

“Waiting and Hope Go Together”

Isaiah 40:28-31 and Matthew 1: 17

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Are you ready to wait in the long lines? Let's face it. A large part of preparing for Christmas involves waiting. We wait at the mall as we shop for family. We wait at the post office to mail packages to loved ones. Advent, the season from Thanksgiving to Christmas, is a season of waiting.

It could be worse. Think about why we wait in lines.

Marj Carpenter, in her book, *To the Ends of the Earth: Mission Stories from Around the World*, tells about her visit in 1983 to Ghana, Africa. She took a mission team of 22 people. They were picked up at the airport in an old van that broke down thirty-seven times on their hot, miserable trip from the airport to the mission school. By the time they got close to their destination, it was so late that the local police threatened to arrest the group if they were not off the streets by midnight. They arrived at ten minutes to midnight. The men in the group hurriedly unloaded the luggage and headed to their dormitory across the street. The three women in the group groped their way through the dark hallways to the second story of the girl's dormitory. There, by the dim light of a kerosene lamp, they got into bed. As Marj lay down she commented to the other two women, "I've been in worse places." One of the women responded, "Marj, you're a liar." They left the kerosene lamp burning low to provide some comfort in a strange place.

The next morning, as the missionaries took them on a tour, Marj noticed a line of people that ran eight blocks long. The line was moving so slowly it was apparent that many would be waiting all day. She asked the missionaries what those people in line were waiting for. The answer—kerosene oil. Marj and her friends realized that someone had stood for hours in line just to have kerosene for the visiting Americans, and they had simply wasted it by letting it burn through the night.

How do we maintain a positive attitude while we wait in lines this holiday season? Perhaps the starting place is to count our blessings. We are not standing in line for kerosene as they do in Ghana. We are not waiting in line for food as they do in various places in our world. We are waiting to buy presents and send packages.

Let's think about our attitudes as we wait for Christmas. Matthew begins his Christmas story in a very boring way—a genealogy. Just reading through the genealogy feels like waiting for the

interesting part of the story to begin. Yet, the genealogy itself invites us to appreciate how generations had to wait for the arrival of the Messiah.

“So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.” (Matthew 1: 17)

Penn and Teller. Romeo and Juliet. Gilbert and Sullivan. Some names just go together. Love and marriage. Horse and carriage. According to the songwriter, these go together. Our family has put an unusual combination together.

When our children were young, I overheard two of our children come running into the house, each begging Kate to take their side against the other. As the story of the argument unfolded little sister complained to her mom about her big brother, “He hit me.” Big brother was quick to defend himself, “She spit on me.” Kate was horrified. “Did you say she *spit* on you?” Turning to our daughter, Kate clarified. “You *spit* on your brother!?” Kate was really upset. She launched immediately into a lecture. “You do not *spit* on someone! *Spitting* on someone is a terrible thing to do.”

I was nearby listening to the lecture. The more I heard Kate repeat the word *spit* the more I was struck by how the very word almost sounds like the action itself. The s-p sounds like you are actually spitting. Kate was practically spitting every time she pronounced the word. My silly side took hold of me. The more I played with the sound in my mind the more I liked it. Finally, I joined the discussion by announcing a new rule for our house. “From now on in this house, *Spitting* and *Spanking* go together.” We all began to laugh. We never had to enforce the rule. But over the years, every so often, one of our children would suddenly make the announcement with a smile. “Remember, *Spitting* and *Spanking* go together.” Even today as adults, if we begin the sentence with “*Spitting*...” our children finish it for us, “and *spanking* go together.”

God invites us to put an unusual combination together—waiting and hope. According to Matthew, generations of the Hebrew people had waited expectantly for their Messiah. He parades name upon name of father and son, intertwining a few mothers. Over hundreds, even thousands of years, the genealogy continues. Then he summarizes his genealogy at verse 17. Matthew subdivides his genealogy into sevens. The first group of generations fit nicely into two sevens: fourteen generations from Abraham to King David. Then he divides the next series into another two times seven groups: fourteen generations from King David to the exile in Babylon. Finally, he divides the third group into another fourteen: from the exile to the Messiah.

His point? Just as we work six days getting ready for the Sabbath, seventh day, so all of these generations spent their lives being faithful in hope and expectation that the Messiah would fulfill their hopes and dreams. They served and waited for the Messiah.

Hebrews 11 makes the same point. The writer lists name after name of heroic people of faith. Then he concludes with the words, “These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what was promised” (Hebrews 11:39). Generations of God’s people held onto

their hope while waiting for the Messiah. If they could do it, we can learn to wait with the same kind of hope.

Let's admit that waiting and hope are not the normal things that we put together. Waiting and worry go together. Waiting and boredom go together. Waiting and scrolling through our phones go together. But waiting and hope?

Carol was devastated. The doctor had informed her that the biopsy revealed her worst fears—cancer. It could not have come at a worse time. Her husband, Sam, was gone for the next ten days overseas. I went over to the house to pray with her. Surgery was scheduled in two weeks. All she could do was wait ... and worry. For the two weeks until the surgery, friends from our church checked in with her, prayed for her, visited her, and sent cards of encouragement. Her husband returned home a couple days before the surgery. Finally, the day before the surgery, I went to pray one more time, this time with Carol and Sam. I was stunned at what I saw. She had aged ten years in two weeks. Her hair had visibly grayed. I might not have recognized her if we had passed on the street. Waiting and worry had taken their toll.

The surgery was successful. After a few months of chemotherapy her hair grew back as beautiful as ever. We celebrated together that she was back to her old self.

Waiting and boredom go together. How do you entertain yourself while waiting in long lines for the cashier at the store? Of course there are the tabloid headlines. "Caffeine-addicted mother gives birth to chocolate-covered baby." "Ten-year-old boy found alive in stomach of tiger at San Diego Zoo."

Before cell phones and people scrolling through videos and texts, our family developed a tradition years ago while waiting in line for the bus at the San Diego Zoo. I began retelling the story of the book I was currently reading, *Les Miserable*. I told a portion of the story and then we discussed the ethical dilemma presented in each section of the story. Over the years we have told each other numerous stories while waiting in lines. How do you deal with the boredom of waiting?

Since we already know that part of December will be used in waiting in lines, maybe this is a time to review how we wait in general. Could we learn to wait without getting bored and disengaging from others around us? Could we learn to wait through stressful times without using up all our energy in worry?

Let's face it; the most common way we wait in lines is by focusing on our phones. We become isolated and disengaged from our surroundings. Followers of Jesus, there is another way.

I am reading a book about the intriguing new directions that religion in modern America is taking. The authors fill the pages with statistics and commentary on the implications. One of the chapters is about how much more connected and engaged religious people are than non-religious people. For instance, even in something as small as allowing a stranger to cut in front of you in line, there is a higher likelihood that regular churchgoers will perform this simple act of friendliness than non-religious people.

A couple years ago a church member shared this story after Thanksgiving. She was waiting in the checkout line at a local store. Realizing that the lady behind her had only a couple items, she asked if the lady would like to go ahead and cut in front of her. "No thanks. I'm fine." Having made contact, the church member asked a generic question of engagement. "So, what is that you are reading?" The next several minutes, as the line slowly moved forward, they engaged in a conversation about all kinds of things.

See what happened. A follower of Jesus chose to engage instead of isolating with her cell phone. It's that simple.

Why not try a quick prayer the next time you are standing in line. "Lord, can I be a blessing to someone else here in line?" Watch what happens when you choose to engage and connect instead of disengaging and merely surviving.

Do you know the story of Henry Dunant, the first Nobel Peace Prize winner? Henry Dunant, a Swiss banker, traveled to Italy hoping to get Napoleon to help him negotiate a financial deal. He learned that Napoleon had already left for a battle. Dunant followed but did not catch up to Napoleon until Austria. He arrived in time to watch Napoleon lead his army in battle. While waiting, Dunant watched in horror as the two armies fought. He had never seen such carnage.

After nine hours, as the battle was winding down, Dunant was shocked to learn that very little would be done for those left injured on the battlefield. The armies had better medical care for their injured horses than they had for the injured soldiers. Most of the injured would either die later on the battlefield or drag themselves home. That day Dunant gathered a small group of volunteers to help with the injured. His decision to do something about the injured from that battle grew into a passion to found an organization that would take care of those left injured by war. His organization? The Red Cross.

Henry Dunant redeemed his waiting into an occasion to engage and help others. What will you do while you are waiting this Advent?