

ADVENT SUNDAY 2024

*Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-9; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-end;
Luke 21:25-36*

I wonder how you deal with waiting?

In her Advent companion, *The Meaning is in the Waiting* (2008), the theologian Paula Gooder, invites her readers to imagine this scenario:

Imagine entering a room and finding a beautiful, wrapped present on a table; attached to the present is a label that reads: This present is for you, but don't open it now... wait.

How would you feel? Indignant? Frustration? Perhaps intrigued or filled with a sense of anticipation?

Waiting is not something that comes easily to most of us. I know it doesn't come easily to me. And why would it? In a world where adverts, technology, and convenience whisper, "Why wait?" we're conditioned to expect everything now.

Waiting, increasingly, feels strange - a practice we'd rather avoid.

And yet, here we are in the season of Advent: a time set aside for waiting. For four weeks, we wait for Christmas - the moment we celebrate the birth of Jesus, when God stepped into history as a child. But Advent is about more than marking time until the presents can be unwrapped.

Advent calls us to a deeper, more profound waiting: the waiting for Jesus' promised return at the end of time, when God's kingdom will be fully realised. It invites us to pause in a world that refuses to stop, to lean into the discomfort of waiting, and to ask ourselves: *What are we truly waiting for?*

To put it another way: this season holds together two great moments in history: the remembering of Jesus' birth and the anticipation of his

return and challenges us to reflect on how we live in 'this in-between' time. Waiting, though uncomfortable, lies at the very heart of what Jesus calls his followers to do.

With that in mind we turn to today's Gospel, for Luke captures Jesus' words to his disciples, urging them to wait and watch for signs of God's kingdom breaking into the world: '*Stand up*', he says '*and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near*' (Luke 21:28). Notice that Jesus doesn't promise ease or certainty, in fact, he warns of chaos and fear, but he calls them to readiness, to live in expectant hope.

The early Christians in Jerusalem, at the time Luke was writing his gospel, knew this kind of waiting all too well. Nearly thirty years after Jesus' resurrection, their faith had been tested by the grind of daily life, political upheaval, and the, as yet, unfulfilled hope of his return.

They gathered to retell Jesus' stories, to break bread, and to hold onto the promise of redemption, but their waiting must have often felt weary and stretched thin. 'Why hasn't your Messiah come back?' their neighbours asked mockingly. It would have been so easy in this 'in between time', for their hearts to grow heavy, as Jesus warned, weighed down by frustration or despair.

Luke's description of Jesus' words paints a vivid picture of this in-between time: '*There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars. On earth the nations will be in distress and confusion*' (Luke 21:25).

The imagery is unsettling, evoking the kind of cosmic upheaval, perhaps one that mirrors the internal turmoil we feel when waiting stretches beyond our control. Yet amid the confusion and fear, Jesus' words point to hope: '*When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.*'

Here, Jesus calls his followers to a posture of defiance against fear. The signs of chaos are not the end but rather the *birthing pains of God's kingdom*. The challenge for the disciples, and for us, is to hold onto this vision when the world seems to be unravelling.

The New Testament scholar NT Wright (*Advent for Everyone: A Journey through Luke*, 2018), notes that this waiting is not passive, but instead a call to action. He says: *“Prop your eyes open—physically, perhaps, spiritually for sure. Pray for strength to meet whatever comes. The son of man will be vindicated, and when he is, you want to be on your feet.”*

But here’s the question: what does that mean for you and for me in *our* time of upheaval and challenge? And what does it mean for you and for me as we begin this period of Advent?

Well, I’d like to suggest that the *birthing pains of God’s kingdom* (also John 16:21-22 and Romans 8:22-23) that Jesus speaks of are not just external, they also happen within us. Just as chaos and confusion can signal the breaking in of God’s kingdom in the world, they can also reflect the inner transformation God calls us to this Advent.

This idea reminds me of an image from the 14th-century German mystic Meister Eckhart. Have a listen:

“What is the good if Mary gave birth to the Son of God all those years ago, if I do not give birth to God today?” In that sense, we are all “mothers of God,” for God is always needing to be born.

Eckhart’s words challenge us to look at Advent differently. What if the waiting we practice during this season is not just about looking back to a birth in Bethlehem or forward to Christ’s return, but about preparing ourselves for God’s life, God’s kingdom, to take root in us here and now?

What if Christmas, when it comes in a few weeks’ time, will not just be about a birth in Bethlehem long ago, but about a kind of birth, a birth of life fully alive, fully in tune with the deep meaning and purposes of God?

The thing is, though, for that kind of life, God’s life in us, to come alive, we need to be open to it. And that openness, that preparation, is not without struggle. Just as any birth involves labour pains,

discomfort, and waiting, so too does the process of God, and his kingdom life, being born in us.

Could it be, as our reading suggests, that the pains we experience, spiritually, emotionally, or even in the world around us, are part of the process of God's kingdom breaking into the present?

Advent invites us to reflect on all of this. What are the birth pains we are experiencing? What in our lives is being challenged, stretched, or even stripped away, so that God's life might take shape in us?

This waiting, this labouring, then, is not passive. It's not just about counting down the days until Christmas or avoiding discomfort. It's about being intentional. Next Sunday (and the one after), we will be invited to step into the wilderness spaces, as John the Baptist (and so many other biblical characters, including Jesus) did, and face what really matters.

This is important because the wilderness is where the comforts and distractions that we rely on are stripped away, leaving us vulnerable but open to God.

It's where we can no longer use food, drink, or other props to numb our emotions, where the armour of status or indifference is stripped away, leaving us laid bare. The wilderness, in its starkness, removes anything that stands between us and the 'really real' God.

What if then, this Advent, we were to embrace those wilderness moments? What if, through silence, stillness, study, or service, we created space to tune into the deeper questions: What are we truly waiting for? What is God trying to birth in us?

Because, quite frankly, this work of allowing the life of Christ to come alive in us cannot wait: 'we don't know the day or the hour', so we really need to stop holding back.

And the world around us is also in urgent need of people who reflect God's love and justice, his peace and his joy. And the life of Christ, being born in us, is how we step into that calling.

Advent is not just about waiting. It's about 'labouring'. It's about becoming open, alert, and ready to bear Christ into the world.

So, what are you waiting for? And what are you becoming, as Christ is born in you?