

## Sunday After Christmas 2020

### ***Prayer:***

### ***Introduction:***

There's something deflating, or something that can be deflating, about the other side of Christmas Day. Maybe especially this year, in that for many people it's been at least something to look forward to. For just as many, of course, and for more than usual, it's been a dreaded thing because of the way the year has gone, because of how it's affected Christmas, because of all sorts of reasons.

But let's linger with the idea that there's something deflating about Christmas Day having passed by. We, of course, don't really celebrate the Twelve Days of Christmas, and we get that New Year's Day isn't particularly Christian, or Christian at all, really.

On the other side of Christmas we kind of enter a no-man's-land when it comes to celebrations. I mean, very few--if any?--of us are really looking forward to Epiphany and all the parties we throw that day.

And when it comes to the idea of parties, that's part of this, right?

What I mean to say is this: Christmas came, and has gone, and while we remember Jesus' first arrival with all it's power...here we are again, waiting. Because Jesus didn't, in some sort of tidy, poetic denouement, return on Christmas Morning. We're simply still waiting.

And, you know: Waiting on Jesus' return is, basically, the background music to the Christian life. We wait with fervency, now and then, or we wait with forgetfulness, but until he returns, and for as long as the Church has been the Church, we wait. We don't simply wait: We wait and work and theologize and pray and do all sorts of stuff, but basically, we're waiters. So: Tip well next time you eat in a restaurant.

But some of us are waiting for that, right? Right now, we're left waiting for all sorts of other things. Waiting right now on 2021, although we don't have long to wait. Some of us are waiting on a check in the mail. We're waiting on a time when what was normal, and is still in our memories, can be normal again: Waiting to go outside our houses, to go inside our favorite shops and stores and, you know, church buildings. We're all waiting on a time when we can see one another again, in person, and linger; when we

can talk leisurely, without fear or guilt, about whatever it is we want to talk about. We're waiting on COVID to end, somehow.

We've been encouraged to wait on the vaccine, which is on it's way, and there are some people we might now who are waiting on their second dose of it.

But the simple reality is that we'll be waiting for much of 2021, if not all of it, on a return to a way of life in which our routines, our wants, our casual spur-of-the-moment gatherings and goings-out return to normal.

If 2020 was a year of adapting--or maladaptating, in many cases--2021 is going to be a year of waiting.

## ***Anticipation:***

Waiting, of course, implies anticipating something. And it's important to point it out. Waiting without anticipation is just living. If you're waiting, you're waiting for something, on something. There's a want or a need that drives it.

2021 will be the year we spend waiting for life to return, for those of us who have had privilege not to fall into poverty or fall off the grid, it's the year we spend waiting for life to return to normal. And we know, even as we say it, that what we thought of us as normal is gone, that the other side of this--which we wait on--will demand changes, incorporate new ways of doing things that weren't even considerations this time last year. And we get that. But we also anticipate life being more like it was, close to like it was. It's what we wait for.

As a congregation, we'll never be able to go back to "just" in-person services and events, right? Telemedicine, curbside pick-up, masks when we leave the house during cold and flu and COVID season--how many of these things will really ever go away?

Still, we anticipate life being more like, close to, what it was for us, once. And it's good and okay to anticipate it. To wait for it.

But how do we wait well? How can 2021 be a time when we wait for a return to normal in the best possible way we can wait?

## ***How do we wait well?***

Honestly, we Christians should be the best at waiting. Jesus has not

returned yet. And whether or not we ourselves are all that great at waiting, the Church certainly has been pretty good at it. The Church still really does believe that Jesus will return and set things right, even if we disagree on the mechanics and intricacies of it. God's People, together, know how to wait.

So, simply: How we wait through 2021 should take its cues from how we have waited for Christ to return. This new year should be for us a practice of the posture, the virtues, and the behaviors that help us wait well. That is, faithfully. In 2021, as we wait for life to "return to normal," we have to practice the postures, the virtues, and the behaviors that have kept us waiting faithfully for Jesus to return.

Let's talk about them. These are the simplest of things, though.

## ***Waiting Well: Trusting Wisely***

We have waited for Jesus to return by putting our trust in a trustworthy person, and so we should wait through 2021 by putting our trust in trustworthy people.

What I mean is that Jesus promised to return; angels confirmed it. Paul explained it. Our faith is built on the promise of Christ's return, but it's built, in equal measure, on the trust we've given to those--even Christ himself--who promised he would return.

As we wait in 2021, as we wait for a "return to normal"--and hear quotes every time I say it, please--as we wait we have to listen to people who are trustworthy, sources of information that are trustworthy. And the standards of trustworthiness have not changed in 2,020 years: Do those speak have integrity, are they supported by multiple witnesses, is there wisdom in what they say.

As we move forward into a new year of waiting, where are we getting our information? And look, I want the Church to be a place where good information is shared, but it isn't always that place. We can always accidentally "pool our ignorance and call it knowledge," as my New Testament professor once said. Let's not.

One simple thing we can do is when we share information that's relevant for our waiting, we share its source. "I read on facebook" shouldn't carry the same resonance as "I read in the International Journal of Infectious Diseases." Unless, you know, facebook is linking to their recent article on aerosol transmission in apartment complexes.

So as we wait, let's allow our perspectives, our opinions, and our wisdom to be shaped by the trustworthy insight and perspectives of trustworthy people.

## ***Waiting Well: Not Changing Our Lives***

We have waited for Jesus to return by not giving up our lives--still getting out of bed, still working, still waiting. We've waited for Jesus to return by persisting while we wait in whatever makes up our day-to-day lives. And so we should wait through 2021 by keeping on keeping on.

What I mean is that the early Church had a big contingent of people who were so eager for Jesus to return, and so sure it would come any day now, that they gave up regular living. They quit their jobs, they quit doing the things that they had done, and just started waiting around for Jesus to come back. There was a gloss to holiness of it; they prayed a lot. But they gave up what was good in what they regularly did.

And while we wait in 2021 we can't fall prey to the same temptation of just giving up on stuff. Giving up on cleaning the house, doing our best work, taking care of our physical or mental or spiritual health. There are things we can't give up on if we're taking our lead from the Church, and from God who holds it in His hands. 2021 could be a long, long year of waiting, of anticipating a "return to normal" that doesn't quickly come. How can we keep from giving up on the normal things we're able to do that provide for a healthy life?

But I hear my own protests, so let's consider what we ourselves can do from the opposite perspective.

## ***Waiting Well: Changing Our Lives:***

Because of course, one of the things that the Church has done as we wait for Jesus is create a whole different society right in the middle of the one we're living in. The most radical thing about the early Church was how radical they were economically, socially, religiously. To be a Christian is to live a demanding life. And so, if we're taking our cues on how to wait well in 2021 from how the Church has waited well for Jesus' return, we have to be honest about the fact that we can't live as if we anticipate nothing in 2021.

The easiest way for me to summarize how the Church has waited on Jesus is to think of our posture as one of radical generosity. While waiting for Jesus to return, we wait with generosity--giving cash, using our talents, offering our time. We build things that people can use, even if they have no return on investment at all. We give our rights up so that others get rights. When

we have waited our best, we've waited generously and selflessly.

So, in 2021, as we wait for a "return to normal," how can we act with generous selflessness? And, look, if our cues are from Church history, we don't get to say the Pandemic is keeping us from generosity. The early Church faced famine and persecution and political instability. Most of us in this moment have most of the same privileged and blessings we had a year ago. How shall we be generous while we wait through 2021? This demands introspection and conversation with others. I hope we can at least have the wherewithal to consider, as we live into 2021, the ways we are acting with or acting without generosity to those around us who need us.

## ***Waiting Well: Patience***

And if there's any description of the Church's waiting on Jesus' return that fits, it's that we've waited patiently. And so, as we anticipate a "return to normal," whether in this new year that's coming, or even after it, we have to practice the virtue of patience.

The entire narrative of the Bible is one in which God patiently worked and worked through history to bring humanity back to him after we'd broken our relationship with him, God worked patiently to deal with sin, free us from evil, through and with the broken people he had to draw us back to himself, and in the end gave us the Holy Spirit so we could live like God wanted us to live; and part of how we are supposed to live, one of the natural virtues that rises up inside us because of the Spirit God has filled us with is patience.

And I don't need to define patience for us; we know it when we see it, when we experience it. It's that delicate grace that keeps us balanced in the middle of anything--a dark tunnel, or the beginning of a pandemic and the anticipation of its end. Patience is the virtue that keeps us from losing control, from displacing our anxiety onto others, from obsessing about what we have power to change--in our situation or in others' behavior. Patience is the posture we take when we know that interruptions are often used by God to shape us into people more like Christ. Patience is the gift that reveals that being in the middle of something isn't the worst thing that can happen to us, but it's the most amazing thing, because it still leaves room for a future whose opportunities, blessings, joys, wonder, and significant relationships aren't yet realized.

If you are going to survive 2021, you must be patient, the same way the Church has survived waiting on Jesus' return by being patient. 2021 will test your patience: People close to you--the ones you live with or around, the ones you communicate with or have to interact with; people in the

abstract--the ones who do all the things you wish that people wouldn't do; people on tv, politicians and celebrities and influencers, who are shaping the world in ways you disagree with. They will test your patience, all of them. The great mercy of mercy is that it is a mirror to us, reflecting the ways we ourselves test the patience of so many. I hope in 2021 we can look in that mirror.

A "return to normal" will not come quickly enough for you this coming year. That's because first of all, it can't come quickly enough, and second of all, there is no going back to before COVID. Life will be different whatever comes whenever it comes. Let the middle time, the waiting opportunity of patience be a time in which your expectations of what's normal are changed by the grace of God.

If we cannot be patient in both large and small ways, we will fail in this coming year. We'll lose our ability to act with discipline, faithfulness, and a concern for others. We'll lose those virtues that have carried the Church through two millenia of waiting for Christ's return, and instead, we'll just ape the impatient culture we live in. And if our culture is anything it is impatient.

## ***Conclusion:***

I pray that we can be a patient people this coming year. Not just because I think it is incredibly practical and anti-sin and counter-cultural, but because I really do think that patience is our calling as Christians. We wait and we seek to wait well. Keeping on keeping on, trusting those we we ought to trust, living generously when pragmatic concerns call us to live selfishly, and letting this middle moment, this in-between Pandemic's beginning and the anticipation of its end, be a time in which our character is shaped and revealed for the good of others, and for our own good, too.

Let's hang on--to the Lord, to each other, to whatever good things the Church has always hung onto--because 2021 will be a difficult year. And yet, I think we can thrive through it, because I think God can do all things, even more than we can imagine or ask for.