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Well, it's that time of year again: Advent—the four weeks when we wait for Christmas to arrive. Don't you just love to wait?

Actually, we wait for things all year long, and some of us are not so patient about waiting, as was an

elderly man who went to the doctor's office for his 2:00 p.m. appointment. While waiting for his turn, he read most of the magazines on the tables, watched numerous reruns on television, moved to a new chair each time someone sat next to him who would cough uncontrollably, and checked his watch countless times. After three hours of waiting, he got up to leave. As he passed the nurse, he told her, "I guess I'll go home and just die a natural death—which would be much quicker."<sup>1</sup>

Waiting can be a difficult thing to do, but it's through the process of waiting that we discover the power of hope—the anticipation and the longing for something to change for the better.

Hope is something that Daniel understood as he waited in the lions' den, unsure whether he would

be eaten for breakfast, lunch, or supper. The king had him thrown into pit with the lion's, and the king also waited to find out if Daniel would survive, for the king respected Daniel but was tricked into throwing him amongst the lions.

Daniel was one of the king's head officials who supervised a large number of government officials. Having risen to the top, others were jealous of Daniel's progress, so they devised a plan to get rid of him.

"Have you noticed how Daniel takes time each day to pray to God?" one of the officials asked another.

"Yeah, but how will that work against him?"

"What if we convince the king to make prayers illegal?"

"I don't think the king will go for that, but maybe we could convince the king to make a rule that everyone should pray only to the king for thirty days."

"That's a great idea. I'll draw up the papers first thing in the morning."

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And so a group of officials presented the king the document, probably flattering him: “Long live the king! You are so wondrous that we would like to create a month-long holiday to honor you. For the next month everyone should only pray to you. Those who break the law will be thrown to the lions.”

The king was probably flattered, and thinking the plan sounded like a good idea, he signed the document, making it an unbreakable law for the next 30 days.

The trap had been set. The scheming officials waited for Daniel to pray to God, and sure enough, Daniel knelt in prayer by his open window, just as he always did, and he was caught in the act of praying to someone other than the king.

As soon as Daniel was reported to the king, the ruler reluctantly had to follow the order and throw Daniel to the lions. That’s when the waiting began—and when hope seemed very thin.

It’s often in those times of waiting that we learn the deepest meaning of hope. When life goes smoothly, hope seemed irrelevant, unnecessary.

This past summer as I waited to learn where I would next be serving in ministry, I began longing and hoping more than I had for a very long time. In the midst of several interviews with a few churches, I hoped so much to be able to join you here, for I was amazed at the fine ministry occurring in this place. Waiting was not easy, and I discovered the power of hope that sustained me during the uncertainty.

The topic of waiting was the center of conversation several weeks ago in the Wednesday morning book study group as we read the story of the author’s encounter with a woman in Guatemala.

“Good morning, madam, how are you?” [the author] asked.

She smiled, showing her few remaining teeth.... “Good morning, sir. I am waiting for the will of God,” she replied.

[The author continued] I was curious about this greeting and stopped to chat. She told me that she lives alone. “My husband died three years ago, and I have no one to take care of me now.”

“What about your children?”

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“I have none,” she said. “I live up there,” as she pointed up the steep slope behind me, “on the other side of that crest.”

She carried a piece of kindling wood and a small bag of food. She told me that she was out looking for food, and I supposed that this old widow went around to her neighbors each day asking for help in her old age.

As she spoke about herself and her life, tears welled up in her eyes. “I am 83 years old, and I’m waiting for the will of God,” she repeated. In Spanish the word *esperar* means both to wait and to expect. I wondered for a moment if she was actually expecting to be called by God that very day—or perhaps was just sitting there in the sunshine wanting to go to heaven soon. Then she looked right at me and said, “*Dios es Grande!*”

I agreed—“Yes, God is Great.” I felt comforted and assured that the Spirit was right there hearing her real and sincere supplication to God—to take her to be at God’s side—or just

waiting to see what was God’s will for her that day.<sup>2</sup>

During this season of Advent we find ourselves waiting again, an experience very familiar to this congregation for the past two years as you waited for the search committee to complete their process.

As a nation, we’re now waiting to see how our next President will lead our nation. Some fear that his lack of experience in politics will be a detriment, while others see the transition as a time for positive change.

We have been waiting for many generations for our nation to become one. Our founding fathers had a vision that in the midst of diversity of religious and ethnic backgrounds that we could welcome everyone, but the Southern Poverty Law Center has noted in recent weeks that hate crimes and harassment against people of certain races or religions have increased in our nation.<sup>3</sup>

- In Tennessee: My American born grandsons were told by some white kids that my grandsons will be getting a ticket of the US soon. My grandsons are of Asian-Hispanic heritage.

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- In California: 16-year-old African-American student at Monte Vista High School in Danville, California went to the bathroom during fifth period on Wednesday and spotted the words "whites" and "colored" scrawled on the wall over the urinal.
- In California: This week someone wrote letters to mosques threatening genocide.

Advent is a time for waiting in a world that so desperately needs reminders of God's hope. The world is not perfect, and yet, we wait in hope that God will continue to move among us, helping us bring healing into the world. During Advent, we can bring about hope through our actions of kindness and hospitality, along with our prayers while waiting.

Author Sue Monk Kidd writes about a form of prayer she calls a waiting prayer. It

has little to do with petition and intercession and getting God to fix things.... We place ourselves in postures of the heart, in the stillness that enables us to become aware of what God is doing so that we can gradually say yes to it with our whole being.... Attentiveness is vital to waiting. The word *wait* comes from a root word meaning "to watch." Originally to wait meant to apply attentiveness or watchfulness throughout a period of time and was a highly regarded experience. To wait on God meant to watch keenly for God's coming.<sup>4</sup>

During this Advent, may we hope as Daniel did in the midst of lions, watch for hope, and trust that God is in our midst as we offer compassion and hospitality.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from *1002 Humorous Illustrations*, Michael Hodgin, #239.

<sup>2</sup> Jerry Aaker, *A Spirituality of Service* by Jerry Aaker, 166-67.

<sup>3</sup> [www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2016/11/18/update-incidents-hateful-harassment-election-day-now-number-701](http://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2016/11/18/update-incidents-hateful-harassment-election-day-now-number-701)

<sup>4</sup> *When the Heart Waits*, 129-30 as quoted in *A Spirituality of Service* by Jerry Aaker, 168-9.