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Arlington Street Church
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Waiting

It's the first Sunday in Advent, but I'm still thinking about the election. You know, there are a lot of things I can't say from the pulpit, but I can say this – and you'll see where I'm going as Advent begins: How about those people waiting in line to vote? Nine hours, some of them. I was at once outraged and profoundly moved.

When it happened four years ago – yes, there have been four years in which this could have been redressed – journalist Robert V. Thompson, who had to vote early in Evanston, Illinois, arrived at the CivicCenter, spent fifteen minutes looking for a parking space, and took his place in a line that was not moving. He writes,

“I found myself in a conversation with the woman behind me.... She was an ER nurse at the University ... Hospital, and this was her only chance to vote; [she was working] a twelve hour shift on election day.... She told me that her father was black and her mother white.... Her eyes moistened.... 'I have to stay here and vote, no matter how long it takes!'”

“The ... couple in front of me was accompanied by their fifteen year old daughter. They ... said that it was such a privilege to stand there and vote for Obama, they'd wait all night if need be....”

“Caught up in this [experience, two hours passed]. We were close to the room with the voting machines.

“My friend Carl ... emerged, wearing the little [sticker,] 'I voted.' We embraced as he proudly announced to me that [his vote had] effectively cancelled [mine]. 'Carl,' I said, “... your wife is a Democrat. She cancelled your vote. My vote put Obama ahead.' Playfully, we jabbed each other and laughed out loud. This ... light-hearted exchange was a reminder that our friendship runs deeper than our differences....”

“These conversations gave me pause, as I looked at the faces lined up and down the long corridor. There were black and white, Hispanic and Asian, old and young.... We stood in the queue to speak, each in our own voice, but ... also to stand together as a community of human beings – what [Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.] called the beloved community.

“I will never meet again most of those with whom I shared that [wait]. But there we were, different experiences and different lives, yet ... living one life, together, ... [standing in] the light of the beloved community.”¹

I will now stop ranting about the wait, and focus on the invitation Advent extends to us to experience waiting in a whole new light.

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Do you know Beat poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti's *I Am Waiting*? It's very long – here's just a minute of it, to give you the idea:

... I am waiting
 for a rebirth of wonder
 and I am waiting for someone
 to really discover America ...
 and I am waiting
 for the Age of Anxiety
 to drop dead ...
 ... I am waiting
 for a religious revival
 to sweep thru the state of Arizona
 and I am waiting
 for the Grapes of Wrath to be stored ...
 and I am perpetually awaiting
 a rebirth of wonder

... I am waiting
 for the meek to be blessed
 and inherit the earth ...
 and I am waiting
 for forests and animals

¹ Robert V. Thompson, “While waiting to vote, I met a guru,” *Religion & Spirituality* in examiner.com, 11/6/08. Please see <http://www.examiner.com/article/while-waiting-to-vote-i-met-a-guru>

to reclaim the earth as theirs
 and I am waiting
 for a way to be devised
 to destroy all nationalisms
 without killing anybody ...

I am waiting for the Great Divide to be crossed ...
 and I am waiting
 for the storms of life
 to be over
 and I am waiting
 to set sail for happiness ...

and I am perpetually waiting
 for the fleeing lovers on the Grecian Urn
 to catch each other² at last
 and embrace
 and I am awaiting
 perpetually and forever
 a renaissance of wonder.³

It occurs to me that waiting for things that may and may not come is an act of faith. Let's save that for another sermon. But waiting for things that will surely come – this month, to finish the year, it's Chanukah, the Solstice, Christmas, and Kwanzaa – that kind of waiting asks of us, not faith, but a kind of spiritual discipline to engage in the journey to our destination, and give it its own purpose and meaning.

I was reminded of how badly we tend to wait, we humans, by stories that emerged from Black Friday holiday shopping. In San Antonio, Texas, a gun was pulled to deter a belligerent line-cutter at a Sears store. A Sears store! Yes, it's that bad.

Americans spend about thirty-seven billion hours a year waiting in line. Disney, “the master of applied queuing psychology,” has divined that we will cheer up if we wait less than we thought we'd have to. When you've been told it would be an hour 'til you can get into Space Mountain, and you're climbing onto the ride after a mere forty-five minutes, you feel lucky. Disney also hides its lines by wrapping them around buildings,

² alternately, “to catch each other up at last”

³ Lawrence Ferlinghetti, “I Am Waiting,” from *A Coney Island of the Mind*, in *These Are My Rivers: New and Selected Poems*

for example, because it turns out we prefer a slow-moving, short line to a fast-moving long one. And impulse buys in supermarket lines – gum or tabloids – generate five and a half billion dollars a year. It's all relief from waiting.

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Some years ago, passengers at a Houston airport “were lodging an inordinate number of complaints about the long waits at baggage claim.” More baggage handlers were hired, and “the average wait fell to eight minutes. But the complaints persisted.”

An on-site analysis revealed that “it took passengers one minute to walk from their arrival gates to baggage claim, and seven more minutes to get their bags.” The arrival gates were then moved from the main terminal, and the baggage was routed to the outermost carousel. Passengers now had to walk six minutes to get their bags, which arrived in two minutes. “Complaints dropped to near zero.”

MIT's Richard Larson, “widely considered to be the world's foremost expert on lines,” tells us that occupied time feels shorter than unoccupied time. It turns out this is why there are mirrors installed with elevators; we can check out how we look and sneak a peek at other passengers, and stop complaining about long waits for the lift.⁴

I hear all this, and I think, Waiting is what smart phones are made for. Or how about books? Remember books? Or – this is radical – how about conversation? Or – I know this is going too far, but stay with me – how about just being quiet, and breathing, and catching up to ourselves?

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Yesterday, December 1st, was World AIDS Day. In the early days of the plague, people got sick and died, just like that. There were bedside vigils, but they were characterized more by dread than by waiting for the outcome.

My teacher and friend, Benedictine Brother David Steindl-Rast, said something that helped me so much. It's kind of a prayer, really; he said,

May we trust that time is not running out, but coming to fulfillment,
May we wait patiently while time ripens.⁵

My Provincetown parishioner, Jim, contracted pneumocystis pneumonia. This was before the discovery of aerosolized pentamidine; Jim was dying.

⁴ Alex Stone, “Why Waiting in Line is Torture,” *New York Times*, 8/19/12. Please see nytimes.com/2012/08/19/opinion/sunday/why-waiting-in-line-is-torture.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

⁵ Please see gratefulness.org/poetry/thanksgiving_song.htm

I could see him begin to grow restless, his eyes widening above the oxygen mask. He just wasn't getting enough air. His panic rose to the point where he tore away the mask, gasping, frantic. Flailing, fighting for his life, he reached for the mask again. Somehow, we got it back on and he lay back, utterly drained. It could only get worse – much worse.

Again and yet again, the restlessness and the panic, the gasping and flailing. I felt frightened, although there really wasn't anything more to fear. I thought, *Can I do this?* The answer came as another question: *Do what?* There was nothing to do.

He wanted to be close, but couldn't stand to be held; it seemed that he needed every available pore to breathe. I rested my upturned hand on the sheet next to his, so that the fingertip of my pinky barely grazed his. In this way, we began to breathe together. The intimacy of it was extraordinary – transforming.

When my tears came, I had to let them come, because to fight them would have meant I had to hold my breath, and I needed to breathe with Jim. He too, wept. He wept at the profound sadness of leaving all that he loved. We looked at each other, gazing deeply. And then there was no more panic, no more gasping, no more fighting. It was just peace – peace and quiet, faces shining, and one breath at a time.

At last, he slept. His breathing became labored, but he never panicked again. And then his breath slowed, and slowed. Just before dawn, it stopped.

Sometimes, now, when I breathe, I remember what he taught me that night about waiting – waiting, not as torture, but as a fulness all its own, the fulness of time, as Brother David said, not running out, but coming to fulfillment.

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Beloved spiritual companions, voting, shopping, Disney, airports – dying, and living on – we are always all in line, whether long or short, always going somewhere.

Let waiting be for us a spiritual discipline,
an invitation to make meaning on the journey,
the opportunity to give it purpose and meaning.

Together, in this beloved community, let us wait and await a renaissance of wonder.