



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA  
Rev. Scott E. Schul:  
Advent 1: Year B (12/3/2017)  
Sermon Text: Isaiah 64:1-8  
Sermon Title: "Waiting like Clay"

Advent is perhaps the most misunderstood season of the Church Year. The name "Advent" comes from a Latin word that means "arrival," which leads many to believe that Advent is merely a time of preparation for Jesus's arrival at Christmas. But the arrival Advent focuses on is Jesus's *second* coming. Advent then has a purpose distinct from Christmas; it is a *season of waiting* that challenges us to consider how we spend our time and our lives as we wait for Jesus to return.

Like it or not, waiting is big part of our lives. *Some of our waiting is pretty minor.* We wait for a table to open at the restaurant. We wait for the item we ordered online to arrive in the mail. We wait for our computer to boot up. We wait for traffic to clear or a stoplight to change. *Other waiting is more serious.* We wait for labor to begin so that the baby can finally be born. We wait for our teenager to arrive safely back home when she's taken the car out on a stormy night. We wait for test results from the doctor that will either put our minds at rest or send us into a panic.

There's no escaping waiting. But *how* we wait, and the mindset and attitude we adopt *while* waiting, has a major impact on how that time of waiting unfolds. Sometimes our waiting makes us angry, like when we're stuck in traffic, or at a construction delay. But does our road rage get us to our destination faster? Of course not. It's self-destructive behavior. The same is true of our Advent waiting. We see the mess the world is in and rage at Jesus for not getting back *now* to fix everything. Convinced that *we* know better than Jesus how things should be run, our anger consumes us in *bitterness*, then *burns out*, and finally *destroys our faith*.

Another reaction to waiting is *boredom*. Stand in a line long enough and the monotony eventually makes most folks fidgety and distracted, and maybe even a little mischievous. The same is true of our waiting for Jesus's advent. It seems so long! Our boredom makes us fidgety and distracted. We want to be entertained, not wait! And so we drift away from fundamental spiritual practices like worship, prayer, and scripture, and then eventually we drift away from Jesus himself.

But perhaps the most painful waiting is *fearful waiting*. As a child, do you ever remember getting separated from your parents in a big, public place? Anxiety and terror build as hope evaporates. "Have they forgotten me? Has something terrible happened to them? Maybe they decided they don't love me anymore and they aren't ever coming back again..."

Adults experience this same range of emotions. We even see them in our Advent Bible readings, including today's Old Testament lesson from Isaiah. Those words originally addressed a people who'd been invaded, saw their cultural and religious institutions destroyed, and then were carried away into exile and suffering. Decades later, after yet another war, they were finally able to return home to rebuild their nation. But they discovered that this job would be

harder and take longer than they anticipated. They begged God to “tear open the heavens and come down.” But the waiting was too hard. They became angry... bored... fearful... and self-destructive. Isaiah tells us they were filthy with sin. Hope had evaporated. Fear, chaos, and anguish reigned supreme.

The problems of 2017 are not all that different from those of Isaiah’s people. Across the globe, people are experiencing political instability, economic inequality, poverty, war, terrorism, racism, sexism, and countless other forms of discrimination, division, exploitation, and suffering. With heightened anxiety and diminishing hope, something deep within us wants to cry out: “God, tear open the heavens and come down.” We wait... and wait... for Christ’s return, because *only he* can make things right, heal us, reconcile us, and wipe away our tears. But too often we don’t wait well. We get angry, and our rage endangers us. We get bored and distracted, and take our eyes off Jesus. And we become scared, and question whether Jesus has forgotten us. We wonder if he’s ever coming back.

But in the 8<sup>th</sup> verse of today’s reading, Isaiah offers us a better way to wait: “O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter.” While we await Christ’s return, we are to be ***waiting like clay***. What does Isaiah mean by this? Well, consider how clay becomes ceramic pottery. First, the potter engages in a process called “wedging” that involves mixing, rotating and pressing very hard on the clay to remove air bubbles that could expand, burst in the kiln, and ruin the pottery. As we ***wait like clay***, we too feel God pressing on us, and we might not like that. But is it possible that God is patiently removing things from us that *we* think are *harmless*, but which *God* knows could *destroy* us?

Next comes “forming,” as the potter begins to bring shape and purpose to the clay. Is God bringing shape and purpose to *you*? Do you sense God forming, reforming, and transforming you? Maybe you’re resisting that change. But who knows better – the potter or the clay?

After the clay is formed, the potter dries it so that the piece can harden into its intended shape. If the clay dries too *rapidly*, it will crack and must be discarded. But if the clay dries too *slowly*, then it might sag and become distorted and misshapen. ***As we wait like clay***, we too must expect that God’s work on us will unfold in *God’s time*, not ours. This kind of patience doesn’t come easily; it requires trust in our Master Potter.

At long last the clay is ready for bisque firing. The kiln is heated to 1,800 degrees and the clay is fired for days. Again, timing is critical. Fire too fast and the clay will explode; too slowly and the clay might not sufficiently harden. ***As we wait like clay***, we again can take comfort that *God’s time* will be the *right time*. And though the pressures of this life might feel like an 1,800 degree oven, we have the *assurance* that *God is with us*, and is *strengthening* us so that we can fulfill God’s *purpose* and *call*.

Finally, the potter applies a beautiful glaze to bring the clay to a new and glorious splendor. Once more the clay enters the kiln so that the brilliant beauty of the glaze can be made permanent. ***As we wait like clay***, God is likewise adorning us with new beauty as our hearts become undivided, and our souls inseparable from God’s presence. In time, God’s grace leaves

a permanent beauty mark on us as God's transformation turns *us*, God's lovable lumps of clay, into the marvelous, breathtaking works of art God always knew we could become.

So *welcome to Advent*, the season that reminds us that someday Jesus *will* keep his promise, and tear open the heavens and return to us in fullness to deliver us, restore us, bless us, and comfort us. But as Jesus stated in today's Gospel, no one knows when that will be. So we wait. And if we *have* to wait – *and we do* – let's not waste the opportunity. Let's make the most of our *waiting* by making the most of *Advent*, and put ourselves in the best possible position to be molded, shaped, formed, reformed, and transformed by God. This Advent, let's surrender our anger, frustration, boredom, and fears to Jesus even as we surrender *our* will to *his*, trusting that this opens us to the most meaningful and peace-filled life possible. And let's do this by recommitting to the fundamentals of discipleship: regular church attendance, prayer, reading the Bible, serving others, and being a generous giver. Those things draw us toward Jesus. They give us purpose. They fill us with hope. And as long as we have hope, *we can wait... we can wait like clay*. Amen.

**NOTE:** Description of ceramics process derived from <http://glendale.edu/home/showdocument?id=1048>