

Advent Waiting I

Through the seasons on the Christian calendar there are periods of times that we might describe as being devoted to certain spiritual disciplines. Disciplines that are designed to help us grow and mature spiritually. Many of us think of the season of Lent in this regard. Another such season is Advent, a season that focuses on the spiritual discipline of waiting. Yet the word Advent, does not itself mean “waiting.” It means “arrival, or coming.” It’s a reminder that when we wait, we are waiting for something or someone. We are awaiting an occasion or a happening. Much in the same way when I was a young boy, how just before Christmas, I remember waiting at the airport for my brother to arrive home for the holidays. Yet even as we wait for the coming of Christmas in the days and nights of Advent, we know that waiting fills the minutes of our lives at any time of year. Thus in this season we take the time to reflect on such questions as: why do we wait? How do we wait? And who or what are we waiting for?

I believe that we spend most of our lives waiting for something to happen or for someone to come into our lives associated with some special reason or purpose. Be it a child waiting for a school bus to arrive, a student waiting to hear back on a university application, a young woman waiting to find out if she got the job, or an elderly man in his later years waiting to pass from this life into the next. We spend most of our lives waiting. Thus, through this season of Advent, I want to spend some time reflecting on what it means to wait and how we wait and what it is perhaps that we find ourselves waiting for in this life we live. After all, waiting isn’t something we humans tend to do very well. Periods of waiting are times when our patience is tested, we can find ourselves anxious, nervous, agitated or just plain bored. Waiting says a lot about who we are, our dreams, our desires, our aspirations. It says a lot about our faithfulness, what we believe in and where we place our hope.

It’s like the story about a preacher who was standing before his congregation one Sunday giving a sermon, when all of a sudden there was a big pop over the speakers in the sanctuary and the sound system went out. Concerned, a couple members of the congregation sprung into action, rushed to the sound system to see if they could get it functioning again. After about ten minutes or so, as the preacher and the rest of the congregation waited, one of the techies emerged from the sound room with a smile, went up to the microphone the preacher was using, blew into it, gave the preacher the thumbs up and they were ready to continue. At that point, the

preacher stepped back up to the microphone and said, "Now, where was I?" And a voice from the back of the congregation shouted, "The End!"

Well, just so you know, I'm not quite at the end yet!

But the reality is that as we wait...one of the things we are waiting for is the end. Waiting as we move from what we believe is one important moment to the next. You know, it's like waiting for one of your children to get married and then you start waiting for grandchildren. Or you're in traffic, waiting for one red light to turn green...and then you find yourself at the next intersection, waiting for the light to change again. For when it comes to waiting for the end of one thing...chances are we may just discover that we will find ourselves then waiting for the next thing. So much of our living it seems, is consumed by waiting that how and why we wait can effect our quality of life.

The Christians to whom the letter of 2 Peter was addressed were waiting for the end. We are able to detect this in our reading today, especially as we hear words such as "waiting" and "patience" being repeated. The people to whom the letter is being written are actually waiting for the world to end in accordance with the things they believed. You see, this group of early Christians would have in all likelihood been Jews who accepted Jesus as the Messiah and believed that certain things were going to happen in accordance with their faith. In accordance with Jewish understandings about the things that were going to happen at "the end." We see this in the language used by the author when he writes that "the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire." These were Jewish understandings of how the end of the world was envisioned. Jewish Christians of the first century would have known what the author was talking about when he says, "the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire." This was the day it was believed Jesus was going to come again.

You see, these early Christians found it a challenge to live in the Roman world. The Roman culture dominated, and all around them all they could see was immorality, decay, injustice, violence. They felt threatened by these things, they felt as if their ability to remain faithful to God was threatened by these things. They were finding it more and more difficult to live authentically and purposefully when they were surrounded by a world that was so unlike the world for which they hoped. The world they believed that Christ had promised them. The world they expected to come to pass when Jesus would come again and set things right. As far as they were concerned,

things were moving too slowly in terms of God setting things right and they were growing impatient. They were waiting and they weren't willing to wait for others.

Now I can appreciate that these visions of the end times, like the one depicted here in 2 Peter can be difficult for us to wrap our heads around. There are other examples in the Scriptures of similar language that is used when talking of the end times...of the apocalypse. We find such language in the book of Daniel, in some of the apostle Paul's writings, the book of Revelation and even in some of the Gospel descriptions of what was referred to as the "end times." These descriptions of the end may not be as meaningful or as scientific in accordance with the mindset of our present day, but they don't need to be as long as we can appreciate them not as accurate or even reasonable descriptions of what will happen as much as they acknowledge and anticipate a day when "the end" will come.

There are many in our present day who envision and are perhaps waiting and even desiring for the "end" to come. There are always groups of religious fanatics out there who are working in accordance to some doomsday countdown. Presently there is a group of Christians in the UK who are counting down to August 21, 2017 as the day the world will end. I actually hope they are off by a week as the 27th is Maryann's birthday and I really look forward to celebrating it with her! But, according to this group in the UK, next August 21 is when it's all going to happen when there is a major solar eclipse scheduled to take place. But it's not just the so-called religious fanatics that are out there predicting the end of the world. On a daily basis we are given reasons why we should believe the end is nigh, be it visions associated with climate change or global warming, or the Earth being hit by an asteroid, or Donald Trump being elected president. I actually thought maybe the Cubs winning the World Series this year was a sign the world was about to end! And then there are others who believe that, even though it may not be as imminent, the end of the world is still sure to come. Just this week I read an article in which the famed theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking believes that the world has about another 1000 years before the end finally comes. At least Hawking gives us a little more time!

Yet time is a part of the problem when we find ourselves believing that the world is about to end...or our world should come to an end. Maybe not literally but let's say figuratively, when we find ourselves facing deadlines and some imposed limit, we start to see ourselves like those

Christians Peter wrote to, growing impatient...running out of time. And when we start to believe we are running out of time, the last thing we want to do is wait. Waiting is a waste of time.

I mean, it's pretty clear that our culture wants things fast and it wants them now. Immediate gratification is a rallying point. We live in an age which is driven to minimize our waiting and maximize our time...the time we have left. Waiting is not a spiritual discipline that we hold in high regard (if we even consider it a discipline). Given our modern mindset, waiting is not something that falls within the realm of productivity. In fact, we have a tendency to consider our times of waiting to be very unproductive. How many times have we caught ourselves, waiting, watching the second hand on a clock move around the dial, thinking about the other things we could be doing. Or what our waiting is preventing us from doing.

One theologian suggests that a time of waiting is usually viewed unpleasantly because we believe that when we change our circumstances things will get better. Life becomes a series of obstacles or events that we just have to get through. As I said earlier, it's waiting for the end of something. And waiting is perceived negatively because it is seen as a delay to changing one's circumstances for the better. Waiting becomes something that infringes on our precious time...Time, the one thing along with money, that most people wish they had more of.

The danger is that when we rush through life this way, we need to begin to ask ourselves who or what are we leaving behind? Who is it that we find ourselves unwilling or unprepared to wait for? Like those early Christians that Peter was writing to, we can be so concerned with ourselves and where we find ourselves that we are willing to forsake others...even the rest of the world. Which to me is why waiting is a test of our character. Are we waiting only for ourselves or do we see ourselves not only waiting with, but waiting for and maybe even waiting on others. Have we forgotten that "good things come to ones who wait?"

You see, we need to appreciate how waiting can be productive, how waiting is not the wasting of time, but can encourage the giving of life and relationship. When we wait there is something happening, the waiting time is there for our benefit...and it is there for the benefit of others. The waiting time, is a time of spiritual maturation and a deepening of faith. This is the point the author of 2 Peter is trying to make in our reading today. As he writes he says, "Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation." I love those

words...“Regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.” Good words to meditate on when you find yourself waiting.

The author of 2 Peter is making it clear that it is not just we who wait, but more importantly it is God who is willing to wait patiently for others...even us. Salvation is not only when Jesus comes again...but it is in this time of waiting. For this is a time when God is waiting on us. God is being patient with us. God is waiting for faith to grow in us and in others...even the ones we are sometimes willing to leave behind in our rush rush world...as we rush to the end. In this text, waiting is meant to be a time when we experience the saving work of God.

I just think of all of those refugees stranded in camps around the world. Ones who are themselves waiting helplessly dealing with circumstances beyond their control. Is it not incumbent upon us to at one level wait for them and wait with them? That’s one of the things I am so proud of when I think of the ministry of our church over this past year, is how we have waited and have seen our refugee families arrive and how we still wait for another family to arrive. It should serve as a reminder for us of how we are called to wait and sometimes even slow our pace and give of our precious time for others because of the good things that happen when we are willing to wait. This is the saving work that happens when we wait, when we wait for others.

It is no different than the way we may be called to wait patiently for a small child to catch up to a group...or slow down that we might walk with them. It’s not always easy to do when you think you are running out of time. But maybe all we need to do is think of times in our own lives when we experienced the grace of someone who was willing to wait for us...be patient with us. Tell us we are worth waiting for. Those times that reveal waiting not as some obstacle, but an act of grace. This Advent season that draws us towards Christmas is a time that should remind us of this grace...of the beautiful things that can happen when we are willing to wait. We behold the beauty of a God who is waiting with us...a God who is waiting on us...and a God who is patiently waiting for us.