

John Mayer or John the Baptist by Kjersten Priddy

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Thank you for inviting me to share in your worship. Seekers Church has been a long-time supporter of [N Street Village](#), and it is a great pleasure to be here. I would like to start with a brief introduction of who I am and a little about N Street Village. N Street is a transitional housing program located at 14th and N Streets NW in the heart of the Logan Circle neighborhood. Everyday we provide a continuum of programs and services to the over 600 women who come through our doors annually. We offer a daytime drop-in center, a holistic health center, job training programs, and a host of residential programming including a night shelter, an addiction recovery program, and permanent supportive housing for women with mental illness. Most importantly, N Street Village offers its population a sense of family. N Street is not simply a social services provider, it is a place to access a supportive community that sees each person for who they are and seeks to walk alongside of them. I first came to N Street Village a little over a year ago through a year of voluntary service with the Lutheran Volunteer Corps. I came as a break between college and seminary, feeling like I needed some non-school time and experience to grow up a little more. I also came with high expectations of the great work I was going to do in helping to eradicate the tremendous problems of poverty I knew existed, yet didn't really understand. Sure I saw the year of service as a good step for me, but I also saw it as my gift to the world, a nice thing for me to do as I bided my time between college and seminary. Sixteen months later, I can see that the change I made in the lives of the women do not nearly measure up to the changes the women made in my life. Seminary

is still in the future, but now I know that I will go as a wiser person than I was before. This waiting period ended up being, through no planning on my end, a time of preparation and growth. And as I prepared for this sermon and talked to women and coworkers I learned that N Street Village just kind of has that effect on people.

My official title at N Street Village is "Manager of Volunteer and In-Kind Services." What that means is in addition to overseeing our volunteer program; I also manage a large office of one that takes care of our donations. So my office doubles as a sort of glorified closet. Anything and everything that gets donated to N Street, from toiletries to clothes to lamps spends at least some amount of time in my office.

A woman came into my office the other day. "I need to get some kitchen stuff together," she told me proudly, "I'm moving out next week." I congratulated her and asked her to put a list together of her needs. She beamed proudly and continued with her story. "I found this list, you see, from my case manager, of all the available apartments in DC, and I've been calling them. I just kept calling them. You can't just sit around and wait for them to call you, you got to go out and get it done for yourself. People aren't just going to help you out if you don't do anything for yourself first. And now I'm going to make a copy of my list and pass it around to some of the other ladies who are looking for places. Because you can do anything; you just gotta keep hoping and praying." Wise words from a wise woman faced with difficult situations.

In preparing for today I looked at the woman's advice through the lens of advent, because I think that as American Christians, we are used to seeing Advent as a season of

waiting and preparing. As Americans we prepare for the holidays. We buy gifts, bake cookies, decorate a tree, and clean our homes.

We write Christmas cards, sing carols to shut-ins, and attend holiday parties. We cook and clean and shop, wrap gifts, call family, and try to fit a million other activities into the thirty brief days between Thanksgiving and Christmas. Everyone is preparing. Stores decorate their windows; our televisions fill with toy commercials; even the most decidedly unreligious get on the bandwagon. We spend so much time planning and preparing that the actual day of Christmas always seems like a bit of a let down. After months of wrapping, baking, cleaning, inviting, we are left with a living room full of wrapping paper and more stuff that isn't really fulfilling. Your uncle, sister, cousin, mother drives you just as crazy on December 25th as they do every other day of the year. Your friend is still sick. The news on the television is still frightening. The month of preparing did not change reality; it simply distracted us for a while.

Oh yes, as Americans we are very busy with the hustle and bustle of the Christmas season, but as Christians we are waiting. Advent is a season of waiting. We are waiting for the coming of the King, waiting for the birth of the Savior, waiting for the One who will redeem the world. We are so eagerly waiting that when the day finally comes and we are presented with our Savior, the infant Jesus, there is almost a feeling of disappointment. This is the One we have been waiting for. This is the Savior of the World. This tiny human infant? He is the One in which all our hopes lie? In the end all our preparing and all our waiting seems for nothing.

This uneasy balance between waiting and preparing seems to permeate a lot of our culture. A culture that values success and progress, we prepare for things. We prepare for school, we prepare for retirement, and we prepare for the future. But we also spend an inordinate amount of time waiting. Instead of moving to change things, sometimes we just wait. Nothing can be done right now, we think, better to wait. For the next season, the next election, a new world leader, a fresh start. I think that as Americans we exert a lot of energy preparing for things, and yet at the same time as Christians we spend a lot of time waiting. I have been thinking about waiting versus preparing recently, and a strange thought occurred to me. Clearly we need to both wait and prepare, but do we sometimes mix up which we should do when? What if we waited for Christmas and prepared for Christ? What would that look like?

One of my favorite modern philosophers speaks to this imbalance of waiting. In John Mayer's new hit single "Waiting on the World to Change" he talks about the struggle a lot of people feel in making a difference in the world. The song opens with Mayer's impassioned plea of powerlessness. It is not that we are oblivious to the problems, he claims, we just feel helpless to do anything about them. "It's not that we don't care / we just know that the fight ain't fair / so we keep on waiting / waiting on the world to change." Mayer's sentiments reflect a growing trend in our culture, this feeling that there is nothing we can do, so why try. But we cannot just keep waiting for things to change; nothing is going to change on its own.

In contrast to John Mayer, today's readings are all about preparation. Before Jesus Christ even arrives on the scene, John the Baptist comes declaring: "Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him." John is called to prepare

the people of the world for the coming of the King. And even John's arrival is prepared for. His coming is proclaimed by both Malachi and Isaiah, and at his birth his father prophesizes, "And you, my child...will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation." History makes it very clear that the miracle of salvation was not a flash of divine intervention, but in fact required much preparation and planning. The prophets of old from Abraham to Isaiah to John the Baptist patiently laid the groundwork for the salvation of the world.

N Street Village is by nature a place of both waiting and preparing. Women come to us from all walks of life, with all sorts of histories and struggles, and it is our job to help them prepare for their future, while teaching them to be patient and wait in their present. The best example of this comes from our fifth floor program. Our 5th floor is a two year residential program that takes women from the streets, from other shelters, from jail, and walks with them through the recovery process. Women leave the fifth floor with a better understanding of their illness and how to cope with it. They also leave with the skills for independent living and a clear set of goals for their future. One of the women who graduated from our addiction recovery program became passionate about helping other women dealing with addiction. This woman decided that her long-term goal was to be an addictions counselor and help walk with people through the recovery process. She landed a job working in a recovery program, and she had all the skills necessary to advance, but because she had never graduated from high school she was unable to take the courses necessary to receive her certification in addiction counseling. It was frustrating to her to be so close to her dream and then be unable to take that final step because of a situation from her past that was largely out of her control. But instead of becoming

discouraged, this woman took a look at her situation and decided to do something about it. Another program we offer at N Street Village is a Rehabilitation and Employment Services Program, or RES for short. RES is a program to help our clients to gain the skills and support they need to find and hold jobs. RES recently opened up an online GED learning lab on our site, and this woman became one of the first to get involved. Despite her job's long hours and helping to raise her grandchildren, she dedicates a chunk of time every week to working towards her GED. She knows she is not yet where she wants to be in her life, and she is patiently waiting to get there, but while waiting she is working hard to make sure she is prepared to take that next step. John Mayer may be waiting on the world to change, but this particular woman is looking to change the world.

Stories from N Street can be as long-term as that one, or they can be as simple as the woman who came to my office last week looking for a coat. She initially came several weeks ago when the weather first started to get cold, but she is a larger woman and I did not have a coat that fit her. Coats come in haphazardly throughout the winter, so I asked her to check back later. She came faithfully, every few days or so and each time I had to send her away empty handed. I felt bad because I knew that while she had housing, the walk between her night shelter and our day shelter was brutal in her thin spring jacket. But each time she left my office empty-handed, she calmly assured me that it was OK, she would simply try back again later. Finally last week a coat came in that was her size and I was able to help her out. As she was leaving she turned to me with a huge grin and said, "See, it all works out in the end, you just have to be patient and keep trying."

The balance between what it means to wait and to prepare is

one of the greatest gifts I have received through my time at N Street Village. There is a huge difference between the frantic preparation and passive waiting I mentioned earlier, and true preparatory waiting. Preparatory waiting means realizing there is something out of reach and patiently biding your time until the goal is in reach, but all through that time working at different things so that you are ready when it comes. The woman looking for a coat persistently checked back. The woman with the dream of being an addictions counselor is working towards a GED as the first step on her journey. The Savior waited until it was His time on the scene, and for centuries before him prophets preached of his coming, preparing the people of the world to receive Him. Moses, Malachi, Isaiah, maybe even John knew they would not live to see the fulfillment of the Good News they promised. But faithfully they waited and prepared, so that everything would be ready for the salvation of the world.

I wanted to end again with John Mayer, to show how this idea of preparation could come full circle. I was hoping to demonstrate that we can prepare to change the world while still being patient for where we are at. And I found this to be a difficult struggle. My modern-day John has apparently been too caught up in the hype of the world to see much hope in his future. At last, in his 2003 album, *Heavier Things*, I found a glimpse of hope for the future. In this particular song John Mayer has realized he is in love with this girl, but he is afraid to go ahead and tell her. He toys with whether to let her know how he feels, or sort of back off and wait for her to make the first move. In the end, he decides to go for it.

*And I will wait to find
If this will last forever*

*And I will wait to find
That it won't and it won't
Because it won't
And I will waste no time
Worried 'bout no rainy weather
And I will waste no time
Remaining in our lives together*

So this Christmas I encourage you to wait for Christmas, but prepare for Christ. Instead of the normal hustle of the holidays, spend your time deliberately. Cherish moments with friends and family, and do not worry about whether or not the gifts are wrapped, or the house is clean, or if there are freshly baked cookies. Spend time in prayer, preparing your heart and mind for the gift of the Savior. Walk alongside the poor and downtrodden. Let the holiday hype pass you by, but “waste no time” before connecting with the ones you love. Peace and blessing to you this holiday season. Amen.