

Waiting in the Now but not Yet

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Date: 14 December 2025

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[0 : 0 0] Friends, I am so glad that we're here and that we didn't have to miss a Sunday due to weather! Because I love Advent. As much as I love and am excited about Christmas, man, I love the season of Advent.

And there are a lot of reasons for that. One of the main reasons I love the season of Advent is because, like it or not, life is full of unanswered questions and unmet longings and unfulfilled, expectations. And what do you do with those things in your life? If you look around the secular culture this time of year, there is an invitation to plunge into materialism, to plunge into consumerism, to binge watch Hallmark movies. I'm not knocking if you like. I mean, we may talk about it later, but I'm not knocking you too hard. But the point is that the invitation in our broader culture is one of escape and avoidance. We're given an array of ways to numb, to detach, to disconnect, and to escape, and to essentially minimize or altogether ignore these unmet longings and unfulfilled expectations.

And Advent does the exact opposite. Instead of avoidance and denial, the season of Advent intentionally carves out space for our struggles and for our hardships. And there's an invitation in the season of Advent to see these not as things to be avoided, but as avenues into the presence of God, as avenues and ways through which we experience the renewal of God. And so that's what we're going to talk about this morning, how Advent and the foregrounding of our longings and struggles is actually a way into the presence of God and a way to experience His renewal. And all of the lectionary readings speak to this. I had a really hard time choosing which lectionary reading to focus in on, so we're just going to do them all. And we're going to do it under three headers, the promise of renewal, the paradox of renewal, and then how to live in the tension. So let's pray. Our Lord,

Heavenly Father, thank You for being the kind of God who doesn't give us simple ways of escape, but rather You go to the core, You go to the heart. And Lord, it is in those desolate places, in those struggles where You are most likely to be found. And so, Lord, we pray that as we open Your Word, that Your Holy Spirit would guide us, illuminate Your Word, and that You would speak to us in the ways that we desperately need to hear from You this morning. And we pray this in Jesus' holy name. Amen.

So first of all, I want to look at the promise of renewal. And for this, we're going to primarily be looking at Isaiah chapter 35. You'll notice this week all the lessons are printed in your bulletin. So if you don't have your Bible, beginning on page 8 of your bulletin, you'll see all the lessons printed in order. But the simple truth of the matter is that when we think about the Christian faith, the entire Christian faith is built around God's promise of renewal. The entire Christian faith is built around God's promise of renewal. And the prophet Isaiah talks about this in chapter 35.

[3 : 26] Isaiah 35 is a poem about pilgrims who are on a journey, and they are wandering in the wilderness, and they're trying desperately to find their way home. And in one sense, this is the story of Israel in the Old Testament. This is what we read about in the Old Testament. The Israel, they are pilgrims, and they're trying to find their way home. But each time they get to the place that they think is going to be their home, it never lasts. It turns out it's not actually the home they were looking for. So they're in Egypt, and then they're in Babylon, and then they're under Roman occupation again and again and again. They find themselves captured and enslaved and in exile, and they never seem to be able to get home. And by home, we mean a place where they can root down and belong and live in lasting peace. But what we understand if we zoom out and look at the whole story of the Bible is that the story of Israel is really the story of the whole world. It's our story.

Because the Bible overall says that we are spiritually homeless, that we are strangers, that we are exiles in the world, that we are pilgrims trying to find our way home.

And most people, I think, most people, even non-religious people, know this instinctively because we experience our spiritual homelessness in our daily lives.

This is the reason why, no matter how good your marriage is, that person is somehow never able to fully satisfy your longing to be fully known and fully loved. It's why sometimes, even in the best marriage, you can still feel lonely or alienated. It's the reason why, no matter how far you advance in your career and how much you give to it, you rarely, if ever, feel like you've arrived. And when you do feel like you've arrived, it's not what you thought it was going to be. And you realize it was a false peak, and there's another horizon to aim at, another peak further up the trail. It's the reason why, no matter how great your Christmas is this year, no matter how many fun things you plan and how many fun movies you watch and how good the food is, no matter how great your Christmas is, there may be, for many of us, this nagging sense that something is missing. And a lot of people make the mistake of thinking that's nostalgia.

And you think, at some point in the past, Christmas was really great, and if we could just recapture some of that or maybe even go back in time, then it would all be there. But I guarantee you, if we invented a time machine and you could go back to those moments you think had it all, they didn't have it all. That's misplaced. It's not nostalgia. What we're really longing for in those moments of longing is we're actually longing for something that we've never actually experienced.

[6 : 31] We're longing for something that we were created for, but we've never actually experienced it. It's just this deep, ancient memory in us that says, some point long ago in our collective history, we did know what home was like. But we've been wandering ever since, and all of us were born into a life of searching for that home, a place where we can be fully known, fully loved, where we can find satisfaction and wholeness. And the Bible says the reason that we are spiritually homeless is because God is our home. All human beings were created to live with and serve God, but because we've rejected Him, the world has become like a wilderness. Because human beings want to live however we want, the world has become a desolate place. That's what it's like when human beings try to be our own gods. And so, as a result, when we look around the world as it is now, we see poverty and racism and injustice and oppression, symptoms of spiritual homelessness. Sickness, aging, decay, death, symptoms of spiritual homelessness. So, the Bible says that God is our home, and life apart from Him is destructive and dehumanizing and ultimately terminal. All of that is the backdrop to Isaiah chapter 35, because as we look in Isaiah 35 and we see what happens, these pilgrims are making their way through the wilderness and their surroundings begin to transform. And the desert begins to change before their very eyes. It becomes like Lebanon and Carmel and Sharon. In other words, the dry, inhospitable wilderness turns into the most fertile, abundant, and beautiful place imaginable.

And then it says that God Himself comes, and He brings renewal. He brings comprehensive renewal, and we see all of these reversals happening. So, we see social and cultural renewal. He's coming to right all of the wrongs committed against His people. He's coming with vengeance and judgment.

He's coming to transform places that used to be full of danger and death into bubbling springs and flourishing gardens. He's coming to bring physical and spiritual renewal. It says that as the Lord comes, the blind are given sight, the deaf can hear, the lame can walk, the mute can sing. This is not just physical healing, but spiritual healing. And then the pilgrims come to a highway, verses 8 through 10, and this highway finally brings them home. And it says they come streaming into Zion, and they're singing, and they're full of joy into the very presence of God.

And if you read this closely, you realize this is not about these pilgrims finally figuring out the path home. This is not about them finding their way home. This is a poem about home coming to the pilgrims.

They're in the wilderness, and all of a sudden, home comes to them. The wilderness is transformed into their home. God comes to them, and He transforms them, and He transforms the world around them, and then He raises up a highway and brings them into His presence. Right? So, this promise of renewal, of a home coming, and by that I mean home coming to us, this promise has animated God's people for centuries. It was a source of hope, a source of identity that they clung to even in the worst of times.

[10 : 05] One day, God's going to come and put all things right. That was their hope. But here's what we need to see. When that renewal finally came, when that home coming finally happened, it defied everyone's expectations of what it would be like, including a man named John. And that brings us to the paradox of renewal and the story of John the Baptist. The first time we meet John, he's still in his mother's womb, not long before the first Christmas. And Luke chapter 1 says, even in the womb, he was already filled with the Holy Spirit. This is, to quote Jesus, the greatest of the prophets.

When Mary is pregnant with Jesus and she visits Elizabeth, and Elizabeth is pregnant with John, it says John leaps in the womb. He's filled with the Spirit, and he instinctively senses this renewal is coming near.

The thing that we've been waiting for is about to happen. And then as John grows up, he becomes this mighty prophet, and he draws followers from all around. And at one point, Jesus comes to him to be baptized.

And John sees the Holy Spirit descend like a dove, and that confirms to John that Jesus is, in fact, the Messiah, the bringer of God's renewal. And so John is out there preaching and calling people to repent. He's saying, renewal has finally come. The thing that we've been waiting for is happening.

God is going to purify and restore Israel, and he's going to put the world right again. It's finally happening. But in our gospel reading, Matthew chapter 11, what do we find?

[11 : 56] John's sitting in prison, awaiting his execution. The local ruler, Herod Antipas, had seduced his brother's wife, and then he left his wife and married his brother's wife. And John had the courage to speak truth to power. He publicly rebuked Herod for something that everybody knew was a notorious sin.

Herod responds by throwing John in prison. And we can only imagine what John must have been thinking as they closed the cell door behind him and clicked it shut. John's thinking, I got nothing to worry about.

Any minute, Jesus is going to show up. He's going to rip the door off by its hinges. And he's going to set me free. And then Jesus is going to bring justice toward all the corrupt leaders, including people like Herod. And I'm going to be right by his side. And it's all going down. But then a day passes, and another day passes, and a week passes, and time passes, and Jesus doesn't come.

And the longer John sits in prison, the more disillusioned he becomes. You know, he's hearing all these things. Jesus is out there. He's doing all these good things. He's healing people. He's, you know, he's changing lives and making a difference. But John's sitting there, he's thinking, but where's the justice? Where's the revolution? Where's the axe being laid to the root of the tree?

That's what I've been waiting for. You can imagine the things that must have been going through John's mind. I did exactly what God asked me to do, so why am I still in prison? The Messiah is here. The true king of the world has come. Why is Herod still on the throne? A notorious sinner.

[13 : 50] So John sends some of his disciples to ask Jesus, are you the one who's to come? Or should we look for someone else? I think if we're honest, probably some of us know how John feels.

You know, some people I know, you know, maybe you remained sexually faithful all your life. You saved yourself for marriage. But despite all your prayers and efforts, that marriage never came. Or maybe you hoped the church would be a refuge from the world, but instead you encountered conflict and disappointment, just like anywhere else. Or maybe you followed Jesus faithfully at work, and you made costly ethical choices out of your desire to be faithful, but instead of being rewarded, you were passed over, you were quietly pushed aside. Or maybe you did the right thing in a relationship.

You know, you did the hard thing. You told the truth. You acted with integrity. You tried to be a true friend, but no one recognized it, and you ended up being painted as the bad guy.

The real question that John is asking, the question behind the question is this. Have I made a huge mistake by following Jesus? With all the things that I've given up and all the things that I've sacrificed, have I made a huge mistake? Look at how Jesus responds.

Go back and report to John what you hear and see. The blind receive sight, the lame walk. Those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. He's quoting, among others, Isaiah chapter 35. And what's he saying?

[15 : 49] The prophecies about the Messiah are being fulfilled right now. The kingdom of God is here right now.

God has come in human form, and renewal has begun. And so, how do we make sense of this? Well, as Christians have wrestled to make sense of this, there's a term that theologians have come to use, and that term is the already but not yet. And that is a paradox. It grammatically really does not make a whole lot of sense. In other words, God's kingdom has already begun. It has already come.

And that work of renewal began through the life and the death and the resurrection and the reign of Jesus. And so, in the time of Jesus and after, we see prophecies like Isaiah 35 being fulfilled.

And because of Jesus' coming, physical and spiritual and social and cultural renewal are now possible. The Holy Spirit is ministering in the world as we speak. And yet, at the same time, as it has already happened, God's kingdom has not yet been fully established on earth as it is in heaven.

So, Jesus sits on the throne of heaven, but His rule is still contested. So, now we live in this space where there is forgiveness for sin available to all who ask, but the power and the temptation of sin remain. The work of justice is ongoing, and some of you do that work, but there's still so much injustice in the world. The Holy Spirit has filled God's people, but life is still full of hardship and struggle. The church has been established as the body of Christ on earth, but we still struggle with conflict and seemingly endless division.

[17 : 55] One day, Jesus will come again, and all tears will be wiped away, and He will heal the world and establish His kingdom on earth. But until that day comes, we have to figure out how do we live in the already but not yet? How do we live in the tension? And this is why Jesus says in verse 6, and this is very important, and blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.

What's He really saying? Blessed are those who don't give up and turn away when the kingdom does not match their expectations or when Jesus does not match their expectations. Blessed are those who don't give up and turn away when God's work of renewal doesn't look like what we thought it would look like. So, there's this paradox within God's renewal. In some ways, it has already begun to be fulfilled with the coming of Christ, but in other ways, it has yet to be fulfilled. How do we live in the time between in this tension? How do we wait well? And that's really the question at the heart of the season of Advent. How do we wait well and live in that tension? And to answer this question, we turn our attention to the New Testament reading in James chapter 5, because this is exactly the question that James is seeking to answer in this part of his letter. He says, be patient then, brothers and sisters. And everything he says after this tells us how to be patient. Be patient then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming, until God finally comes and finishes what began with the incarnation on that first Christmas. And then he gives us an image. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains.

I don't know if anyone in here has ever been a farmer, probably at least one of you just knowing this congregation. Probably somebody is at least, you know, some of you I know maybe grew up on farms.

But farmers, it's really important if you're a farmer to be very clear on what you can control and on what you can't control. Farmers can create the conditions for growth. They can plant the seeds, they can tend the soil, but farmers cannot cause the growth. No matter how much they might want to, a farmer can't simply walk over and yank the crops up out of the ground.

You have to wait. You have to be patient. And even the most knowledgeable, experienced farmers don't fully understand the mystery of how that growth happens. At some point, you're just staring at the ground, waiting for something to grow up. And so it is with God's renewal. No matter how hard we struggle, we cannot cause God's work and God's renewal to happen on our timeline. So we have to learn how to wait patiently on God's timing. And as I'm saying this, I want you to be thinking about a relationship or a situation, a set of circumstances in your life where you feel like you're beating your head up against a wall, where you've tried everything. And at the end of all of your efforts, you're just kind of staring at the barren ground, hoping and praying that something happens. I want you to think about a situation like that. Because we can't cause these things to happen in our own timeline. We have to learn how to wait on the Lord's timing. But there are things that we can do. We can, as the farmer can, tend the soil. We can create and maintain the conditions where that renewal is able and likely to happen. And James actually gives us some very practical ways of doing this. James is incredibly practical. Lots of exhortations in James. Very practical. And he gives us ways of doing this, which also happen to be practices that we focus on during the season of Advent. So I'll give you sort of three categories that John deals with here. The first thing that we can do in terms of how do we wait well and how do we focus on the things that we can control is verse 8, it starts there, is to tend our own hearts. We can tend our own hearts. Verse 8 says, be patient and stand firm because the Lord's coming is near. And the Greek phrase stand firm actually literally says, establish your heart. Plant your heart firmly. Establish it. Root it down deep. Root yourself down in the faith. Waiting time is not wasted time. It's easy to think of time spent waiting as time wasted.

[22 : 55] We're just kind of passing the minutes until something interesting happens. But spiritually speaking, waiting time is never wasted time. The time that we spend waiting on God to do what only God can do is often the time when God does His deepest work in us. So learning how to wait on the Lord is crucial for our growth. It is only by waiting on the Lord that we learn to trust Him. It's only by waiting on the Lord that we develop resilience and endurance. And by the way, resilience and endurance are extremely important in the spiritual life. It's only by waiting that we develop that resilience. It's only by waiting that we learn how to let go of things we can't control. And that's a lesson we have to learn, if you're anything like me, over and over and over. You see your white-knuckled grip and you realize, I got to let this go. So this is a time to tend our own hearts, to establish our hearts, to cultivate that deep trust and faith and resilience by waiting.

Number two, James calls us to tend our relationships with one another. And you know, if you're reading through this at a glance, it seems kind of like a weird turn for him to all of a sudden start talking about relationships until you think about it for a second. You realize in any community, whether it be a family or a friend group or a workplace or a church, whenever there is uncertainty, whenever there is anxiety, whenever you as a group are waiting on things to happen, things outside of your control, it can tend to bring out the worst in us.

Because any social system, any communal system, in that system, anxiety spreads. It's like a virus.

And if you have a little pocket of anxiety here, it can quickly spread and the whole system becomes anxious and uncertain. And when a bunch of people are doing life together and everybody's feeling that anxiety and uncertainty, it can tend to bring out our less desirable qualities.

And so James says, starting in verse 9, hey, as you're waiting patiently on the Lord, part of waiting patiently is making sure, verse 9, you don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters. He says, or you will be judged because the judge is standing at the door.

[25 : 22] I think this is so relevant for us right now because, you know, as a community, we're going through a lot of change right now. And any living, thriving organism is going to go through times of major change. And this is just one of those seasons for us.

And because of that, because there's things that we're waiting on, like we're waiting on the completion of our renovations, we're waiting on this move, we have a sense that things are going to change and some things are changing. But in many ways, we're not able to fully imagine or realize what that's going to be like. A lot of the more significant things are still in the future.

So we're sort of in a holding pattern, waiting for these things to happen over the next couple of months. That's a hard season to be in. It feels like a limbo. And so I think this is extremely relevant for us. And in these times, there can be, and I feel it in myself, a very powerful temptation to grumble, to complain, to take out our frustrations on the people around us, sometimes, sadly, the people closest to us. There can be a temptation to assume the worst about other people and their motives. We can begin to operate with a kind of worst case scenario mentality when, if there's information we don't know or things that we're unclear on, we fill in the blanks with the worst possible scenario. So when that kind of thing starts to take hold, it can really do damage in a community. So James is saying, hey, during times of waiting and uncertainty, when you're wrestling with those unmet expectations and unfulfilled longings, it's especially important to guard and care for our relationships, to be careful how we use our words, to be careful how we talk about other people, to commit ourselves to assuming the best about other people. When there's ambiguous information, when we don't know what's happening, when we see somebody doing things that don't seem to make sense, instead of assuming the worst, to commit ourselves to assuming the best. What is the best, most charitable assumption about this person's motives? So James is saying, during this time of uncertainty, guard not only tend to your heart, but tend the relationships around you. Give special care to ensuring that those relationships are intact. Don't grumble against one another.

And then finally, the third thing he calls us to is to tend our relationship with the Lord, beginning in verse 13. James calls us essentially, the whole section could be summarized as that we are called during times of waiting to be people of prayer, to be people defined by our prayer life.

So he first calls us, pray for those who are struggling. There are people in our community right now who are struggling. Be a community of people who pray for that regularly and often.

[28 : 14] There are people who are celebrating and happy and they're in a great season of their life. He says, you know, we should also be people who sing prayers of praise to those who are joyful. And then after that, he calls us to be people who pray for healing, who practice healing prayers.

Is someone sick among you? Call the elders, anoint them with oil, pray that they might be healed. We actually have a healing prayer ministry for that express purpose. Anybody who wants prayer, our healing prayer ministry will come to you, our prayer ministers will anoint you and pray over you.

That's a ministry that I hope and pray grows in the coming years. And then he also talks about prayers of confession. Of course, Christians can always confess their sins directly to Jesus and be forgiven, but there is a, and I will say this from my own personal experience, a particular kind of healing that we experience when we confess our sin aloud to other Christians.

And while Christians can freely do this with one another, this has historically been a role that has been played by priests in the church, right? If you want to confess your sin to someone who is prepared to receive confession, someone with whom you know they're going to abide by the strictest standards of confidentiality, someone who you know is not going to judge you or think differently of you, somebody who's going to offer you words of encouragement in the gospel, somebody who is speaking with the authority of the historic church, the forgiveness of Jesus Christ into your life, then clergy are available for that and it's something we offer to those who ask.

And then finally, intending our relationship with God at the end of our passage, he says that we should as Christians, instead of using our words to grumble against one another, that we should use our words to restore one another, that if there are people in the community who have fallen away from the faith, right? People who've dropped out, you haven't seen them in six months, you don't know where they are, but they haven't been in church. People who are struggling with doubt or uncertainty. People who are rebelling against the Lord in ongoing active ways. He says, it's the role of the community to do everything we can to restore those people, right? To be the kind of community where if you're here, you're going to be encouraged in your relationship with the Lord.

[30 : 43] Sometimes whether you like it or not, if you're in this community, you're going to be encouraged in your relationship in the Lord. Tend our relationship with God. So this is the invitation that we find in the heart of the season of Advent. We have a little more time in this season before Christmas, but the invitation is to learn how to wait and to learn how to live in the tension of the already, but not yet. And this invitation is really an invitation to recognize that in those unmet longings, in those times of struggle and a hardship, those are the times when we are most likely to encounter Jesus in a new way. But what you find is that those barren places that become bubbling springs, that's not just something that happens in the future. There's a way in which we meet the Lord in a unique and powerful way in that barren spring, right? We're in that precisely in that darkest moment, in that place of languishing. We can encounter God in very powerful ways. And in a very real and immediate way, that barren place becomes a bubbling spring. That desert becomes a garden because it is in that place that you meet the Lord. And that's what we're invited to discover because these are the times when we're most likely to encounter Jesus in a new way. Let's pray. Our Lord, Heavenly Father, may this be true. May it be so. Lord, as we continue in our time of prayer, as we come to your table,

Lord, we are here because we desire to encounter you afresh. And in particular, for those of us who may be struggling for whatever reason, we pray that you would minister to us in the power of your Holy Spirit, that in this Advent season, we would taste and experience your power to bring renewal to us.

And we pray this in the name of our Lord Jesus. Amen.