

## ***"SERVICE WHILE YOU WAIT"***

Second Sunday of Advent

December 6, 2020

Isaiah 40:1-11 ~ 2 Peter 3:8-15 ~ Mark 1:1-8

When I was commuting each week to Chicago to attend seminary I often traveled by train; though some weeks I drove. It was about a four-hour drive before I saw the city skyline in decent weather, but in the winter all bets were off. But no matter the weather, once I got into the city it was always a mess. I don't like to wait in traffic, and I learned that if you give most Chicago drivers an inch, they will cut right in front of you. And many of them were too rude to let you in so you had to make a space with a mad dash and a sudden brake. But the worst thing was the boredom. You had to pay attention, but as you waited there was nothing interesting to stimulate your mind. I listened to public radio to pass the time, and sometimes I listened to books on tape. I meditated on the scripture passages for that week's sermon and I made lists of things I wanted to do in the next week or month or year. All of those things helped me believe that I was using my time instead of wasting my time while waiting.

Actually, I got this idea from Eleanor Howe's little book, *Waiting Games: How to Get Rich, Powerful, Sexy and Healthy While You're Killing Time*. While I can't say that the book has lived up to its promise in my case, it has been helpful. According to Howe:

*Experts estimate that more than ten percent of all our waking hours are spent in the boring, unproductive, stressful act of waiting - often for someone or something that never comes. The inevitable results are painful to list - ulcers, sleeplessness, anger, frustration, and an incalculable loss of time, money, and personal energy.*

But Howe contends that this inevitable waiting time need not be wasted time. She gives a long list of creative exercises and activities you can do while waiting which will redeem the time and enrich your life. For instance, she recommends Yoga exercises for the face while you are waiting at a long light. Inhale deeply through your nose. Then hold your breath while you stick out your tongue as far as you can, trying to touch your chin. Open your eyes as wide as possible, and then exhale loudly with a "H-a-a!" sound. This will increase the circulation to your face and tighten the muscles, improving your skin and reducing wrinkles. In addition, I imagine that the people sitting around you in traffic will give you a wide berth as soon as the light changes! But do me a favor ... please don't do your face yoga while you're waiting for this sermon to be over.

Waiting is hard time, but it need not be wasted time. And this is a good word as we wait for the advent of Christ. 2nd Peter was probably the last book of the Bible to be written, composed in Peter's name according to the style of honoring a former leader some time around the Year of Our Lord 125. Almost a hundred years after the resurrection, and still no second coming ... no final judgment ... no end to suffering, oppression, and evil ... no "this day with me in Paradise." The promises of the preachers began to ring empty. We complain about our problems, but they really had it rough. I'm not talking about their lack of television or cell phones, or video games. Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Romans twice over and the church had been persecuted ... Christians crucified ... beheaded ... and burned for their beliefs ... their property confiscated ... their families separated and sold into slavery. And where was Jesus? Still, they clung to their faith, less because they believed Jesus would rescue them from crisis ... but because they experienced him helping them get through it. But where was the hope of his coming? Had they so completely misunderstood his message as to get this promise all wrong?

The author of 2 Peter describes the mood of the day:

*This is now, beloved, the second letter I am writing to you; in them I am trying to arouse your sincere intention by reminding you that you should remember the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets, and the commandment of the Lord and Savior spoken through your apostles. First of all you must understand this, that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and indulging their own lusts and saying, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!" (2 Peter 1:1-4).*

"Nothing ever changes," they complained. The ancient version of the modern common complaint: "Same old, same old." But this author says,

*Do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed (2 Peter 3:8-10).*

Well, okay, I'll buy that. God keeps promises. Jesus will return to judge the quick and the dead and to initiate the transition from changing time to changeless eternity. We can be sure that the end of creation ... like its beginning ... belongs to the hand and will of God. But when you say "one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years like one day to God" it renders all the biblical time words irrelevant. Words like "soon" and "before this generation ends" and even "night" and "day" lose all meaning as a measurement ... which means that God could jump in

and stop everything today or maybe a million years from now. And what do we do while we're waiting?

That is the whole question as far as 2 Peter is concerned.

*Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. 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 (2 Peter 3:11-15a).*

Yes, it turns out that the Lord is far more patient with waiting than we are. How long has the Lord had to wait on us ... on you and me ... on humanity as a whole?

The test of faith becomes faithfulness ... being true ... continuing to wait and watch even though it has been a long, long time. But faithfulness is not only continuing to wait for God to keep this promise, but how we wait as we wait. We must wait actively, making the most of the time. We must wait as messengers of Jesus, like John the Baptist daring to be different from the culture of his day ... shouting a message that business is not as usual ... that the world is not as you people think because all will be held accountable before God one day. We must offer God's people a message of comfort and hope that in the words of the prophet Isaiah, the "*the grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever*" (Isa. 40:8) and that "*He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep*" (Isa. 40:11).

All our texts today agree on one thing ... and all would urge us not only to hear the message but to proclaim it ... to make it the banner by which we live in the world. For some it is good news and for some it is bad, but for all, the message is the same: "*Prepare to meet your God!*" Whether you go to God or God comes for you, it is the inevitable interruption which defines your destiny, and you should be ready for it. You should prepare by baptism ... by service while you wait ... service to others in the name of God ... in every way telling and living and showing forth the good news of God's world to come ... in which every person is treated with dignity and respect and justice as a beloved child of God, or, as the author of 2 Peter describes it, "*a place where righteousness is at home.*"

On this second Sunday of Advent 2020, all of us are waiting for something, for somebody. Mostly we're waiting for this pandemic to end as we wait for those things we have done without for so long ... waiting for that trip we've been planning ... waiting for our relatives to come for the holidays. And go home. Although we are living in strange times, we are still

waiting ... waiting for graduation. We're waiting for retirement. We're waiting to see if we can save the relationship. We're waiting to see what will happen to our kids. We're waiting to see what the test results will show or whether the medication will work. Some are waiting to die; worse still, some are waiting to live. And we are all waiting for the day when we shall meet our God face to face. For some God will be an old friend ... for some, a complete stranger.

Yes, all of us are waiting for something, for someone. But we do not wait alone. We do not wait without help. We wait together. We wait with the sustenance of the Spirit provided by God. We wait like athletes in training or artists in rehearsal, preparing ourselves for what is soon to come. We wait with a new awareness of our neighborhood ... an awareness of what needs fixing ... of what we need to do to get ready. We look as if with God's eyes ... what God will see when God comes. And so, with God's help, our waiting becomes an exercise in spiritual formation. And if we wait actively ... with eyes alert and hearts alive ... we will be the first to see Christ emerge from the darkness around us. And we will run to meet him.

May we pray?

We wait for you, O Savior, to show us who we are. We wait for you to reveal yourself in our own experience. We wait for you to establish justice and righteousness. And we wait upon you in our service to one another. Make our waiting time worthy time. Use it to form us into the harbingers and heralds of the new creation. Bless this sacred supper we are about to share with a memory and a hope. And let us know you near as we wait. Amen.