

# *“God Acts When We Wait”*

*Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:24-37*

Advent I

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Ahrens  
Senior Minister

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From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: [home@first-church.org](mailto:home@first-church.org)

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

*A Communion meditation delivered by the Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Advent I, December 3, 2017, dedicated to all who have died with HIV/AIDS and all who continue to live and thrive with HIV/AIDS and all who have given love and care to them and always to the glory of God!*

***“God Acts When We Wait”***

***Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:24-37***

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*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.*

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We awoke this morning to a new day and a new year! With the rising of the sun, the season of Advent dawned. With a Big Ten Championship in hand for all the Buckeye Nation, we arose to a new reality (are we really going back to the championship playoffs?). Wait and pray! It is a day full of new colors (no not Scarlet and Gray – but Royal Blue), new candles, new light, and new hope. Today Advent begins! New life - renewed hope. This is the day for which we have longed!

As we open our eyes and our ears to this new day, we are told by Isaiah that God is coming and that we should be praying for the arrival of God, for the potter's hands to shape us into the people God longs for us to be. In the apocalyptic passage from Mark, he tells us that God will be coming soon - breaking the cycles of days, seasons and everything we know to be the way it was before. Mark proclaims that when God comes, the farthest star and the smallest blade of grass, everything else in all creation will be affected by the power of our creator. For Isaiah, our job is to prepare through prayer. For Mark, we are told to stay awake, to be faithful in our work as though we are already standing in the presence of the One who is coming in the name of the Lord.

As we live into our longing for this day, we are called to pray, to watch, to wait and to stay awake. With this, the message has shifted from just a week ago! How can that be? Just last week, Matthew's gospel was telling us to see our brothers and sisters in need and to act on their behalf. In fact, Matthew told us that to "NOT" act will cause our hurried flight into eternal punishment. Now, at the dawning of this new day and new season we are called to not act - to be still and to wait.

Seriously? Could the Gospel writers get their stories straight? How we be called one week to be people of action and now, all the sudden, be called to people of inaction? What kind of

crazy faith do we have? Who is in charge of the messaging around here? Who is doing the test marketing? Who is branding this product we call Christianity? Save people or pray that God comes and saves us? Take action or wait and let God act while we are still? Which is it - act or wait? Move or be still?

Let us wait for a second – or better – a whole season – (which is only 21 days and a couple of hours – if you are counting. Remember, Christmas Eve is now only three Sundays away. Yikes). For today and for this brief season of Advent - let us be still and let God act.

Having said this, we all must admit that waiting is not a very popular attitude. Being still is not in our collective consciousness or social DNA. In fact, most people consider waiting a waste of time. We associate waiting with losing time, losing focus, losing money. Simply said, we associate waiting with losing.

In our world today, waiting and stillness are closely associated with fear. We are afraid of inner feelings, afraid of other people, afraid of our own shadows and afraid of our future. Waiting means not knowing, not acting, not seizing the moment. In a world of fear, people who are unable to wait, to watch, to be still, are more likely to make aggressive, hostile,

and destructive responses than people who are not frightened and those who are able to be still and wait upon God. Our “first strike” approach to life and faith often comes out of our inability to wait. It is often a dangerous approach, one that leaves spiritual carnage and real pain in its path. I believe the more afraid we are, the harder waiting becomes.

**However, there is hope for us.** As Christians, we have all sorts of models seeking to teach us the art of waiting. As with the *Canterbury Tales*, the cast of characters come to us throughout this Advent Season as we wait for the coming of the baby. Although the Gospel of Mark does not look at the characters who come into focus at the birth of Jesus, these women and men tell their story from the pages of Luke.

Mary, Elizabeth, Zechariah and Simeon are central to this season. Mary and Elizabeth dance, laugh, love and support one another during their pregnancies. Meanwhile, Zechariah, struck speechless, watches them, smiling and wondering and waiting the coming messiah and his lost and hoped-for return to words and speech. Simeon is aging and wondering if he will live to see the Prince of Peace reign in his lifetime and yet he waits.

Mary and Elizabeth are feeling the kicks of their sons, the pulse of young deliverers growing inside them. They are living

with a promise that nurtures them, grows in them, feeds them, and helps them to stay present where they are. For Mary and Elizabeth, waiting is not a movement from nothing to something. It is a movement from something to something more.

**The secret to waiting is found in the ability to recognize the seed of promise growing within.** A waiting person is someone who is present to the moment, who believes that *this moment is THE moment God has given us*. Being present in this moment that you have been given by God is not passive at all. It is being opened to all the sensory experiences all around you.

However, as we live into the present moment and open ourselves to sensory experiences all around us, we need to watch out that our waiting does not turn into wishing. We tend to wait for something very concrete that “we wish to have.” We say, “I wish that I could have a job. I wish the weather would be better. I wish the pain would go away.” Our waiting gets entangled in our wishes. Wishing tends to connect to our fears.

But, Elizabeth, Mary, Zechariah and Simeon were not filled with wishing. They were filled with hope. Hope is our trusting in God that something will be fulfilled. But, such fulfillment is

according to God's promises bearing fruit, NOT according to our wishes coming true.

In these days of descending darkness, as we approach the shortest day of the year and the birth of Christ in our lives, **watch and pray**. Wait upon God's promises. Trust that God gives this moment, this hour, this day as a gift. Rest in the silence. Be filled in the stillness.

**Here is a radical thought – allow God to act while we are still.**

**AGAIN- allow God to act while we are still.**

**Let God be God while we wait and stay awake and are fully present.**

In waiting, in praying, I offer you this closing prayer, this abiding thought in the first hours of Advent's coming. From John Baillie's *A Diary of Private Prayer*, I offer this closing prayer as we long for Christ's coming in the opening hours of Advent:

*O Holy Spirit of God, visit now this soul of mine, and tarry within it until eventide. Inspire all my thoughts. Pervade all my imaginations. Suggest all my decisions. Lodge in my will's inward citadel and order all my doings. Be with me in my silence and my speech, in my haste and in my leisure, in company and in solitude, in the freshness of the morning and the weariness of the evening; and give me grace at all times to rejoice in thy mysterious companionship. Amen.*

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