

**The Waiting**  
**Isaiah 9:2-6**  
**December 9, 2018**

The late great Tom Petty had a song that came out in the early 80's called *The Waiting* -- maybe you remember it, or maybe you've heard it on a radio station for old people.

The chorus, which, to spare you, I will not actually sing, goes like this:

*The waiting is the hardest part*

*Every day you see one more card*

*You take it on faith, you take it to the heart*

*The waiting is the hardest part.*

Me and my teenage girlfriends driving around with our mix tape on would sing along at the top of our lungs --

we figured, like everyone else,

that it was the ultimate song of longing for that special someone,

and **we** were all still longing for that special someone.

But Tom Petty himself told an interviewer that it was really meant to be a song about, he said, 'optimism and hope. *Hope.*'

*You take it on faith, you take it to the heart*

*The waiting is the hardest part.*

So *The Waiting* just might be an Advent hymn.

Okay, that's probably a stretch.

But still. The theme fits.

Because what Advent is all about is just that:

The waiting.

And the hoping.

At the most basic level, of course, it's the waiting for Christmas Day.

And nobody embodies the intensity of *that* wait more than kids.

Last Saturday morning,

right here, our Nursery School held an event for the kids called *A Magical Visit with Santa*.

We have a little Christmas tree up here,  
 We put a rocking chair next to it,  
 and at the appointed time, Santa himself comes through those double doors, sits in the  
 rocking chair,  
 and visits with the children one by one.

Here's **my** job at this event.

My job is stand up here

before Santa comes out, to welcome the kids and their parents.

And to speak for a few minutes about our Advent activities here at church,  
 and the times for our Christmas Eve services and etc.

I think the parents listen to me,  
 but the kids? - *fuhgeddaboutit.*

I am what is standing between them and Santa:

and the look on their faces right then, well, it expresses the Tom Petty song pretty well:

The waiting is the hardest part.

And please, lady, don't make us wait any more!

Kids' anticipation during Advent is like a full-body thing --  
 they are bouncing up and down, literally --

They are **so** eager for Christmas morning,  
 counting down the days with their Advent calendars,  
 and wondering why time moves so slowly in December.

Meanwhile, the grown-ups are wondering how time could fly by so fast in December --  
 while kids are trying to speed up the waiting,  
 the rest of us are wishing for just a couple more days  
 to get cards done and gifts figured out.

Our niece Laura has a three year old daughter whose recently-issued Christmas list  
 includes such mysterious entries as:

*Princess for white cat*

*Paper on pants*

*and a Mets toy.*

The Mets toy Laura thinks she can figure out,

but for the rest of it, two more weeks may not be enough time to decipher.

So yeah, for us grown-ups, we'd like to tap the brakes just a bit.

But what **kids** are feeling right now is actually the true Advent emotion:  
 waiting,

waiting with anticipation and expectation, waiting in hope.

Waiting in hope **is** Advent's theme.

All the scripture readings for Advent are about waiting,  
waiting for something glorious to come.

Waiting for someone glorious to come.

The scripture passages that we've heard already today,  
read by Greg, and shared at our Advent wreath --  
they're the promises made by the prophet Isaiah  
to a world that was longing for a better time.

For everyone dwelling in darkness, Isaiah says, a light will shine.

Every dark valley shall be exalted, and the glory of the LORD shall be revealed.

The wolf will lie down with the lamb.

Swords will be beaten into plowshares.

And a little child shall lead them.

What we're meant to remember in Advent is that we are still waiting.

We are still waiting in hope.

We live in a world that is not quite perfect  
and we are still waiting for the world yet to be.

And the child to be born in Bethlehem  
is the only one who can lead us there.

Growing up, I worshiped in a church where that theme of waiting was taken very very seriously.

We were not to sing Christmas carols until it was actually Christmas.

And no Christmas decorations in the Sanctuary during Advent.

We were meant to remember that we were waiting,  
that the world was still waiting.

We were supposed to savor the "not yet," the anticipation.

You can tell by the wreaths on the walls behind me  
and the festive bows on the sconces there  
that we don't approach it quite that way here.

But I must have internalized that to some extent,

because I've got us singing *Advent* hymns -- not Christmas carols just yet.

We are in the *not yet*.

We are waiting.  
And that's Advent.

But this isn't sitting-in-a-doctor's-office waiting.  
This isn't stuck-on-hold-with-customer-service waiting.  
This isn't the kind of waiting where there is nothing you can do but pray for time to pass.

The point of Advent waiting is to remind us  
of what it means to wait faithfully in hope.  
And what that means is to be active in our hope.

Yes, Advent says,

we're waiting for a world yet to be.

Yes, we are waiting for a time when swords will be beaten into plowshares and people will learn war no more.

Yes, we are waiting for the reign of the Prince of Peace.

But we're called to be active in our waiting.

We're called to be active in our hope.

We're not waiting on the world to change.

We're working on the world to change.

David and I saw a movie yesterday that reminded us of what active hoping looks like,  
of what it means to be at work for what is yet to be.

We went and saw *Green Book*.

It's based on a true story,

the story of an extraordinarily gifted classical pianist,

Don Shirley.

Born in 1927, he was a musical prodigy who by the age of 10 had an incredible repertoire of classical music,

and at 18 played a Tchaikovsky concerto with the Boston Pops.

But he was black, he was told that no one would ever accept him as a classical pianist.

So he created his own sound,

and his own ensemble, the Don Shirley trio.

And he determined to change people's minds.

The movie focuses on one particular concert tour,  
a tour that Don Shirley and his trio made through the deep South

in 1962.

At the center of the movie is the relationship between Shirley and his white driver, a guy from the Bronx whose nickname was Tony Lip because he was a big talker.

And Tony Lip was also a racist;  
he takes the job only because the money is good.

And what you see in the movie is the friendship that emerges between these two guys, and the barriers that are broken --

but what you also witness is the racism that Don Shirley encounters and endures time after time,

as they travel through Little Rock, through Jackson Mississippi, and on to Birmingham.

The title of the movie, Green Book, refers to the travel guide first published in 1936 in New York by Victor Green, and published for 40 years more.

It was meant to help African-Americans to travel in safety into the South, offering tips on where to find motels that would take them, and restaurants that would seat them.

And warning them where not to go.

In scene after scene of the movie,

Tony Lip has to consult the book to make sure he's driving to a place of safety.

But the book alone isn't enough to protect them from the daily humiliations that they encounter.

And at one point, Tony Lip asks why,

why are they doing this tour at all,

why didn't they just stay in New York

where the Don Shirley Trio was beloved and the money was easy.

And what he learns

is that they're there to,

in some small but infinitely courageous way,

make a difference.

To walk, with head held high, into a concert hall filled with white folk

and show them

that brilliance knows no color

and genius knows no race.

To watch this movie was to be reminded  
that for every name we know from the civil rights movement  
are thousands of names that we do not know --  
people like Don Shirley who made the choice  
to take themselves to places they were not welcome  
and begin to push the doors open for all who came behind them.

To watch this movie was to be reminded  
that we don't wait for a better world,  
we work for a better world.

The Civil Rights movement that was emerging  
just around the time of Don Shirley and his tour through the South  
was a movement built almost entirely in the church,  
based almost entirely on scripture;  
a movement whose voice found expression in hymns of faith,  
and led almost entirely by pastors who believed with all their heart in the promises of  
the Bible:  
about a time to come when the wolf would lie down with the lamb,  
and swords would be beaten into plowshares.  
They believed in scripture and hymns that sang  
in Christ there is no east or west, no south or north,  
in Christ there is no Jew or Greek, no Slave or Free.

This they prayed for, waited for, hoped for –  
but theirs was an active hope.

Those who marched and sang and sat at lunch counters,  
and those, who like Don Shirley, simply had the courage to let their gifts shine for  
others to see,

they were Advent people.

They were looking to what was yet to come,  
waiting for it – and working for it.

They were people of active hope.

They were Advent people.

That's what we're called to be, too.

Advent people.

People with our eyes on what's ahead, what is yet to be.

Waiting in hope, yes, but *working* in hope, too.

People who hear the promises, the ancient promises,  
and let them speak to us again.

Which means

doing whatever it is each day that moves us towards God's future.

Whatever act of kindness, whatever deeds of faithfulness,  
whatever words of hope.

We are like the wise men, eyes on that star,  
moving toward the promise --

knowing that our Savior is already present  
and letting his love lead us forward.

I began this sermon with a Tom Petty song lyric.

I'm going to close it by giving my husband an early Christmas present  
and quoting from his favorite band, Green Day.

Tom Petty's song was *The Waiting*.

Green Day has a song called *Are We the Waiting?*

To which the chorus answers We are. We are the waiting.

That's what I'm saying we are.

The waiting.

The waiting people, the Advent people.

The ones who dare to listen to the prophets,  
and to believe in the vision of a world yet to be.

We are called to be God's presence of hope  
in whatever way we can,

in whatever corner of the world we inhabit.

And to know that even the smallest acts of love,  
done in the service of God,

move us closer to the world Isaiah dreamed of --  
the world Jesus came to build.

We are the waiting.

We are the hoping.  
We are Advent people.  
Amen.