So, Black Friday is behind us, and 24 days from now we’ll be gathered here in the sanctuary for Christmas Eve. Depending on how you measure it, these are either the longest 24 days of the year, or the shortest. How may of you enjoy waiting? Waiting for Christmas is one thing; but there’s a lot of other waiting. How many of you relish the opportunity to stand in line at the grocery store (always the slowest-moving line!), 6 carts deep, as you watch your frozen goods begin to thaw prematurely? Or waiting on the golf course for the foursome in front of you that won’t let you play through? Or maybe you enjoy sitting on the phone for what seems an eternity while waiting for technical support when the computer messes up? We do these things, and some may enjoy it, but I think it’s safe to say that most of us don’t. After all, we are a people addicted to now, to faster, to instant. I heard on the radio recently the recommendation that you defrost a frozen turkey 1 day for every four pounds of frozen turkey. What are they thinking?!? Who has time for that?!? We need it now!

In the midst of such a hurry-up world as ours, Advent may be the best spiritual discipline we could have. Advent is a season of waiting and preparation, and maybe the waiting of the season makes us pay attention not only to our own waiting, but to others who are waiting, too. As you know, some forms of waiting are not the joyous sort.

John Jewell reminds us that there is an “insidious kind of waiting. A waiting that almost escapes our attention in spite of the fact that it eats away at the meaning of our lives. This toxic waiting” as he describes it is reflected in a story he shares about

A little boy who could not wait to get to high school. The high school kids seemed to have so much fun. Once he got to high school however, he noticed that the people, like his sister, who had gone off to college were having more fun than he was. He could not wait to get to college. But college seemed to drag on after a time and he was tired of all the homework. He couldn’t wait to get out of school, get a job and make some money. When he got his first job, it seemed as though people who were really happy were the ones with a wife or husband, a couple of children and a home with a back yard – maybe even a family dog. But once he was married and had two children and a mortgage and a dog, he envied those couples whose children had gone away to college. They had so much more time for each other. Finally his children had left for college. But now the burden of a mortgage and tuition for two children was very heavy and he couldn’t wait to be out of debt, pay off his house and retire. Then he could have some real fun like all those people who move to Arizona and play golf every day. Then one day—in the early winter of his life—standing at the tee of the 18th hole of the golf course near his home in Phoenix—(still unable to straighten out the horrible slice that had plagued him ever since he retired)—he thought to himself, “What’s the point?”

Maybe you’re familiar with that kind of self-imposed waiting, a waiting that convinces us that the next thing is going to be better than what we have now, so that we never really enjoy who we are, or where we are, or what we have, or who may be around us. Such waiting fails to appreciate the goodness of here, and now.

But there is another kind of waiting still: a kind of waiting that is beyond our control—waiting that knows in a profound way that the world is not the way it’s supposed to be. It’s the waiting that is best characterized by the biblical language of lament. It’s the waiting of a person who looks for a job to provide for her family, but cannot find one. It’s the waiting of a father who watches his daughter receive treatment for cancer, and hearing from the doctor that it will be several weeks before they know if it’s working. It’s the waiting of parents who search desperately for food for their children who are hungry, but there’s little food to be found. There’s the waiting of orphans of the AIDS pandemic as they lose parents, and wonder if anyone will ever love them and nurture them.²

It’s this sort of waiting that prompted the prophet Isaiah to cry out to God, “Why don’t you tear apart the heavens and come down!” That is a cry of deep faith, lament that reaches out to God in the midst of the suffering, the unfairness, the brokenness of this world. God, come down and do something! Do something about a world where we trample to death a man who opens the doors at WalMart so that folks can go Christmas shopping! Do something about a world where terrorists strike fear into the hearts of the world and bring senseless death to dozens and dozens of people! Come down! No more waiting!

Isaiah’s words are a reminder that some folk would prefer the blues to the ubiquitous Christmas carols of the season. A substantial number of the Psalms bear witness to the dizzying, terrifying experience of being human, lifting the fragility of human life before God’s throne. “Why don’t you tear apart the heavens and come down?” Isaiah asks. Things aren’t the way they are supposed to be, and only God can make them right.

Sisters and brothers, the good news of the gospel is that God has come down in Jesus Christ, visiting us with grace, eating and drinking with sinners, confronting the powers that be with the news of God’s sovereignty. The good news of the gospel is the news that God is not content to be God apart from us, gazing from afar at our plight; but that because God loves us, God chooses to be Emmanuel, God With Us. God has experienced firsthand the vulnerability of human life, living it in the flesh, coming into this world the most vulnerable way you can: as a newborn baby. It is this news that we remember as we gather around the Advent wreath, and the manger, recalling God’s love come down in the Christ child.

But the faith of the church is that the work that God has begun in Christ is not yet finished. There is a time to come when God’s redeeming work will be brought to completion, when all things are at the last reconciled to God. Jesus “will come again to judge the quick and the dead,” we affirm. Mark bears witness to this hope, as Jesus uses the strange apocalyptic language and imagery to speak of the coming again of the Son of Man. The one who has come will come again, he says, at an unexpected hour (rather like the unexpected nature of his first coming, I suppose). Things aren’t yet as they are

² These images are suggested in Larry Hollar (ed), *Hunger for the Word: Lectionary Reflections on Food and Justice, Year B* (Liturgical Press, 2005), pp. 1-2.
supposed to be, but in the meantime, we have tasks to complete. So keep awake, Jesus says; keep at it.

Notice what he says with his parable: expectant servants aren’t supposed to just sit there as if there is nothing to do but wait for the master. They have jobs to do, and they are expected to do them. Their waiting isn’t in the form of idle gazing out the window, but in the form of watchfulness over the tasks that the master has left for them to do.³

Jesus’ call to discipleship reminds us that there is much more to our lives than that. The one whose coming is promised is the very one who has already called us to follow, and to love and serve God and neighbor here and now.

Gary Charles, pastor of Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, says that “Vigilant disciples do not waste time speculating when the Lord will walk through the door; they keep doing the Lord’s business—preaching, praying, worshiping, healing—no matter what the month, no matter the time of day...[The call to ‘keep watch’] is a call from Jesus to lead a life of faithful vigilance, to avoid looking beyond today for Christmas to come and the Lord to return. We are to live confidently in the provisions of God every day, even when the Lord is away.”⁴

Think of it this way: “There is no time to nod off in a waiting room. Rather, we are to be more like a waiter who is continually busy in serving others and so has no time to sit down and count the tips.”⁵ Keep awake, Jesus says. Wait and watch with vigilance, by taking seriously our Lord’s call to serve in this “time between the times” of his coming to us.

Or think of this watchful time as something like The Bucket List, the movie in which Morgan Freeman and Jack Nicholson are both diagnosed with a terminal illness. Rather than follow doctor’s orders, they get up from their hospital beds and get started on checking items off of their “bucket list,” the list of things that they want to do before they kick the bucket. They get moving, and they keep moving! They don’t sit there and wait for death to come, though they know it will at some point. They get busy with living, doing those things they’ve always wanted to do, and the ones they’ve needed to do for sake of reconciling with people from whom they’ve grown distant.

Maybe one of the disciplines of this season of Advent for us could be coming up with our own version of a bucket list. How about something like an Advent list—a list of those things that you’ve wanted to do, that you know you need to do, but just haven’t gotten around to? Not a list for a lifetime necessarily, but a list for between now and Christmas.

Like calling a family member from whom you have grown distant.

Or volunteering at Crisis Control Ministry or any other agency in town that is overwhelmed with cries for assistance these days?

³ One of the dangers of the series of Left Behind books and their literal reading of such texts is their belief that God will come and snatch faithful folk out of this world, as if God isn’t concerned for the whole thing! The danger of that sort of believing is that it leaves folk thinking that their chief end is to get their spiritual suitcase packed and have it sitting by the door, ready when God comes to take them away. This life, this world becomes something of a spiritual waiting room.
Or visiting a homebound member of the church, or an older neighbor down the street. We have bags left for many of our folks for you to deliver!

Or writing a letter to a senator of a member of congress about an issue of concern for you.

We talk about things, and say we want to do them, but we don’t get around to it!

Maybe our Advent list will include taking seriously the discipline of daily Advent prayers or devotions—intentionally setting aside time in the morning or at night with family or friends.

Or reaching out to someone who is lonely and needs a friend to talk to, or whose stress level is particularly high in these days of economic uncertainty.

I know we don’t need more to do in these busy days of preparation for Christmas. But maybe we do; maybe we need to be busy particularly with these sorts of things. “Keep awake,” Jesus said, “for you do not know when the time will come.”

I think that’s the kind of waiting that Jesus has in mind—a waiting that is mindful of his presence in others, even as we await his dawning. It’s a watchful life, which attends at every moment to the promise of God’s coming amongst us. That waiting gives voice to the lament that arises from the heart of human suffering, including our own suffering. But it does not stop there. Out of that lament comes our desire to join in service with the one who comes to us, reaching out in love to the lamenting and lonely ones, extending the grace we have received with anxious or hurting folk, even as we await the fullness of Christ’s presence when he returns.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, may our season of Advent be a season filled with watchful waiting—not wasted in idleness, nor rejecting the opportunities we have at hand, but full of love for God and for neighbors. May our Advent not just be a marking of the days until Christmas, but a season of prayer and devotion, and acts of loving kindness—particularly with those whose longing for God to tear apart the heavens is spoken from the midst of despair and suffering. After all, we do not know when the time will come. When the time does come, may our Lord find us faithful to our calling. Amen.