

Waiting With Wonder | Life In the Spirit

“Whatcha Waitin’ For?”

Isaiah 40.25ff; Psalm 130

4.19.20

“To whom then will you liken Me That I would be his equal?” says the Holy One. ²⁶ Lift up your eyes on high And see who has created these stars, The One who leads forth their host by number, He calls them all by name; Because of the greatness of His might and the strength of His power, Not one of them is missing. ²⁷ Why do you say, O Jacob, and assert, O Israel, “My way is hidden from the LORD, And the justice due me escapes the notice of my God ”? ²⁸ Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth Does not become weary or tired. His understanding is inscrutable. ²⁹ He gives strength to the weary, And to him who lacks might He increases power. ³⁰ Though youths grow weary and tired, And vigorous young men stumble badly, ³¹ Yet those who wait for the LORD Will gain new strength; They will mount up with wings like eagles, They will run and not get tired, They will walk and not become weary.

(Psalm 130) A Song of Ascents. Out of the depths I have cried to You, O LORD. ² Lord, hear my voice! Let Your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications. ³ If You, LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? ⁴ But there is forgiveness with You, That You may be feared. ⁵ I wait for the LORD, my soul does wait, And in His word do I hope. ⁶ My soul waits for the Lord More than the watchmen for the morning; Indeed, more than the watchmen for the morning. ⁷ O Israel, hope in the LORD; For with the LORD there is lovingkindness, And with Him is abundant redemption. ⁸ And He will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.

On the church calendar (which Presbyterians have traditionally NOT followed – but which many other Christians DO follow – both Protestant, Catholic and Eastern Orthodox) on the church/liturgical calendar, we’ve now entered the Season of Easter (Eastertide).

This season culminates in the celebration of Pentecost (May 31), which, after Christmas and Easter, is the third great Christian Holy Day on the Liturgical Calendar – which Presbyterians traditionally have not followed... but we do ...sort of.

Usually, we see this as the Season of the Spirit – we divide the church year into three parts – the Season of the Father (in which we look at the Hebrew part of the Bible – we just finished Judges and Ruth if you remember) and the Season of the Son (Christmas to Easter – just looked at the The Twelve in the Gospels) and now the Season of the Spirit (Easter to Pentecost and through the summer).

It's worked for US.

Today begins a seven-part series (seven weeks of Eastertide) leading up to Pentecost (May 31) called Waiting With Wonder – Life In the Spirit. Today we begin with the general idea of waiting.

The Apostles are waiting for the Promise of the Spirit and we're waiting... for any variety of things. Today's sermon: "Whatcha Waitin' For?", a double meaning (we wait/they wait) And we hope to DIVERT our minds away from some of the things we're waiting for and REDIRECT them to some bigger realities that might replace our boredom or irritability or worry... with WONDER and AWE at God and at what God might be doing in the world, in our church and in our lives.

- 1) How We Deal With Waiting
- 2) The Deep Difference of Waiting on the Lord
- 3) The Discipline of Waiting In the New Way

We hate waiting; it makes us feel out-of-control. Imagine if we could bring an ancestor back from like 200 years ago (time machine) and they saw us impatiently tapping our foot and crossing our arms as we waited for the microwave saying, "C'mon!" (He: I didn't even see you light the fire!")

Years ago I asked my old friend Otha Radcliffe (grew up in a coal mining town in West Virginia, born c. 1920) if the kids today faced more temptation than kids in his day. He said, "It's basically the same – we didn't have drugs but alcohol is 'bout the same... One thing is different: everything's a lot faster now."

We all know it but MAY not see it anymore (we're too used to it): it's a very fast paced world. And we are NOT accustomed to waiting. Patience is a virtue but I don't have the time to cultivate it! "Nuf said!"

But now we're in this special moment, this pandemic moment and we're all getting a little ...antsy. Missy and I were taking a walk about ten days ago when the weather was a bit cooler and people had their windows open. We heard screaming coming out of a house (sisters yelling at each other?) Then, on the next street, a young woman on her cell phone in her front yard, shouting into the phone. People are on edge. People are tired of waiting for the lockdown to end.

It's all weird... I know that... it's like nothing I remember and we tell ourselves that it could be a lot worse...and we all know it could be... like in poor nations... and people who have lost loved ones...and people who have been laid off or jobs lost all together – so for some people IN our congregation or friends or neighbors IT IS WORSE!

The prophet Isaiah was counseling the people in his day to wait. He, like Jeremiah, was also thinking of future generations and the devastation they would see in the future. He was at a kind of high-point of apparent well-being and prosperity but also the ripening of his own society's sin. He stood at this peak but as a prophet he could also see into the valley of judgment AND HE COULD EVEN SEE PAST THE JUDGMENT into a time of restoration.

In Isaiah's sanctified imagination (under influence of God's Spirit) Isaiah imagined the people IN THE VALLEY of judgment that was coming; he envisions them groaning under the boot of a foreign army, under economic hardship that goes on and on. The prophet hears the future complaints of a people in deprivation mode.

Psychologists speak of three responses to this kind of trauma or opposition: fight, flight or freeze.

Isaiah pictures the people in freeze response – just not able to think or act rationally. They will say, “My way is hidden from the LORD and vindication (justice) due me escapes His notice”. This is the voice of over-ripe frustration where the person freezes in a kind of moral, spiritual, psychological paralysis.

And that kind of lethargy that says, “Ah! What's the use? All is lost!” – that kind of listlessness can easily morph into a fight or flight response. In a state of frustration people can “Freak out!” – turn to road rage or some act of aggression. Jeremiah saw that: the people saying, “Let's rise up against the Lord's enemies! – thus saith the Lord!” (Jer 29.8-10) and God says, “I did NOT send them – I decreed this exile to last 70 years – your violence won't reduce the time!”

And we know some people turn to flight – all kinds of escapes to which people look for relief. We will just resign ourselves or resort to substance or process addictions (substances like drugs, alcohol, food OR processes like shopping, pornography, gambling or shopping [Amazon is hiring]). The prophets fight, flight and freeze (in other forms).

In the second reading, this Song of Ascent (120-134), a chant that pilgrims would sing as they journeyed to Jerusalem to worship. And as he progresses toward his goal he feels... guilty.

As it says in the 24th Psalm, “Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? And who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not lifted up his soul to falsehood and has not sworn deceitfully.” (Psalm 24.3-4) Maybe he realizes, “That does NOT describe ME! I have not been truthful in all my dealings – my hands and heart are NOT pure!”

This pilgrimage is bringing some things to the surface: “Out of the depths I have cried to You, O Lord!... If YOU Lord would take note of my failings, my guilt – I will NOT be able to stand before You! In fact WHO could?!”

And once again, I'm remembering our walk through our neighborhood in this involuntary, unplanned pilgrimage that has stopped the whole world – is it bringing anything to the surface in your life? In your family? IT DEFINITELY IS FOR OUR NEIGHBORS! (As for me and MY house, we keep our windows closed!)

And who CAN stand in this weird time – this forced WAIT – this claustrophobic, lonely, quarantined time where THE DEPTHS COME TO THE SURFACE of our lives – “O Lord, who can stand?!”

But if the depths come to the surface – God will not prescribe a surface solution just to make us feel better or look better – God will go with us INTO the depths. See, there's a vast difference, a DEEP difference in waiting ... and in waiting on the Lord.

Isaiah (and the rest of the prophets) are not fixated on surface (Jer. 6.14; 8.11) or only immediate solutions but on deep and long-term restoration. A crisis is a terrible thing to waste and God will use the crisis to liberate His people and promote the deep healing for which all creation is groaning!

The pilgrim who wrote Psalm 130 NOT ONLY faces his own depths, his own failings, guilt and iniquity but he recognizes where he's going – to the Temple! He goes to the place where forgiveness is trumpeted and LOUDLY ANNOUNCED! “There is forgiveness with You that You may be feared”

Here, in the Temple life will be poured out. Here atonement will be made. Covering will be freely given. The exhausted can find rest – the image is of a watchman who is utterly depleted at the end of a long shift and longs to be home in bed – AS THAT FRAZZLED, BORED, BONE-WEARY guard who feels that the security of the whole city is on his fragile shoulders – so the soul who truly waits for the Lord will find DEEP RELIEF.

This is a person who sees clearly what he needs and what he really WANTS – fight, flight or freeze won't give him relief. His depths, his soul will only find rest in the God of forgiveness. That same God who WENT into our depths – He descended into our lowest lows, felt our loneliness and took upon Himself our guilt and descended into the lower parts of the earth? (Eph 4.9) Who said, “Come unto Me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you WHAT YOU MOST LONG FOR AND WAIT FOR – I will give you rest....YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS.” (Mat 11:28-9)

Look how they waited for Him...outside the tomb not even daring to expect that He would actually come but He did. It's because of that Resurrection – an event that happened in time and space. It was not a symbol of mankind eventually working hard enough to defeat all our

enemies like cancers and viruses and lines at Publix and even death... it happened as a historical happening. As John Updike famously wrote:

Make no mistake: if He rose at all
it was as His body;
if the cells' dissolution did not reverse, the molecules
reknit, the amino acids rekindle,
the Church will fall.

The stone is rolled back, not papier-mâché,
not a stone in a story,
but the vast rock of materiality that in the slow
grinding of time will eclipse for each of us
the wide light of day.

It's because of that Resurrection – an event that happened in time and space – that we can have with Isaiah that long-range perspective that converts impatience and frustration and fear INTO HOPE. O Israel HOPE in the Lord! The resurrection (in this Eastertide) tells us that the very worst things are actually a part of the Plan and will somehow lead to something unimaginably NEW and BEAUTIFUL!

Now let me close by helping us turn THIS kind of waiting into a discipline a practice you can USE on yourself and use to help others... I just want to assure you first – I'm NOT giving you a "to-do" list but ways to open yourself to HOPE – to turn the fight/flight/freeze of waiting into restful, reenergized hope, rest and relief:

1) To wait on the Lord is to bring Him and His defining Story INTO our story. It's to recognize in our present case that what we're waiting for is NOT a return to normalcy (Lewis: life, [since the fall] has NEVER been normal) normalcy is not what we want or need – IT'S GOD! The God of forgiveness and the God of Grace and Good News. That's what... WHO we long for... like a horribly tired man longs to sleep!

2) We are all mourning cancellations. The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America has been canceled for June (moved to NEXT June) – we will likely be canceling events at the church and already have...people have canceled or postponed huge milestone events like weddings and graduations – but this is also a time, if we are waiting on the LORD, it's a time we KNOW that He will use for good – even though we can't possibly imagine HOW – but we know He will because Jesus Christ rose from the dead – and that's what this God does.

So we can use this time – seeking Him, trusting Him and hoping (confident in) Him to reassess and reevaluate – many of the things we relied on or "needed" – they will be exposed as false resting places and we need not fear.

3) There are people we know who are in real need of practical help and hope. We should avoid any kind of triumphalism and do all we can to listen to people and help them. Loneliness is real right now. A starving person probably can't hear the cry of his own soul OVER THE GROWLING OF HIS OWN STOMACH – so let's band together as a church and creatively find ways to help people. AND as we said last week to counsel and encourage and rekindle others AND OURSELVES.

4) Notice how God through Isaiah counsels these impatient, frustrated people with a series of searching questions in vv. 25-28 – Who is MY equal? (Is this virus My equal... your unemployment... your inability to get a mask... is economic downturn My equal)? Who created the stars? Why do you say, 'My way is hidden from God? Do you not know? Have you not heard?' – SEE: Ask yourself these questions. Really, preach to yourself... Don't feel foolish... take it as a gift from God? Even laugh at yourself (isn't this what Isaiah is doing?)

AND in the Presence of this living, forgiving God of resurrection let these words soak in:
The Everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth does not become weary or tired. His understanding is inscrutable. He gives strength to the weary, and to him who lacks might He increases power. Though youths grow weary and tired, and vigorous young men stumble badly, Yet those who wait for the LORD Will gain new strength; They will mount up with wings like eagles, They will run and not get tired, They will walk and not become weary."