
These Are The Good Old Days

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I was twelve years old, and it was Christmas.

In those days, we weren't allowed to open our presents until after Mom and Dad got up and we had all eaten breakfast. It was the longest meal of the year!

On this Christmas, though, I found myself awake in the middle of the night. I lay in bed for a while, staring at the ceiling, until I just couldn't take it any longer. You can imagine what I decided to do.

I crept up the stairs and into the living room where all of our presents lay under the tree. And, there it was, a brand new, beautiful 20-gauge shotgun.

It was perfect!

I devoted the rest of the night to dreams of hunting with my father. I wore the same khaki field coat that he did. I wore the same dark leather boots that he did. We walked every field I could remember, flushed every covey in the county and, of course, never missed a shot.

By the time the sun rose, I had already cleaned that gun ten times.

I get that same feeling at the beginning of Advent each year. Christmas is coming. The kids will be home. There are trees to dress, presents to give and liturgies to plan.

It's a little like waiting for the ketchup to pour from one of those old glass bottles. The anticipation promises to make it taste all the better. (If you can hear Carly Simon singing in the background, then you know what I mean!) The moment feels like that pause in a joke, just after the set-up and just before - wait for it - the punch line.

But, left unattended, anticipation has a nasty habit of turning into anxiety. All it takes is just a little uncertainty about how things are going to turn out. Everyone else is holding a blue piece of paper. Am I really in the right line? This line looks a little long. Will it move fast enough for me to check in on time? I've been sitting here for a long awhile. Do they even remember that I'm here?

I usually can't take too much of this before I decide that I don't even want whatever it is that I'm waiting for and start to wish I was somewhere else!

When I was a young lawyer, I worked for a partner who had a plaque above his desk that read, "All good things come to those who waiteth, as long as they worketh like hecketh while they waiteth!"

I think he was on to something.

Just waiting suggests that nothing else needs to be done. We're just standing around, expecting something to happen. In my experience, the good things in life don't just appear. They require us to do something to get

them.

Even the person who wins the lottery has to buy a ticket!

No, , we may have to wait for the good things in life, but we also have to prepare for their arrival. Just holding our place in line will not be enough. We need to be in the right line and we need to be paying attention to whether we're supposed to have that blue piece of paper or not!

This is, I think, what Paul is trying to tell the church in Thessalonica. It was a young church, filled with converts. They could still remember what it was like before they believed. And, now they were being persecuted. Their future was starting to look more than just a little uncertain. They were waiting and they were afraid.

Paul seems to be saying, yes, Christ is coming, but it won't be for the first time. The best way to prepare for what he will do tomorrow is to learn what he is doing today.

And you do that by rejoicing always, praying without ceasing and giving thanks in all circumstances , for the one who calls you is faithful.

It's an easy formula to remember: Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.

You can begin to feel how it works just by repeating it to yourself. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.

You get the sense that if you repeated this phrase to yourself often enough, you would begin to do what it says without having to think about it.

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.

You would begin to come back from the future and into the present. It's not all about tomorrow.

There is something going on right now that we don't want to miss.

And, it roots us where we are. At this moment, we need to be here and not somewhere else.

There is nothing more important than what is happening right here, right now!

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.

You would begin to remember that, no matter how frightening this year has been, or how uncertain the future may look, we rarely find lasting joy in anything that we own. It usually comes from small things we are much less likely to lose""the tired smile of a child, who is glad to be home for a break after college exams; the relieved look of a cook, who walks back into a completely clean kitchen after the holiday meal; or the thankfulness on the weathered face of the unsheltered man, who, at least on this night, has something hot to eat and somewhere warm to stay.

It is when we give ourselves to these things""first one and then another""that we begin to find our faith again. It is in our relationships with God and each other that we feel most fully alive. And, it is in those relationships that we begin to see that what we may have feared as the end is not really the end, but the coming of hope for a new beginning in God.

Advent is a season of waiting. But, not just waiting. It is also a season of preparing. Christ is coming, but it won't be for the first time. The best way to prepare for what he will do tomorrow is to learn what he is doing today.

And, we have a way to do that. Just keep saying it quietly to yourself""rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.

You know, I've been thinking about that shotgun. I remember it so well. The way it felt. The way it worked. The way it smelled. I loved that gun.

But, in the end, it really wasn't about the gun. It wasn't the gun that I treasured. What I treasured was the time

that I spent hunting with my father.

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.

As Carly Simon reminds us, these are the good old days.

Amen.

Note: The references to Carly Simon are to her song, "Anticipation." This song was made famous by a Heinz ketchup commercial in the late 1970s. The commercial pictured a person waiting for the ketchup to come out of the bottle as the chorus of "Anticipation" played in the background. The song is sometimes referred to as "The Ketchup Song." Simon reportedly wrote the song while waiting for Cat Stevens to pick her up on a date. Here are the lyrics:

*We can never know about the days to come
But we think about them anyway
And I wonder if I'm really with you now
Or just chasing after some finer day.*

*Anticipation, anticipation
Is making me late
Is keeping me waiting*

*And I tell you how easy it is to be with you
And how right your arms feel around me.
But I rehearsed those words just late last night
When I was thinking about how right tonight might be.*

*Anticipation, anticipation
Is making me late
Is keeping me waiting*

*And tomorrow we might not be together
I'm no prophet, I don't know nature's way
So I'll try to see into your eyes right now
And stay right here, cause these are the good old days.*