

Waiting For What?

1. Warm-up Question: Are you in the Christmas spirit yet? What tends to put you in the Christmas spirit?
2. When you think about it, we're almost always waiting for something in life. In fact, so much of life is spent waiting, it's impossible to live well without waiting well. Waiting is a major theme of Advent. During Advent we're invited to reflect on what it was like for our ancestors in the faith to wait for centuries for the birth of the Messiah – and to consider what we can learn from their experience.
 - a. One of the earliest prophecies of the Messiah is found in Numbers 24:17, where the prophet Balaam said, "I see him, but not now. I behold him, but not near. A star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel." Those words were spoken 1300 years before Christ was born. What took so long?
 - b. Suppose you had lived 1000 years after Balaam's prophecy. Do you think you would have believed his prophecy? Why or why not?
 - c. What's something you're waiting for in your life right now?
3. Philip Brickman was the lead author of a landmark study published 40 years ago that compared the levels of happiness reported by three groups: lottery winners, paralyzed accident victims, and a control group. Amazingly, the happiest group was the accident victims, followed by the control group, with lottery winners bringing up the rear. Does that surprise you? Why do you think accident victims were the happiest?
4. Although Brickman was hugely successful as a scientist, had two beautiful girls, a wonderful wife, and an idyllic farm home, he struggled to find happiness, especially when his job became a stress trap and his wife asked him to leave. At age 38, he jumped off Tower Plaza at the University of Michigan hurdling 26 floors to his death. Author Jennifer Senior says, "The irony is that, better than almost anyone, Brickman understood that the pursuit of stature, material bounty, and ultimately happiness itself was a fool's errand. Early in his career, he grasped that the more we achieve, the more we require to sustain our new levels of satisfaction. . . . You may as well chase your afternoon shadow. Happiness always looms ahead."
 - a. What do you think Senior means when she says, "Happiness always looms ahead."
 - b. Senior says, "The more we achieve, the more we require to sustain our new levels of satisfaction." Do you buy that? If so, why is it true?
 - c. In your opinion, is the pursuit of happiness a "fool's errand?"
5. Jeff suggested that the key to happiness is learning how to wait well. Life's never going to be perfect. There's always going to be something wrong and something

more we need or want. Ergo, happiness depends on learning to wait well. With that in mind, Jeff suggested two faith-based lessons that are critical to waiting well.

Lesson 1: Don't set yourself up for disappointment by making your plans for the future too specific. Stay loose, go with the flow, and expect to encounter God wherever life leads!

- a. Our ancestors in the faith developed an elaborate plan for what the coming of the Messiah would be like. They believed the Messiah would be a great ruler, born to a great family, who would ride into Jerusalem on a mighty steed, become a regal king, use political power to usher in a golden age of prosperity for Israel, and subdue their enemies. Jesus did none of that. As a result, the vast majority of our ancestors who were waiting for the Messiah, completely missed him when he came. God visited earth, and they missed it! What should we learn from their experience for our own lives and our own plans?
- b. Is it wrong to make plans? Is it wrong to ask God for specific outcomes in prayer? If not, how do we balance our plans and prayer requests with the fact that we're not in control?
- c. Read Hebrews 11:1-3 and 8-16. Abraham is often regarded as "the father of our faith." Verse 8 says that when Abraham felt God calling him to find a new home, "he set out, not knowing where he was going." What's the significance of that quoted phrase for our lives? Where in your life right now are you in the middle of a journey whose destination is unclear? Are you at peace with the uncertainty? Can you embrace the excitement and adventure of the uncertainty?
- d. Psalm 27:13 says, "I had fainted unless I had believed to see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait on the Lord, be of good courage, and the Lord will strengthen your heart. Wait, I say, on the Lord!" What do you hear that verse saying?

6. **Lesson 2: Never underestimate how long and hard the road to your hopeful future may be.** For people who wait well, hope in the future is a choice they make, an attitude that says, "One way or another, God will prevail."

- a. Admiral James Stockdale was imprisoned in a Vietnamese prison camp. When asked, which soldiers didn't make it out, he said, "That's easy. The optimists. They died of a broken heart." He went on to say, "You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end – which you can never afford to lose – with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality." What do you think Stockdale meant?
- b. In your own life, when have you had to grind it out, hang tough, and remain hopeful even in the face of brutal facts?
- c. Hebrews 11:13 says, "All of these [Bible heroes, like Abraham and Sarah] died in faith *without* having [fully realize] the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them." What do you hear that verse saying to you?