

You must be present to win

December 03, 2006

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

The season of Advent, more than any other time of the Church Year, invites us to embrace the spiritual discipline of waiting. The season of Advent will not be rushed. The Advent carols must be sung, the Advent candles must be lighted week by week, and the doors of the Advent Calendar must be opened day by day. Christmas will finally come when all the expectant Scriptures have been read and when the baby has finally been born.

Waiting presents an enormous challenge. We are an impatient, *I-can-fix-it* kind of people, but not all situations can be fixed. We assume that everything in life can be made better by taking action, but sometimes it just isn't so.

We shrink when we are presented with situations where action does no good at all. We deplore the passivity of waiting. Yet waiting is an enormous

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opportunity if we regard it as a wise teacher, Waiting offers us a great deal when we choose to learn.

Waiting is an important guest to honor in the guesthouse of our humanity. If we consciously allow waiting to be our teacher, we can accommodate waiting more peacefully. If we welcome waiting as a spiritual discipline, waiting will present its spiritual gifts and some of our richest spiritual opportunities if we would only recognize them.

Bingo Halls and Casinos often have signs that read *You must be present to win*. In order to convert the inescapable lessons of waiting into deliberate spiritual gifts, we, too, have to be *present to win*.

The primitive Christian community knew waiting and lived full of expectancy, as if the end could or would come tomorrow, or next week. They lived by an unspecified *deadline*.

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What is striking about their unwavering and omnipresent belief in the Lord's imminent return is that it did not take the community out of the world, but intensified the work of the Church within it, some notable exceptions withstanding, which you can read about in Paul's Second Letter to the Thessalonians (2 Thess. 3:6-15).

The intense expectation of the Parousia, or particularly the future return of Christ in glory to judge the living and the dead, *charged* the lives of the early Christian community with a commitment based on hope, rather than restricting their lives based on passive cloud-gazing. The promise of the Lord's return provoked a power in the present. These believers *lived into* being the community of the Advent. They functioned on the edge of their seats: awake, alert, active.

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Who can fathom, to the least extent, why the *end*, which the early Church envisioned, did not occur? In the final and fullest sense, only God knows what God wills.

But perhaps the coming Kingdom was delayed because the work of Jesus Christ in and among and through the saints was not so much to roll out the red carpet for the new Jerusalem and her King, but to lay down their lives in the power of the Spirit and by the dailiness of their existence.

We should always be ready to pray, yet equally ready to enact that prayer in concrete and current situations in the midst of an unredeemed world that is full of suffering, full of slums. While we are in this interim time, we are called to *make our waiting count* in a fruitful ministry.

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What do we mean by the coming of God's reign among us? Surely the advent of our King is God's own work, infinitely surpassing all worldly possibilities and imaginations. Who can say?

What we *can* assert and live out boldly is that Advent shines as the jeweled season of hope in a world where, the closer it looks, the further away God's reign seems to be.

But, nevertheless, it is a sure hope that, in spite of wars and terrorists, famine and despair, and countless other evils, *God reigns*. We affirm in our worship together that history, individually and cosmically, has a purpose and a destiny: the transfiguration of the world in Christ.

That is the consummation this world stretches on tiptoe to see. As Paul wrote to the Romans (Rom. 8:18-19) *I consider that the sufferings of this present*

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time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed in us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. It is that consummation which we Christians should pray for and work toward every day.

In the words of another of the great hymns of our Church (#516), *Come down, O love divine, seek thou this soul of mine, O Comforter draw near, within my heart appear, and kindle it, thy holy flame bestowing.*

AMEN.