

May I speak in the name of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I have one small disappointment to share with you this advent season. It's that I've not been able to buy an advent candle, by which I don't mean one of the lovely wreaths that Rebecca was making a few weeks ago, but in England I used to buy at Westminster Abbey a candle with the numbers one to 25 down. One to 25, so you could light it at the top and instead of opening windows to count down the days of advent, you'd light the candle and you watch it burn down.

The reason I like to have one of those, and I'm missing it this year, is that if you get an advent calendar and you forget a couple of days, you just quickly open a few extra ones and catch up, but you can't do that with a candle because a candle is ever going to burn at a slow rate. You can't rush it which is a reminder that this advent season is a time not to rush, not to rush towards Christmas but to wait. Advent is a time of waiting.

Waiting is a great advent theme and I'm delighted to have a chance to preach about it just in this last Sunday before Christmas, the last Sunday of advent. The psalm that we read together is a great psalm of waiting, as indeed many of the psalms are. I want to look at that psalm in detail and see what it tells us about the important subject of waiting.

The psalm has a very clear structure. It begins in a deep and dark place. "Out of the depths I have called to you, O Lord", but it moves on and ends in a very different place, with the promise in verse 7 of God's plenteous redemption. In the middle, it's all about waiting. Verse 4, "I wait for the Lord, my soul waits for him. In his word is my hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than the watchman for the morning."

In advent we remember that we live between the times. We look forward to the coming of Jesus, not just in Bethlehem which we'll be remembering this time next week, but at the end of time. We're looking forward too, to that day when Jesus will come again. We're called to wait for that great day.

There's lots of waiting in the bible. I was just thinking this week about the story of Joshua, going around the walls of Jericho. Do you remember? He blew his trumpets and the walls fell down. They didn't fall down on the first day. He had to walk around seven times until he could blow and the walls would fall

down. Presumably God could have enabled that to happen on the first, but for some reason, Joshua and the people of Israel had to wait.

Often waiting's not popular. Somebody's just written a book I've seen on how to avoid, or how to get out quickly from the checkout line in a supermarket, things to look for to be able to queue quickly, to get from buying your produce to out the door. Somebody this week complained to me that they got impatient waiting for their microwave to cook. The microwave's already cooking an instant meal. In England we all drink instant coffee. I know you don't like to over here, but that's what we do over there.

There's nothing instant in the bible.

I don't know about you, but I've found the whole speeding up of life makes me more impatient. That's the microwave phenomenon. I can find myself getting really annoyed just having to wait for a short time, which doesn't really make sense because some kinds of waiting are good and healthy. If I plant a seed in my garden and go back the next day, I don't resent the fact that it hasn't sprouted because we know that some things like plants grow slowly. They need time to germinate over time.

I've never met a pregnant woman who's said, "You know I went to the doctor yesterday. He told me I was pregnant but nothing's happened." We know it takes time. There are some things that just can't be rushed. Some things need waiting for, and there are different types of waiting.

Imagine a scene, imagine there are two people on a platform at a big train station, Union Station in LA. One's a person who's there simply sheltering from the cold and the rain. They're lying on a bench there while the trains are rushing past. There's another person there who's there to meet a loved one off a train. They're checking the arrival boards, desperately looking for the train coming in which will be carrying their loved one. Both of these people are spending time on a station platform. Only one can truly be said to be waiting. The other one's hanging around or loitering, but they're not waiting because waiting implies that something matters.

In verse 5 of the Psalm, the watchman can be said to be waiting because they're actively looking for the advance of an enemy. They're not just sitting up there. They're there looking, looking to see if there's an enemy approaching. The psalmist could have seen

two people on the city wall, one gazing at the stars while taking his dog for a walk. The other a watchman peering out into the gloom, desperately looking for signs of movement. Only one is waiting.

One thing I've enjoyed since I've been over here is watching the surfers. You don't get that in London. It is strangely hypnotic just watching the waves come in and watching the surfers ride the waves. It struck me that surfers know how to wait. If you watch them, I've seen that they spend most of their time waiting, waiting for the right wave. Most of the time they're just bobbing up and down in the water on their boards, although I'm sure it's more fun than that and it's actually much more glamorous, but that's what they're doing most of the time. They could do that on a lake, but that would be silly as you don't get waves on a lake. Bobbing up and down, legs akimbo on the board is not the point of the exercise. They surf in the ocean because they're hoping to catch a big wave.

Notice how hoping and waiting are linked. They're linked in the psalm in verse 4. "I wait for the word. In his word is my hope." When surfers are bobbing around, they're looking for a good wave. They're paying attention to what's further out, to the waves that are rolling in to the shore. That's the kind of waiting that the psalmist is talking about. It's a kind of waiting which involves paying attention, being alert. Just as surfers pay attention to the movement of the waves, so we must strive to pay attention to the movement of God in our lives.

When the psalmist says, "My soul waits for the Lord," he doesn't mean I'll hang around long enough til God taps me on the shoulder. He means I'm going to seek God with all my heart. I'm going to pay attention to his work in my life. I'm going to look out for the signs of God's presences and I'm going to do that more than the watchman waits for the morning.

To go back to the surfers again, the surfer hopes to catch a good wave. That's the point of the exercise, and to do that, they have to get themselves into a good position so that when the wave comes, they're there ready to catch it. They have to take their board not to a lake, not even to any old beach, but to a beach with a good break, so they can get in the water, pay attention and wait.

So it is with God. If we're serious about waiting on God, we have to seek him. We have to pay attention. One thing that in my own life I've found very helpful is the ancient practice of *lectio divina*. It sounds

complicated but it's not. It's simply slow and thoughtful reading of the bible. We take a passage. We just read it phrase by phrase, and we let the word sink in and we do that day after day. It's reading the bible slowly and expectantly. Waiting for God to speak to us. If we want to hear from God, we need to have the opportunity, create the context when that might happen. For me, that's slowly reading the bible on a regular basis. Just as the surfer gets into the sea, so turning to the text of the bible for me has been the time when I've been able to discern God's voice speaking to me.

I might read day after day, week after week, month after month and not have that sense of any of the words coming alive or taking on a particular resonance for me, but every now and again, there's that flicker. A word just seems to leap off the page and I can discern the movement of God's spirit. The waiting in that sense has been worthwhile. We wait in the hope that God will in his own time address us.

I've said that waiting and hope are linked. I like the idea of waiting as hope put into action. I read the bible every day, slowly listening, seeking to listen to God because I have a hope that by his spirit he might speak to me in that way. There was a company that's business was selling to shops. They'd send a note to shopkeepers a week ahead of a visit that would say, "Our Mr. Smith will have the pleasure of waiting on you next Tuesday." As Mr. Smith, the firm's rep, would dutifully arrive in the shop the next Tuesday and wait on the shopkeeper to be free, he wasn't simply sitting in the shop loitering. He was waiting for the shopkeeper to have a moment to speak to him.

That's a great image of waiting on God. Advent as I've said is a time of waiting. It's a time to resolve amidst all the busyness to seek God and wait on him. It seems to me that our willingness to wait for something is in direct relationship to how much we desire it, which is why you get those people camping out on the street outside the apple store the night before black Friday because they really want the latest product. One of the challenges for us this advent season is for us to ask ourselves, how willing are we to wait on God this advent? When it comes to God, are we simply loitering in the church, or are we truly waiting on him?

Amen.