

## Still At It

Gene McAfee  
Faith United Church of Christ  
Richmond Heights, Ohio

The First Sunday of Advent  
November 28, 2010

Isaiah 2:1-5; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44

“But about that day and hour no one knows. . . .” -- Matthew 24:36

Have you ever had the misfortune of having to wait with someone who doesn't know how to wait? It can drive you nuts. First they fidget. Then they pace. Then they start asking questions for which you couldn't possibly have an honest answer.

“How much longer, do you think?” “Have they started yet?” “Why haven't they started yet?” “What's taking so long?”

Anyone who's ever been in that sort of situation knows that the so-called patience of Job doesn't come close to the resources you need to cope with whatever you're waiting for and the companion you're waiting with.

Most of us have a hard time waiting for anything, and the world we live in isn't making it any easier. Our world is instant – instant everything. Instant messaging. Instant replay. Instant coffee. Instant rice. Instant mashed potatoes. Speed dialing. Speed reading. Speed dating. Express lanes. Express check-out. Express ticketing.

I saw the other day that the new big box store next door is a Toys R Us. Express. I'm not entirely sure what the “express” means unless it is that you can get in and out before your child has a melt-down when they realize that you're not going to buy the entire store.

I pride myself on being something of a throw-back to an earlier age – I still wear church clothes to church, I still read paper books, I still write with a fountain pen, I watch Lawrence Welk on PBS, I spell thanks with a k and an s, those sorts of things – and yet I can feel the change in myself. I can feel the growing impatience in me with the ordinary business of getting through a day. It's not enough that there may be a couple of express lanes at the supermarket; if there's not an empty lane I sense a twinge of irritation.

Gone not only are the days but even the memory of the days when someone at a cash register had to read a price on every single item, punch all the numbers in one by one, hit the sub-total key after every item, and then punch the total key to tell you how much you owed. Most of us would find checking out that way at the grocery store today absolutely interminable, and yet I know that I and many of you lived quite contentedly, we thought, in such a world not so very long ago.

The great promise of all those labor-saving devices and instant food products after the Second World War was that we would be freed from the drudgery of washing clothes or making a meal from scratch or cutting grass with a rotary mower, and we'd have more time to enjoy life. Somehow the promise never materialized, and there's no evidence that we, as a generation, enjoy life any more than our parents or grandparents did, and there's good reason to believe that we actually enjoy it less.

The BBC published a survey in 2006 comparing across time the number of people in Great Britain who described themselves as “very happy” with their lives. In 1957, 52% of the British people said they were very happy; today, that number is only 36%, despite the fact that people in Britain have three times the wealth today they had in the 1950s.

And the results are similar for America. In the early 1970s, 34% of those

interviewed by the General Social Survey described themselves as very happy; by the late 1990s, that figure was down to 30%. It's not a huge change, but it is a significant decline, especially in the face of two of the important factors that were supposed to make us happy: increased technology and increased wealth.

People have been waiting for happiness for a long time, and we're still at it. We're still waiting for the right candidate or the right president or the right dictator or the right war or the right job or the right gadget or the right partner or the right diet to fill that God-shaped hole in our lives, and as our secularity grows so, too, apparently, does our unhappiness.

"Thou hast made us for Thyself, O God," Augustine wrote 1,500 years ago, "and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee." The farther we move from anything most of us would recognize as God, the farther we move not only from our source and center, but also from our goal.

When I was a divinity student twenty-five years ago, we had an Advent preaching series at school on the question, "What Are You Waiting For?" and if I asked that question here of all of you this morning, what would you say? What are you waiting for?

Some of us are waiting to retire. Some of us are waiting to die. Some of us are waiting for the kids to be grown and on their own. Some of us are waiting for our ship to come in. Some of us are waiting to graduate. Some of us are waiting for Ms. or Mr. Right to come along.

But most of us, I suspect, wouldn't have a ready answer because most of us don't live our lives in anticipation. We're not waiting for anything. We're just hanging out. You're born, you grow up, you get a job, you get married, you have kids, they have kids, you get old, and then you die. That's the over-arching narrative for most of us, and whatever there is in our lives worth waiting for is to be found within the confines of that narrative.

Most, perhaps, but not all. In every generation there have been those with a different over-arching narrative. In every generation, there have been those who didn't ignore that God-shaped hole in their life and who didn't try to fill it with trinkets or people or activity.

The prophet Isaiah was one of those people; the apostle Paul was another. We Christians see Jesus as another, and not simply as someone who allowed God to fill that hole in his life, but who actually reshaped that hole for himself and for all who will accept his way of life as theirs.

And for people like that, there was something worth waiting for, and it wasn't retiring to a warmer climate or enjoying the summer home. It was a new, different, and better world, defined not by us, but revealed to us by God. A world of which we are a part, but whose builder and maker, as Hebrews puts it, is God.

The vision of that world – a world of justice, peace, and righteousness – is the vision that holds the Bible together. It is the vision that holds our faith together. It is the vision, we believe, that holds the world together.

We start this new church year, this season of Advent, not with words from Jesus about his birth – there aren't any of those in the New Testament – and not with words from him about the beginning, but rather words from him about the end. Advent, the beginning, focuses on the end, not simply because that's the direction we're headed, but more because the end is the place of hope.

The Christian hope is not that Jesus came among us as a baby; we've seen how much the world did and did not change because of that fact. No, the Christian hope lies not in the past, but in the future; not that Christ came, but that Christ will come again. We don't know how, we don't know when, but we do know why: to seal the promise God

made to us, to our ancestors, and to our descendants that we do not hope for a better world in vain.

I close by reminding you that the better world for which we hope, wait, and live is revealed to us not as an inevitability, but rather as a desire and a promise. Two weeks ago, a woman who had waited, hoped, prayed, and lived for freedom for her people was released from house arrest after more than twenty years. Aung San Suu Kyi has led the movement for democracy in Burma from a dilapidated villa on an isolated lake almost entirely cut off from the outside world. She has called for a peaceful revolution that would free her country from its current military dictatorship and distribute its resources more equitably among its people. For her unrelenting peaceful efforts to inspire not only her nation but other nations to freedom through peaceful means, she has received numerous human rights awards, including the Nobel Peace Prize. For those same efforts, she has been imprisoned by her own government for most of her adult life.

Aung San Suu Kyi is a symbol of what waiting with hope can do. She is a living, breathing example of holding in tension the what-is, on the one hand, and the what-can-be, on the other, without giving in to either violence or despair. We don't know how long it will take for the junta in Myanmar to fall, but eventually it will; they all eventually do. The end of all forms of oppression is the promise we have been given, and it is the promise that shapes our hope. Thanks be to God.