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 First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL
 December 2, 2018
 First Sunday in Advent

Good Things Come to Those Who Wait?
 Luke 21:25-36

Heinz ketchup used to come in a glass bottle with a little fifty-seven on the side. This was before the days of house-made ketchup or plastic squeeze bottles. In some classy establishments, it still does. As a child, I remember learning the secret of hitting the bottle just right to get the ketchup to pour out – it wasn't easy to do. The ad wizards at Heinz played this up in their marketing campaign, using the old adage – good things come to those who wait.

Good things come to those who wait. Is this true? In our winner-takes-all, early bird gets the worm culture, do we believe this?

Maria is waiting.¹

Her belongings are in a backpack beside her, her shoes scuffed but clean. Her dark hair pulled back into a ponytail.

She has been waiting a long time, more than a month. The time has passed slowly. She doesn't have much to do, except to entertain her little boy, and to search for their next meal.

They are camping under a tarp alongside her cousin. Every morning he greets her – Buenos DIAS chica – the same way he did when they were growing up in the same little town in the mountains of Honduras. When they arrived at the border, they went to the bridge and tried to cross to request asylum. The gangs had killed their uncle, no one in their family was safe. Drought had withered their family's fields before the corn could be harvested. They had little choice but to come north to try their luck in the States.

But when they got to the crossing, Mexican officials held them back. Put their names on a list in a grubby notebook in a blue plastic case. Told them to come back in a few weeks first thing in the morning to listen for their numbers to be called. When it's their turn, they will join a handful of people from around the world to cross the border, and ask for asylum.

But for now, they wait.

Wait for a chance to tell their story... to the agents, and the lawyers, and finally to the judge who will decide their fate.

¹ Maria is fictional, but her story and the experience I describe were drawn from the LATimes' reporting on the migrant caravan and the situation on the border in October and November. I'm thankful for the work of reporters Robin Abcarian and Patrick McDonnell among others for covering this crisis.

And while they wait, Maria wonders – what will happen to us? We can't go back. What will happen if we can't go forward? If our claim is denied? For now, she tries to remain hopeful. But she has heard about the tear gas launched across the border a few days ago. She saw the injured women and children. And she is afraid. How much longer can she wait?

On the other side of the border, people wait, too. Some wear uniforms, the more than 5,000 troops waiting for word about when they will be able to go home. And they worry their deployment will be extended through Christmas until the end of January, as the Department of Homeland Security has requested. Their partners and children are waiting, too, waiting for them to come home safely.

Here in Birmingham, people are waiting, too.

The hospitals are filled with families and patients waiting – waiting for a word from the doctor, waiting to hear that the surgery went well, waiting to be discharged to go home. Some are waiting in the sacred, in-between space, at someone's bedside as breath by breath, they slowly die; at someone's side as breath by breath, they breathe and push new life into the world. Waiting.

The family and friends of EJ Bradford, the man killed by police on Thanksgiving night at the Galleria, are waiting. The community that is outraged about his death is waiting, too. Waiting for more information from the police department and the city of Hoover about what really happened that night. Some are waiting for white Birminghamians to speak up, to denounce the death of another black man at the hands of police. Really, all of us should be waiting, not passively but actively waiting, ready to take any opportunity move forward in the wake of that traumatic event. Ready to call for restitution for life lost or at least an apology for the unjust profiling and portrayal of the man who was killed. Ready to move toward greater transparency. Because that may be the only way we move toward reconciliation between over the mountain and downtown, Hoover and Homewood, Vestavia and East Lake and Ensley. Between the people and police, between black and white. We're waiting.

It is hard to wait.

But this is Advent. It's the season of waiting, when we wait and expectantly look for God to come into the world. These four weeks leading up to Christmas, we remember and reclaim God's promise of salvation. We hear it anew through the words of the prophets, the joy of Mary, the song of the angels: Do not be afraid! The people who walk in darkness have seen a great light; those who live in a land of deep darkness on them light has shined.

The texts say that Christ came into the world in the fullness of time, when all of creation was groaning with labor pains. So although our experience of advent is often domesticated down into calendars and cookies, the truth is much heavier than that.

Creation was groaning, crying out in pain. Advent is filled with human longing for peace in the midst of suffering, saying to God – how long?

How long will we have to wait?

We are in a strange position, waiting as Christians in Advent. Because if we really trust and believe the promises of God, then we already know how it all turns out. Good things *do* come to those who wait. Our passage this morning tells us how it will be. God is giving birth to a new creation, a new kingdom heralded by the arrival of Christ to those many years ago: a place where pain and sorrow will be ended, where the lowly are lifted up and the rulers taken down from their thrones. The pain and the suffering and the struggles of today are part of the work of labor, bringing the new world into being. As people of faith, we cannot look away in despair! God calls us to lift up our heads, for the troubles and tumult of our time means that our redemption is drawing near. But my God some days, that is hard to believe.

In the waiting room of this year, with the evil empires conspiring and the ocean temperatures rising and the microcosm of loss in our own congregation and the pain of our city tattooed on our hearts, it is hard to wait for God's intervention, hard to believe that we are anyone but Vladimir and Estragon waiting for Godot, waiting for someone or something that will never come.

But.

There are sparks of hope.

Like buds on a tree that show forth the promise of spring – there are sparks of hope that all is not lost. God is coming into the world, in fact, God is already here.

There are two men in Brownsville, TX. Their names are Mike Benavides and Sergio Cordova.² They're a couple who, every day, load up wagons with food and supplies and tarps and shoelaces and pull them across the border into Mexico, to visit and share with the migrants who are stranded there. They've organized an incredible operation of volunteers over the past few months, and raised more than \$35,000 to help feed and clothe and care for the hundreds of vulnerable people waiting in Matamoros, Mexico to seek asylum in the US. Mike says, "Sergio and I sometimes feel like we're spitting on a bonfire. Shouldn't they have the Red Cross or somebody over here? But if we don't do it, they go hungry."

Thousands of people have given money and sent supplies to support their efforts. Their GoFundMe page has countless messages from their supporters, messages of encouragement and gratitude for their work, people saying "Thank you – this is our America." As I scrolled through them earlier this week, tears streamed down my cheeks

² Hennessy-Fiske, Molly, "Down on the border, Texas volunteers open their homes and hearts to migrants" LA Times, November 21, 2018. <https://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-texas-asylum-volunteers-20181121-story.html>.

– because I realized as hope sparked in my heart– we are the ones we have been waiting for! Christ is present in the world, in and through us!

Talk about the coming of the Son of Man was intended to give hope to people during difficult times – helping the faithful endure times of crisis. Helping the faithful *know how to respond* in times of crises. Can it do the same for us? What if crises are an *opportunity* to open our hearts and our lives, to give ourselves more fully to one another – and thereby to find our redemption? My prayer is that this Advent, we will wait – not passively, but actively wait – like Mike and Sergio, seeking to be the spark of hope our community needs, reaching out to care for those in need, speaking up for restitution and reconciliation in our city, and when it feels as if the world itself is coming to an end – trusting in the promises of God. Our redemption is drawing near.