our own interest, and such lives leads the human creature into a cul-de-sac of spiritual darkness and misery that I suspect we have all seen in other people, sometimes to a very high degree, and may even have seen in ourselves. The judgment of God is the putting to bed all of that.

Every Sunday in this church, we pray that for Jesus Christ's sake, God the Father will grant "that we may delight in [his] will, and walk in [his] ways, to the glory of [his] Name." That is not a small thing. The decisions we make in our everyday lives, with God's help — the choice for mercy instead of cruelty, for humility instead of pride, for generosity instead of meanness — these *choices* are part and parcel of Christian witness, made possible only through embracing God's judgment and allowing the Holy Spirit to cleanse our souls. They are the tasks commended to us in both the Old Testament and the New, and they are the substance of lives that are awake for the day on which the Lord is coming.

When the sun goes down on December 24th, this year's season of Advent expectation and patience will be at a close. But the day of God will remain outstanding, and we will continue as Christians to wait for a day and an hour which — as Jesus says — only the Father knows.

That *day of God*, the day on which our Lord shall finally come again, Barth says it will be "the day of salvation from our confusions, and the day of the end of our restless disquiet."⁶ On that day, Jesus Christ will open every door and lead forth every captive who sits in darkness and in the shadow of death, he will purify by his judgment all that ails us, and the end of our anxiety and powerlessness will be at hand. As we wait for and hasten that day, let us tend our plots faithfully, even as our Advent prayer issues forth to the throne of Heaven, and we say, "O come quickly."⁷ AMEN.

⁵ Romans 6:2

⁶ Barth, *Early Preaching of Karl Barth*, 31.

⁷ Thomas Campion, "Never weather-beaten sail," in *The New Oxford Book of English Verse, 1250-1918*, ed. Arthur Quiller-Couch (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), 214-15.