

A sermon preached by the Reverend Deacon Timothy Ervolina,
St. Martin's-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church, Columbia, South
Carolina, on the first Sunday of Advent 2006

Waiting

They waited and waited. And waited. For one hundred and eighteen days, they waited. American Marine Band clarinetist Tom Fox, Canadians Harmeet Sing Sooden and James Looney and Briton Norman Kember had come to Iraq as members of a Christian Peacemaker Team. When they were kidnapped by a previously unknown insurgent group, their mission to pray with the Iraqi people became a mission of waiting in an 11 foot square room. Waiting for release and redemption. Waiting for death. Waiting for something, anything. Even if it's the apocalypse.

As the days passed, their impatience with each other began to grow. Looney describes his mounting despair: "I became self-absorbed, irritated with everything: Harmeet's wriggling toes, Norman's burps, the way Tom chewed his food, the hours of feckless small talk." Their captors told them they would be home by Christmas, but Christmas came and they were still waiting.

Yes, we're back to apocalypse in the lessons again this week. First it's Zechariah, where Yahweh does a mighty Orpheum Theatre stomp on the Mount of Olives and splits the thing in two. Along comes the Psalmist, whose God is both a devouring fire and a Level 5 hurricane whipping the wicked about like rag dolls. And then there's Luke's Jesus, spitting out fire and brimstone, warning about the raging of the sea and the shaking of the heavens. That old end-of-the-world stuff again. Which we really don't have time for, what with all we've got to do in the next twenty-one days.

The lights are strung on the Norfolk pine, and the stores are filled with additional 25 percent discounts on the already low prices of the Ralph Lauren cashmere sweaters. While there are plenty of X-box 360's at Wal-Mart, the Nintendo Wii is on backorder. Tickle Me Elmo's and Transformers are being furtively wrapped and stuffed on the top shelves of linen closets and behind sofas. It's back to the stores on Saturday, lists in hand, checking accounts draining at each swipe of the barcode. Oh well, for everything else, there's MasterCard.

The holiday cards are being addressed, not forgetting Aunt Rose, who was inadvertently left off the list last year. The party invitations have gone out, the brie and Pinot Grigio ordered. The plane tickets are on top of the dresser and the fruitcake is, well, still in the refrigerator where we left it last year.

The new year for Christians begins today, on this first Sunday of Advent, and the preacher's going to lecture on some scary old scriptures, we're going to sing *O Come, O Come Emmanuel*, pray our prayers, receive the Sacrament, and go back to the mall. It's open until nine tonight, you know.

It's hard to find Advent through all the Christmas wrapping paper.

But, let's start to unwrap it. There's a reason that we are given a season to prepare for the coming of the Savior. The reason is we're not ready. So we've still got some serious waiting to do.

In the weeks ahead, we're going to meet Jesus' cousin John, whose apocalyptic rant will make Jesus' preaching look like a poetry slam at Starbucks. Why are the scriptures so angry during Advent? Aren't things supposed to be looking a lot like Christmas? Where are the silver bells, ring-a-linging on the city streets?

The scriptures are angry because we haven't been listening. If we were, Advent would be scaring us silly. That's because the One whose own Word set off the Big Bang, who carved out the seas and hung the moon and stars, who unfolded fifteen billion years of slow motion creation, is coming into our midst. And we're not ready.

If we were, we'd notice that all around us people are scared, just like Jesus says in Luke. Scared—waiting for something bad to happen. For the global thermometer to keep rising and melt all the ice caps. For a mushroom cloud to rise over Seattle or Beirut. For a madman, wearing swaddling cloths made of dynamite, to slip into a café while you're eating a bagel, and pull out his pin. Scared, waiting.

If we were ready, we'd notice that there are children in our city who will go hungry tonight. We'd notice that there people dying in Darfur because they're black. We'd notice that one out of every 32 Americans is in prison. We'd notice what some folks from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation told me a couple of weeks ago: there are two world crises creating a chaotic, fearsome future. The Third World crisis in basic health care and the fact that half of all U.S. teenagers are not graduating high school. They may not sound equal, but in their power to shake the heavens and roil the seas, they are.

Advent comes each year to remind us that we are not ready for the end of the world. Because the end of the world is what Jesus brought with him into that manger in Bethlehem. It's what he carried into the carpenter's shop. It's what he loaded onto the donkey's back at Jerusalem's gate. It's what he carried onto the cross with him. It's what he strode out of the tomb on. He ended the world.

But still the world stumbles on, and we Christians with it. It's why Advent is a whole season: we need our time to slow down, to listen, to look at the figs, hanging low on the branches. We need to breathe in the fresh air of the new world, and exhale the poisonous zeitgeist that surrounds us. We need the time Advent gives us. Time to wait. Time to pray. And finally, time to act.

Zechariah and his people waited seventy long years before they could start rebuilding the Temple that the Babylonians had razed. Paul, Silvanus and Timothy waited on their friends in Thessalonica to grow in love for each other as they waited together for the coming of the Lord Jesus with all his saints. Jesus, amidst his tears and anger about the

fate of his people, waited beneath fig leaves making little cross-shaped shadows in the afternoon sun.

What is the waiting for? What waiting is always for: for the time to pass, for the right time to come. In the Greek in which the New Testament was written there were two words for time: *kairos* and *chronos*. Chronos is the time marked by the sun and moon, the time that ticks by on your watch, the time that you mark with feverish activities and the busyness of modern life. The time that is always too short. But *kairos* is not that sort of time. *Kairos* does not have minutes or hours: it is God's epochal time, the fullness of time, the appointed time, the time when the time is right, and the something you're waiting for finally happens. *Kairos* is God-time, it is redeemed time. Barren wombs blossom, virgins grow heavy with child, the fig tree puts forth its leaves. The world may seem as if it's falling apart, but something is about to happen. That something is our redemption.

In *kairos* time, when you see the world falling apart, it's the time to rejoice. In *chronos* time, the clock ticks towards midnight, and the world is full of distress and confusion, fear and foreboding. Only those who are waiting and watching know that they are living in two distinct time zones, and in one of those, it's time to lift up our heads, and look for our redemption.

The *chronos* of busyness has its rewards, I suppose. You are too busy to be afraid, or too afraid to stop being busy. The only way to slow down is to lose yourself in the bottom of bottle of whisky, or in swallowing a little purple pill. But it has its downside, too. Too busy with life, too frightened by death, or too numbed by chemically-created slowness to notice that the Day of the Lord is here.

It's why Zechariah and Jesus are so angry. They are trying to get our attention, and they are willing to crack the earth in half, yank out the plumbing, and knock us over the head with it. Listen, they are saying, the world is ended, you've got work to do. And the only way to do it, is drop everything you're doing, and wait. And in that quiet waiting time, you will find the strength to do the work God has given you to do.

On December 28, 2005, their Iraqi captors brought the Christian Peacemaker Team a Christmas cake decorated with thick white icing, decorated with green palm trees and strange pink hieroglyphs. They sang "Happy Birthday to You" in honor of Jesus' birth, and the captives sang "Silent Night."

The next day, the young man the captives nicknamed "Junior" told them he was going on a suicide mission. Junior was 25 years old and had gone only through the sixth grade. He planned to drive up alongside an American patrol and detonate himself and his enemies. He looked upward and spoke softly. "Heaven. With my mother, my father, my fiancé." They, along with his best friend and one of his sisters, were killed when the U.S. bombed his house in Fallujah. He pointed to the earth and spat. "America," he said.

In this month's issue of *Sojourner's Magazine*, James Loney writes:

“[Junior’s] intention to use his young body as a weapon disturbed me profoundly. I racked my brain for some way to break through his bomb-proof, God-blessed, necrophiliac logic. I wanted him to know, right in his body, how good, how beautiful he was, how much God loved him.

“On New Year’s Eve, while Junior supervised our morning exercise and bathroom routine, I brought him a chair, pointed to it, then pointed to his shoulders and mimed massaging them. He often complained of neck and shoulder pain. He took the chair, eyes wide with surprise. My thumbs and fingers searched through the network of knotted muscle and spasms that had colonized his back. I could feel him melting into the chair.”

The captives waited 117 days. Six weeks before, Tom Fox had been taken away. His bullet-riddled body was found in a West Baghdad ditch.

Junior came and unhandcuffed them. The captives knew their waiting was almost over and that soon their bodies would be found. But Junior looked at James Looney and pleaded, “Come on, Jim. Massage. Massage.”

Looney says, “I was sitting on top of our communal bed and Junior sat cross-legged in front of me. Despite my reluctance, I complied. It’s hard to say no to a captor. As I kneaded his forearm, he released a torrent of woes: no mother, no father, no house, no marriage, no children, no job, no money to fix the clutch on his car. He explained in body language that the pain in his arms was from his day job, using a high-powered rifle to shoot American soldiers. He seemed on the brink of despair.

“‘What do they say in Canada about suicide? Is it okay or not?’ Junior asked me. ‘It is haram [forbidden],’ I answered, ‘by Esau [Jesus].’

“‘Good,’ he said, ‘just like Islam.’ He looked at me, pointing his finger solemnly at his own chest, and said, ‘I no suicide. Suicide no good—haram. I [get] married. I [become] father.’”

The next day their wait was over. The famed British Taskforce Black busted into the house and took them away. Their captors were nowhere to be found. Jesus came, through James Looney and his friends right smack into the middle of Baghdad. Because they waited. Because they were finally ready.

That’s what Advent is for. Are you ready?